

WCU ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

SUMMER READING LIST

2013

This annual list presents suggestions for summer reading from individual faculty of the West Chester University English Department. You can also find this list & its predecessors at http://www.wcupa.edu/_academics/sch_caseng/faculty/. There's something here for every reader!

Book:

All Roads Lead to Austen

Amy Elizabeth Smith

How do Jane Austen's novels play in Central and South America? This easy-reading travel book from a writer who conducted reading groups in several countries asks us to consider what makes certain works of literature "translatable" and understandable (or not) in different cultures, questioning the familiar claim of "universality." The narrator has her own spicy romance story to impart, as well.

The Art of Fielding

Chad Harbach

What would summer be without baseball? What would summer reading be without baseball fiction? You need not ponder such existential questions if you bring Chad Harbach's wonderfully human baseball novel to the beach with you. It tracks a transformational season of the Westish College Harpooners baseball team (it takes its name from the college's dubious scholarly connection to Herman Melville) as it aspires to win its league for the first time ever and earn a chance to play for an NCAA championship. Shortstop Henry Skrimshander seems destined for big league stardom. But when a routine throw goes disastrously off course, the fates of five people are upended, and they are forced to confront their deepest hopes, anxieties, and secrets. Written with grace and great intelligence, this is an expansive novel about family, friendship and love.

Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts

Daniel K. Richter

Richter offers a brilliant synthesis of Native American, European, and African histories, weaving them together as they relate to what would become the U.S., but without teleologically anticipating that outcome. In other words, rather than writing these stories as if they were the prelude to Anglo-American dominance, Richter treats Natives, Europeans, and Africans as actors in their own histories, with goals, social structures, faith practices, politics, technologies, strengths, blind-spots, etc., all of which affected their ultimate interactions.

Recommended by:

Cheryl Wanko

Chuck Bauerlein

Rodney Mader

Behind the Beautiful Forevers:

John Ward

Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity

Katherine Boo

This non-fiction study of the cruelty, corruption, ingenuity, and occasional kindness that underlie the emergence of India as a twenty-first century economic power emphasizes both the daunting complexity of such an emergence and the extremely high price, in human terms, it exacts even though its long-term outcome may on balance be beneficial.

Bring up the Bodies

John Ward

Hilary Mantel

This novel, the second volume in a projected trilogy dealing with the life and times of Thomas Cromwell, won its author a second Man Booker prize. Although I find it less compelling than its predecessor, *Wolf Hall*, and was surprised when it won the Booker, I do believe that it is worth the attention of readers who are interested in history, political maneuvering, and Mantel's treatment of the novel's fascinating central character.

The Big Kiss-Off of 1944

Joseph Navitsky

Andrew Bergman

The first of Bergman's three Jack LeVine mysteries, this crime novel features a private eye who is relentlessly self-critical about his place in the wartime culture of New York City. *The Big Kiss-Off of 1944* intriguingly extends some of the typical concerns of the genre to the highest reaches of American democracy, introducing presidential contenders and a military leadership desperate to win the war at any cost.

Birds of the Air

Luke Stromberg

David Yezzi

Birds of the Air is Yezzi's third collection and, in my opinion, it confirms his place among our finest poets. This collection contains both exquisitely crafted lyrics and extended narrative pieces such as "Tomorrow & Tomorrow" about the dissolution of a love affair set against the backdrop of a disastrous touring production of *Macbeth*.

Birds Without Wings

Linda Myrsiades

Louis de Bernieres

This book – on audio tape it's 23 hours – requires an abiding interest in the decline of the Ottoman Empire, including its wars and myriad cultural conflicts. A massive piece of fiction, it is probably as accurate as most historical novels, even if it gets the massacres and inter-ethnic hostilities of Anatolian as wrong as most authors of the period. Nevertheless, the cultural insights are on-spot (he wrote, as well, *Corelli's Mandolin* – about the Italian occupation and the precursors to the Greek civil war on a Greek island) – and the opportunity he provides to enter a mixed world of Muslim and Christian, Greek, Armenian, and Turkish villagers offers a certain welcome richness.

Book Was There

Eleanor Shevlin

Andrew Piper

Offering a nexus of several fields, Piper addresses the past and present of reading and does so with a lyrical blending of personal, academic, and tactile experiences. Far from sounding the

death knell for the book and reading, Pipe instead situates the digital and its wondrous possibilities as part of a long continuum of the history of the written word.

