

WCU ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

SUMMER READING LIST

2012

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

Title & author:

1Q84

Haruki Murakami

Not his best book— *Kafka on the Shore* or *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*—or his most beautiful— *Sputnik Sweetheart*—but rather, this is his best summer book: it offers almost 1000 pages of serenity in a contemporary story (first published in 2009, but set in 1984) that brings surreal adventure to themes of murder, cult religion, violence, love, fate & self-understanding. A quick read with enough detail to support several re-reads, this book helped me remember why I began to study literature.

Annie's Ghosts: A Journey into a Family Secret

Steve Luxenberg

Non-fiction, based on the author's discovery that his mother had a sister whose existence she had concealed from the family. Much of the book follows his attempts to learn about his late aunt (who had spent much of her life institutionalized) and to understand the reasons for his mother's secrecy and deceptions.

Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor

Charles Allen

Ashoka Maurya—or Ashoka the Great as he was later known—holds a special place in the history of India. Through his third century BCE quest to govern the Indian subcontinent by moral force alone, Ashoka transformed Buddhism from a minor sect into a major world religion. His bold experiment ended in tragedy, and in the tumult that followed the historical record was cleansed so effectively that his name was largely forgotten for almost two thousand years. Yet, a few mysterious stone monuments and inscriptions miraculously survived the purge. Charles Allen tells the incredible story of how a few enterprising archaeologists deciphered the mysterious lettering on keystones and recovered India's ancient past to craft a clearer picture of this enigmatic figure than ever before.

The Baron in the Trees

Italo Calvino

A wild, picaresque ride through the trees.

Recommended by:

Randall Cream

Deidre Johnson

Ayan Gangopadhyay

Theodora West

Before I Go to Sleep

S. J. Watson

What if you lost all of your memories every night when you went to sleep? Christine wakes up every morning and learns about her past from her husband. Is he telling her the truth? An excellent suspense thriller/mystery. I stayed up late two nights to read this!

Merry Perry

The Beginning of Infinity: Explanations That Change the World John Ward

David Deutsch

A highly regarded British scientist/philosopher offers his optimistic vision of humanity's future as well as an extremely interesting analysis of what has (in his opinion) made such a future probable.

Belief

Gianni Vattimo

A highly accessible manifesto of Gianni Vattimo's nihilist theology. Vattimo, who is also one of Italy's leading gay rights activists, makes the paradoxical argument that secularization is the fulfillment of Christianity, insofar as he sees the Incarnation as the "kenotic" surrender of sacred power in the service of worldly charity and compassion.

Paul Maltby

Bitter Fruit

Achmat Dangor

Covers the South African truth and reconciliation process.

Geetha Ramanathan

The Black Swan

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

Possibly improbable – but definitely worth considering.

Mary Buckelew

The Book Thief

Markus Zusak

Prof. Ashley writes: It's now a few years old, but I hadn't read it because, I insisted to all who recommended it to me, including my own Jewish mother, "I don't read Holocaust novels." However, this book's prose is so delicious yet it does not at all mitigate its completely devastating plot. In fact, it is a remarkable resource for helping all of us think about what it means to be an ally. *Prof. Muller writes:* Death himself narrates this coming of age story as Liesel Meminger explores life in Nazi Germany during WW II, learns to read (and steal) and befriends some controversial characters while trying to survive. (LIT 165 students gave it a thumbs up!)

Hannah Ashley & Meghan Muller

Cloud Atlas

David Mitchell

Clever and discouraging futuristic novel with multiple invented languages and narrators.

Lynette McGrath

The Dante Club

Matthew Pearl

Probably the best mystery I have ever read. Also, his *The Poe Shadow* and *The Last Dickens*.

Theodora West

Death Comes to Pemberley

P. D. James

A for-fun extension of *Pride and Prejudice* by the famous crime novelist.

Linda Myrsiades

Delirium

Lauren Oliver

Teenagers in this totalitarian future must be cured of love (aka deliria) to keep them safe. Another wonderful young adult dystopian future.