The Boy Kings of Texas

Erin Hurt

Domingo Martinez

From the National Book Foundation website: "In *The Boy Kings of Texas*, Domingo Martinez traces his life from a rough Texas border town to the 'wet wilderness of civility' in Seattle. With sentences that often burst like small fireworks, this is a brave book, an angry dissection of the macho values that dominated his upbringing and a sorrowful account of his love, often betrayed, for his family – most poignantly, for his brother. Like the best of its genre, this memoir is absolutely specific and totally universal."

The City in the City

Seth Kahn

China Mieville

Sci-fi/Urban fantasy/Murder mystery. A murder victim from one city discovered in another. The trick is, both cities occupy the same physical space, and residents "live" in one or the other by virtue of ignoring the other. Anybody who fails to do so is likely to get punished by a shadowy overarching power called The Breach.

The Classroom and the Cell:

Ayan Gangopadhyay

Conversations on Black Life in America

Mumia Abu-Jamal and Mark Lemont Hill

A series of conversations between the authors, this book addresses, among other things, the "enclosed" spatial distribution of institutionally defined "places," such as the classroom and the prison cells in America. Lemont Hill, who teaches at Columbia University, and Abu-Jamal – a journalist on death row – take on addressing the hard hitting questions that involve the essentially interconnected relationships between education, economics, and prison system in America: how it is the distribution of institutionally enclosed spaces that intertwine "black" life and categorically structural disenfranchisement. A remarkable achievement, indeed!

Code Name Verity

Deidre Johnson

Elizabeth Wein

Young adult novel and Printz (YA award) Honor title. Captured as a spy, "Verity" begins writing out an account of her mission and her past, telling a tale of friendship, tragedy, and courage.

The Complete Sherlock Holmes &

Cheryl Wanko

The Complete Tales of Terror and Mystery

Arthur Conan Doyle

Don't tell anyone, but up until last summer, I had never read a Sherlock Holmes story. Not one. I decided to remedy this with a vengeance and read all of them over the past year. And now I know what all the fuss is about: quirkiness, crankiness, inventiveness, intelligence. If you are still as impoverished as I was, please read some ACD soon: you'll be glad.

Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter

Meghan Muller

Tom Franklin

Two unlikely friends, Larry and Silas, in a suffocating Mississippi town, are estranged by many variables, and now find themselves on an intersecting and twisted path. One, an accused (but never convicted) murderer of a girl who disappeared 20 years ago, the other an ambitious cop who denies to everyone, including himself, his connection to his old friend, and when another girl goes missing, the past must be dug up. The desolate, eerie landscape is as much of a character as any other in this unsettling story, and though it's a solid mystery, the authentic characterization and struggle of the human spirit make it an unforgettable read.

Darkness Bids the Day Goodbye

Tim Ray

Gary McKinney

The second in a series of murder mystery novels involving Sheriff David Pruitt, a Deadhead who interweaves his Deadhead philosophy of life with his job as a law enforcement officer and his role as father and husband in the post-Grateful Dead world of the Pacific Northwest.

*Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys,
and the Dawn of a New America*

Carla Verderame

Gilbert King

Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction this year, King's text provides a detailed analysis of Thurgood Marshall's tireless efforts for civil rights in the United States.

The Dream of the Celt: A Novel

Eleanor Shevlin

Mario Vargas Llosa, trans. Edith Grossman

This historically-based novel by the Peruvian Nobel Laureate recreates the life of the Irish-born Roger Casement. Briefly covering his early years, the work charts Casement's extraordinary efforts to expose human rights abuses and champion indigenous cultures in the Congo and Peru; his awakening to the cause of Irish nationalism; and his eventual imprisonment and execution for treason, a charge compounded by revelations of his homosexuality, by the British who had formerly knighted Casement for his service to the realm.

East of the Sun

BG Betz

Julia Gregson

A saga featuring three Englishwomen who journey to India between the two world wars, this engrossing novel depicts the end of the British empire.

The Emily Dickinson Reader:

Rodney Mader

An English-to-English Translation of Emily Dickinson's Complete Poems

Paul Legault

In this loving, playful homage to Dickinson, poet Paul Legault "Englishes" all 1789 poems, translating them for those of us who struggle with their density. In doing so, he creates a distinct personality, which is not really Dickinson but is *really* funny, morose, antisocial, and crushing on Sue pretty badly. Buy this book and set it on top of Franklin's edition of Dickinson's poems near a favorite chair, and periodically treat yourself to a mix of belly laughs and insights into Dickinson.

L'Empreinte à Crusocé

Patrick Chamoiseau

Just published and easily accessible with college French. a rethinking of Defoe's story that explores man's shifting relations with the natural world.

Michael Brooks

Everything Is Illuminated

Jonathan Safran Foer

This came out ten years ago, but I just got to it now. It made me literally laugh out loud, hard. And also have that ethereal, this-is-bigger-than-me feeling. Particularly enjoyable for Jews and our allies who know Jewish culture well, and the magical realists among us.

Hannah Ashley

The Feast of the Goat

Mario Vargas Llosa

Nobel Prize for literature, 2010. A novel based on the conspiracy surrounding Rafael Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic in 1961.

Kostas Myrsiades

Flight Behavior: A Novel

Barbara Kingsolver

I've never regretted reading anything by her.

Jen Bacon

First Contact: Scientific Breakthroughs in the Hunt for Life Beyond Earth

Marc Kaufman

If you would like a good, understandable update on the latest breakthroughs in astrobiology and their implications for our past and future, this is where to start. The author, an accomplished science writer, asks expert mainline scientists to explain and speculate about the newest discoveries in space and their attendant questions, such as "how life evolved from non-life," whether or not extraterrestrial life in the cosmos will be carbon based, how much of earth is extraterrestrial material, and the theological implications of finding--or even positing--life on other planets. The science behind the issues is always lucidly explained, and if science isn't your strong suite, you'll feel eminently smarter after reading this book.

Allen Witkowski

The Garlic Ballads

Mo Yan

Nobel Prize for literature, 2012. A novel based on the horrifying conditions of Chinese farmers struggling to sell the crops they are encouraged to plant under communist rule.

Kostas Myrsiades

A Grain of Wheat

Ngugi wa Thiongo

A powerful novel concerning the aftermath of Kenya's war for independence. The novel traces the interconnected stories of various African and European characters, each of whom are drawn with remarkable insight. The novel concerns human aspiration, fear, and the nature of fidelity and betrayal. The narrative is beautifully told in a subtle and low key manner, and the overall affect is to leave you thinking deeply about these characters, their world, and perhaps your own life. A modern classic, and essential reading for contemporary global citizens.

Graham MacPhee

Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal

Jen Bacon

Mary Roach

Roach's new book. I've already had a "taste" for *Gulp* via the RadioLab podcast, which describes, in detail, Mary Roach's trip to visit a fistulated cow, which she gets to stick her arm in up to the shoulder. What fun!

Heat: An Amateur's Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany

Vicki Tischio

Bill Buford

An entertaining and close-up memoir about a journalist's "internship" in a celebrity chef's restaurant kitchen (Mario Batali's acclaimed Babbo). You can almost feel the steam rising from the giant pasta pots. It's an entertaining read, especially if you are a foodie, like me.

*How Not To Say What You Mean:
A Dictionary of Euphemisms*

Chris Teutsch

R.W. Holder

From the back cover blurb: "[The book] unmask[s] the language of hypocrisy, evasion, prudery, and deceit." High recommendation indeed. Instructive and fun to read.

*How to Live or a Life of Montaigne in One Question and
Twenty Attempts at an Answer*

Allen Witkowski

Sarah Bakewell

If you've read any of Montaigne's *Essays* and wanted to put them into context and learn more about them and their author, this is the book for you. This highly readable, philosophical biography takes up the major contradictory themes of the *Essays*, shows how they were woven into Montaigne's life, and engages the reader to meditate on their existence in one's own life. It's also a National Book Critics Circle Award Winner.

*I May Not Get There With You:
The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Andrew Sargent

Michael Eric Dyson

Dyson's study of MLK is a wonderfully overstuffed work of "bio-criticism" that seeks to recover "the Martin Luther King we've forgotten": a flawed but heroic leader whose radical critique of poverty, inequality, militarism, and materialism is, for Dyson, highly relevant to today's America but too often obscured by hazy memorializing and a disproportionate focus on a few isolated lines from MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech. Dyson, a professor and public intellectual who also happens to be a Baptist minister, offers nuanced discussions of various MLK controversies (e.g., plagiarism, adultery, etc.), and he's especially good at critiquing how MLK's call for "color blindness" has been twisted by conservatives into a rationale for dismantling affirmative action.

*In the Garden of Beasts: Love, Terror,
and an American Family in Hitler's Berlin*

Carla Verderame

Erik Larson

Larson writes a gripping account of Ambassador William E. Dodd's family's experience in Berlin in 1933.

The Life and Legacy of Mary McLeod Bethune

Jim Trotman

Nancy Ann Zrinyi Long

This author moves beyond the headlines of the most famous educator to come out of the south after Booker T. Washington and examines the indefatigable efforts and successful life of this woman and her towering strength of character.