Merry Perry

The Draining Lake: A Reykjavik Thriller

Arnaldur Indridason

A skeleton in a lake and an old transmitter lead Inspector Erlendur and his associates into a search for a missing person, a situation complicated because the unidentified figure may also have been involved with Cold War espionage. The Icelandic setting adds a distinctive element to the story. Part of a series featuring Erlendur.

Deidre Johnson

The Elegance of the Hedgehog

Muriel Barbery

Barbery's novel (published in 2006 in France) should remind us of Salinger's best work: carefully enough to invite readers to pursue (and love) philosophers like Barthes and Husserl, but also effortlessly beautiful in a way that makes the book accessible enough for beach, airplane, train, or Appalachian Trail. This book made me smile, again and again.

Randall Cream

The Elementary Particles

Michel Houellebecq

An extraordinary cross-genre effort.

Geetha Ramanathan

Empire of Illusion: the End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle

Chris Hedges

The first decade of the 21st century has seen a slew of books condemning the swell of ignorance in America, as reflected in such trends as reality television, celebrity obsession, the refusal to accept evolution, and the decline of America's newspapers. The most disturbing aspect of this cultural movement is that the embrace of escapist entertainment is often accompanied by an explicit need to justify itself against other, more intellectually challenging pursuits, resulting in a disdain for scholarship. Chris Hedges examines this trend by demonstrating how the consumption of illusory entertainment is causing a fundamental default in American society: a frightening proportion of Americans have little or no engagement with reality. According to Hedges, these worlds of fantasy provide an oversimplified illusion of justice and benevolence which inhibits critical thinking. His chapter on the Ivy League should be an alarming wake-up call to those who attend or toil in public institutions of higher learning.

Chuck Bauerlein

The Epic of Gilgamesh

I am immersed in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in Andrew George's Penguin translation. One of Gilgamesh's many attractive qualities is that he was the world's first great urbanist.

Michael Brooks

Exiles

Ron Hansen

A fictional biography of Gerard Manley Hopkins, which looks at the circumstances of his composition of "The Wreck of the Deutschland." The book concludes with the 35-stanza poem, which is one of the most freakish experiments in English verse in the late 19th century.

Paul Maltby

The Finkler Question

Howard Jacobson

Booker Prize winner.

Linda Myrsiades

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Short description: I've recently become aware of the value of "mindfulness" meditation as a resource for dealing with stress and illness, and this book articulates the key principles of the mindfulness movement. Kabat-Zinn, the founding director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, writes in clear, empathetic prose and emphasizes the practical, concrete steps that you can take to reduce stress, feel more relaxed, and potentially improve your physical health.

Andrew Sargent

God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse

Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević

A brilliant dissection and reconstruction of the three major faith-based systems of belief in the world today, from one of the world's most articulate intellectuals, Slavoj Žižek, in conversation with Croatian philosopher Boris Gunjević. In six chapters that describe Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in fresh ways using the tools of Hegelian and Lacanian analysis, *God in Pain* shows how each faith understands humanity and divinity--and how the differences between the faiths may be far stranger than they may at first seem.

Ayan Gangopadhyay

The Hermaphrodite

Julia Ward Howe

The author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" wrote this fascinating, but fragmentary, novel about an intersex person in the 1840s. It's not a "great" work, but Howe does some interesting, and unexpected, things with gender.

Rodney Mader

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Douglas Adams

A twisted and joyful way to celebrate turning 42.

Jen Bacon

The Hunger Games

Suzanne Collins

Yes!

Hannah Ashley

Hypothermia

Arnaldur Indriðason

The sixth novel in the Inspector Erlendur series and by far my favorite (you can read it without having read the others; all you'll miss is some details of his relationships with his family, which I

Seth Kahn

think you can get the gist of anyway). Very creepy and disturbing. If you like Nordic/Scandinavian mystery, read this.

The Infinities

Bill Lalicker

John Banville

Unseen except when they inhabit the bodies of mortals to wreak love and havoc, the classical Greek gods and goddesses hover around the deathbed of an academic as his family gathers and lives are revealed. Graceful, profane, and deeply humane. Winner of the Man Booker Prize.