Lincoln's Tragic Pragmatism

John Ward

John Burt

This painstakingly researched and profoundly reflective book undertakes to chart the dangerous territory where philosophy and politics converge, with its primary focus on the protracted contention between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas as to how best to deal with slavery, an institution that both men despised, but for very different reasons. Burt asserts, correctly, I think, that his skills as a literary critic enable him to offer a more nuanced analysis of political speeches and other documents of the time than previous scholars have been able to do. It seems unlikely that anyone who reads this volume will fail to emerge from the experience with a yet higher estimate both of Lincoln's intellectual powers and his political skill, though Burt is quick to acknowledge that Lincoln inevitably took the occasional false step.

Lord Byron's Foot

Luke Stromberg

George Green

Lord Byron's Foot is a poetry collection that should appeal even to those who do not typically read contemporary poetry. Green's verse is witty, erudite, and inventive. "Jeffers' *Medea* Opens on Broadway with Judith Anderson," for instance, seamlessly moves from describing the premiere of Robinson Jeffers' translation of Euripides to a scene from the movie *Hombre* with Paul Newman and Richard Boone. Not many poetry books can honestly be called a page turner, but this is one of them.

Love Among the Chickens

Peter Kent

P. G. Wodehouse

Originally appeared in 1906; revised edition 1921. Hilarious, and very much an acquired taste; you either love it or you hate it, I tell you it's an experience not to be missed!

Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention

Jim Trotman

Manning Marable

The most thorough biography on the late activist to date, and one that is very, very well written.

Master of the Mountain: Thomas Jefferson and his Slaves

Jim Trotman

Henry Wiencek

There is plenty to reflect upon in this study which centers upon Jefferson's life at Monticello.

Mother Courage and Her Children

Ayan Gangopadhyay

Bertolt Brecht, trans. Tony Kushner and Tom Kuhn

During the time when the US invaded Iraq, these US intellectuals decided to translate and adapt this Brechtian classic anti-war play yet again to ponder the then US (political) context for a performance event that took place in Central Park. Meryl Streep starred as the title character, which turned out to be yet another crown to her already illustrious career. *Mother Courage* uses

war to earn money for her own benefit. But in the end she loses her children who she was trying feed and help; however much glorified war may be, it only brings loss. This bilingual edition will again teach me the classic Brechtian maxim: Never look at war wearing a sunglass!

My Year with Eleanor: A Memoir

Vicki Tischio

Noelle Hancock

Written by a woman who had considerable phobias to overcome. She was inspired by Eleanor Roosevelt's transformation from a wallflower into first lady and a national role model for women, and decides to embark on a year of bravery inspired by Roosevelt's writings and philosophy. It's a very light read with some deep insights.

The Old Ways

Lynette McGrath

Robert Macfarlane

Archeology, anthropology, history, poetry, art, psychology, all merge in a narrative of walking journeys and ancient public paths laid down over centuries, but also recapitulated in the author's experience. The BEST book I've read in a long time.

The Painted Girls

BG Betz

Cathy Marie Buchanan

This novel focuses on sisters from the slums who dance for the Paris ballet and also model for Degas, sculptor and painter.

The Parasol Protectorate Series:

Sarah Paylor

Soulless, Changeless, Blameless, Heartless, Timeless

Gail Carriger

I am not quite sure how to describe these books, except that there are elements of a Victorian-era comedy of manners, well-researched Victorian culture, some mad science, dirigibles, vampires, and werewolves. Oh, and they are a delight to read.

The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane

Jamie Feiler

Katherine Howe

Taken from Howe's website: when Harvard graduate student Connie Goodwin's mother "asks her to handle the sale of Connie's grandmother's abandoned home near Salem, she can't refuse. As she is drawn deeper into the mysteries of the family house, Connie discovers an ancient key [that] ... contains a yellowing fragment of parchment with a name written upon it: Deliverance Dane. This discovery launches Connie on a quest – to find out who this woman was and to unearth a rare artifact of singular power: a physick book, its pages a secret repository for lost knowledge. As the pieces of Deliverance's harrowing story begin to fall into place, Connie is haunted by visions of the long-ago witch trials, and she begins to fear that she is more tied to Salem's dark past than she could have ever imagined."

The Postmortal

Tim Ray

Drew Magary

This novel is a dystopian futurist story of a cure for aging and all the issues involved when people actually can live forever. The lure of immortality is too strong to resist for most people, but the problems that ensue include rapid overpopulation and a dramatic breakdown of various

social structures such as marriage. The author is a first-time novelist but a frequent contributor to numerous blogs and magazines.

Savage Inequalities

William Nessly

Jonathan Kozol

Searing investigation of the state of education in the US, including eye-opening comparisons of schools in upper- and lower-income communities.

The Secret Life of the Lonely Doll: The Search for Dare Wright Deidre Johnson

Jean Nathan

With their evocative black-and-white photographs, Dare Wright's Lonely Doll picture books were a favorite of many children in the 1950s and 1960s. One fan, Jean Nathan, became curious about the author and began to investigate her life. The result is – to quote *Library Journal* – a "compelling psychological biography . . . [that] illuminates Wright's tangled and tragic life [and] work" and an engaging, albeit sometimes painful, read even for those unfamiliar with Wright's picture books.

Serena

Michelle Blake

Ron Rash

From its opening scene to its last, *Serena* is muscular and complex and challenging and violent, in an almost Shakespearean way. The story centers on George and Serena Pemberton and how they carve out their newly married life in the 1930s Appalachian timber industry, learning to live both with each other and with each other's passions. Not a light read, but one that is easy to get lost in. Apparently it is being made into a movie starring Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence – I can't see those actors in these roles, but maybe you'll have a different reaction! (I also highly recommend Rash's *The Cove*, which is more somber than violent, but equally well written.)

A Song of Ice and Fire

BG Betz

George R. R. Martin

This is the series title for the brilliant medieval fantasy novels that begin with *A Game of Thrones* (Book 1). These books include deep characterization and breath-taking plot twists in which Martin is not afraid to execute major characters.

Suite Française: A Novel

Peter Kent

A novel about writer – a Frenchwoman and a Jew – and her life in occupied France. "*Suite Française* is a singularly piercing evocation . . . of life and death in occupied France, and a brilliant, profoundly moving work of art." And I agree!

The Swerve

Peter Kent

Stephen Greenblatt

An intellectually stimulating book which takes you across medieval Europe in search of a text, *De Rerum Natura*, which, again, will prod Europe into thoughts for a new direction – modernity.

Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln

Hyojein Yoon

Doris Kearns Goodwin

A contextualized biography of Lincoln in relation to his contemporaries: William Henry Seward, Salmon P. Chase, Edward Bates – competitors, cabinet members, and eventual friends and

supporters. Impressive synthesis of primary sources – letters and diaries that, unexpectedly, shed light on the women in these men’s lives and their political, not just domestic, influence. You can’t help but love Lincoln by the end of it – it could be criticized for that bias – but I didn’t mind.

Texaco

Michael Brooks

Patrick Chamoiseau

A brilliantly translated modern classic. The classic is a rich history of Martinique. Imagine *Absalom, Absalom!* if Faulkner had concentrated on the slaves.

This is How You Lose Her

Lynette McGrath

Junot Diaz

Appealing use of interlocking street and professorial argot, emotionally desirous, nostalgic, cynical, disabled, the usual mix of current contemporary writing.

Transmission

Robert Fletcher

Hari Kunzru

One of my interests lately has been fiction about cyberculture and globalization. Kunzru satirizes Silicon Valley and transnational corporate culture in the story of an Indian programmer who winds up in an indentured IT servitude and, in an effort to better his fortunes, releases a virus with a Bollywood actress’s name that has unintended consequences that spread around the world.

The Warmth of Other Suns:

Carla Verderame

The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration

Isabel Wilkerson

Wilkerson (Pulitzer Prize winning journalist) writes a compelling story of America’s great migration by following three individuals who move from the south to northern and western US cities. This is a marvelous work; read it!

Wild

Carolyn Sorisio

Cheryl Strayed

If you liked Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild*, you might find this piece an interesting comparison. In this now much praised book, Cheryl Strayed writes of her hike on the Pacific Crest Trail. She undertook her journey with very little knowledge of hiking and less knowledge of herself. While this topic could tend toward cliché, Strayed avoids it—instead giving a gripping account of her life and experiences.

The Windup Girl

Robert Fletcher

Paolo Bacigalupi

Another novel that reflects my interest in stories about technology and globalization. This one is “biopunk” science fiction set in a 23rd-century Thailand depleted of petroleum and ravaged by biotechnological plagues. Anderson Lake – the representative of a Western “calorie company” interested in accessing the seed bank that has kept Thailand independent while other nations have fallen to famines brought about by GMOs – has his plans for gaining influence in the country disrupted by his encounter with Emiko, a “New Person” or engineered human, creche-grown,

programmed as a concubine for a Kyoto businessman, and now abandoned in the sex clubs of Bangkok.