Just My Type: A Book About Fonts

Bill Lalicker

Simon Garfield

Passion, history, print design, plus the fascinating cultural and symbolic messages we communicate with the choice of a typestyle.

The Kingdom by the Sea

Peter Kent

Paul Theroux

A somewhat jaundiced view of my native country by an American writer of merit.

The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of "Proper" English, from Shakespeare to South Park

Michelle Blake

Jack Lynch

Without siding with either grammatical prescriptivists or descriptivists, Jack Lynch explores the compelling and relatively recent story of the tension between them in a way that's researched to satisfy scholarly readers and written to please popular audiences (I'd take this one to the beach!).

The Line of Beauty

Lynette McGrath

Alan Hollinghurst

Beautifully written exploration of class and sexuality in Thatcher's Britain. Might be fun at the same time to watch *The Iron Lady*, a much better film than the reviews would suggest, exploring gender and sex issues from another perspective than Hollinghurst's.

The Locktender's House

Seth Kahn

Steven Sherrill

A very creepy, poetic ghost story with slightly sardonic undertones.

Love in a Cold Climate

Cheryl Wanko

Nancy Mitford

If you're in the mood for arch humor about the British moneyed classes, this is a good place to start, from one of their own. (I read a lot of Mitford last summer, and this is really the only one that holds up.) Loopy characters abound. Lady Montdore is particularly appalling and hilarious.

The Maimie Papers: Letters from an Ex-Prostitute

Judy Scheffler

Maimie Pinzer

In 1910 ex-prostitute Maimie Pinzer began her remarkable twelve-year correspondence with Fanny Quincy Howe, a Lady from one of the very "best" and oldest families in Boston. Her letters reveal her growth as a person and as a writer, as she recovers from the effects of her morphine addiction and the venereal disease that had claimed one of her eyes. We witness her strength in

her attempts to reconcile with her Jewish family and her compassion as she works to found a home to help at-risk young women.

The Meaning of Life

Peter Kent

Terry Eagleton

With his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, a leading critical theorist raises the perennial question and tries to answer it.

*Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the
Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914*

Rodney Mader

J. R. McNeill

McNeill focuses on two mosquito-borne illnesses—yellow fever and malaria—and their effects on European colonialism in the area from South Carolina to the coasts of Colombia and Brazil. More than a few decisive moments in this long history turned, not on human agency, but on these summer pests. A great beach read!

Never Let Me Go

Hyojin Yoon

Kazuo Ishiguro

Runner up for Man Booker Prize. A dystopian, science fiction novel, without aliens and robots, about three children who grow up in a society that raises them, essentially, to slaughter. Adapted to film in 2010 by Mark Romanek, starring Keira Knightley, Carey Mulligan, and Andrew Garfield.

*The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration
in the Age of Colorblindness*

Cherise Pollard & Andrew Sargent

Michelle Alexander

Prof. Pollard writes: This is a fascinating cultural critique. Alexander argues that the terrain of segregation has shifted considerably due to the rise of mass incarceration, particularly in African American Communities. It is an important book for non-African Americans to read because everyone needs to know about the impact of this growing industry (the system of incarceration) on American race relations.

Prof. Sargent writes: This eye-opening book calls attention to the appalling racial inequities of our prison industrial complex and dismantles the fiction that America has somehow entered a "post-racial" era of blissful colorblindness since the election of Barack Obama. Alexander, a law professor, argues that the wildly disproportionate number of African American men "warehoused" in today's prisons amounts to a deeply entrenched racial caste system in which mass incarceration and the war on drugs generate new forms of social control and racial segregation. A powerful book for anyone interested in understanding a key component of the story of race in America today.

No One Had a Tongue to Speak:

Jen Bacon

The Untold Story of One of History's Deadliest Floods

Utpal Sandesara and Tom Wooten

The story of the Machu Dam disaster in 1979.

Not Buying It: My Year Without Shopping

Cheryl Wanko

Judith Levine

Perhaps you're like me and like many North Americans. We feel good when we buy stuff. Consider, then, the challenge of your average Judith when she decides to live a whole year buying only necessities: no clothing, no tchotchkes, no *booze*. It's an interesting psychological and social experiment that reveals much about our culture.

Old School

Carla Verderame

Tobias Wolff

Set in a boys' preparatory school, the novel raises interesting questions about teaching and learning while commenting on the challenges of growing up. Wolff includes interesting profiles of Robert Frost, Ayn Rand, and Ernest Hemingway as he develops a compelling story of deceit, betrayal, and redemption in the close community of a secondary academy. A "must-read" for both teachers and students of English.

The Orphan Master's Son

Eleanor Shevlin

Adam Johnson

Set in North Korea and providing a compelling portrait of life in this harsh, isolated country, *The Orphan Master's Son* benefits from Adam Johnson's extensive research. The novel, given to shifts in narrative voice, conveys life in this totalitarian state—its cruelties, absurdities, and survival mechanisms—through the experiences of its main character, Pak Jun Do: tunnel worker, kidnapper of Japanese citizens, translator, diplomatic envoy, labor-camp prisoner, and torturer.

Our Final Hour: A Scientist's Warning

John Ward

Martin Rees

A comparably eminent British scientist/philosopher offers a diametrically opposed vision of the probable future (or lack thereof) facing our species.

Philoctetes

Eric Dodson- Robinson

Sophocles

What does it mean to be a hero? What responsibility does an army at war have to the individual? When is it right to disobey orders? Sophocles's tragedy explores these questions through the dilemma of a young warrior faced with conflicting duties, immense responsibility, and terrible potential consequences should he make the wrong choice.

The Physick Book of Deliverance Dane

Jen Bacon

Katherine Howe

A fun book that combines history, graduate study, and witchcraft with some delightful writing.

Pure

Merry Perry

Julianna Baggot

Pressia, who has a doll's head fused to her hand, is the sixteen-year-old protagonist of this postapocalyptic horror novel. Compelling plot, startling images, and grotesquely beautiful characters. I loved this book!

Queen Elizabeth in the Garden

Trea Martyn

Gardens as political maneuvers and seductions of the Elizabethan imagination. For readers interested in the history and fantasy of gardens.

Lynette McGrath

Republic

Plato

What is justice, and how can we practice it in our everyday lives? What sort of government and education does Plato imagine would be necessary to make this happen?

Eric Dodson- Robinson

Reverend America

Kris Saknussem

Take equal parts Flannery O'Connor, John Steinbeck, Pete Dexter, and Thomas Pynchon; mix and pour into a road story that moves fast, as a preacher of mixed provenance applies an idiosyncratic gospel of pure love to American culture low and high.

Bill Lalicker

Roseanna

Maj Sjowall and Per Wahloo

The first of ten novels in the Martin Beck mystery series; originally published in 1965. Credited by some with (re)inventing the whole Swedish crime fiction genre. Unknown murder victim discovered in lake, mystery ensues...

Seth Kahn

Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded

Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire

Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker

A fascinating read even at 500+ pages.

Mary Buckelew

Scoop

Evelyn Waugh

Waugh's satire on the high-stakes business of news coverage has never been more relevant as today's giant media outlets scramble for supremacy in the global marketplace. When a nature writer mistakenly gains an appointment as a foreign correspondent for "The Daily Beast," readers gain a hilarious insider's perspective on the business of reporting and learn just how easy it is to "scoop" the professionals.

Joe Navitsky

Sea of Poppies

Amitava Ghose

On the Indian Ocean slave trade; just brilliant in its use of language.

Geetha Ramanathan

Selected Poems

Tony Harrison

Tony Harrison is one of the most passionate, accessible, yet intelligent British poets of the last 3 decades. This is a great overview of Harrison's work, including his important poem "v".

Graham MacPhee

Sensation

Tim Ray

Nick Mamatas

I had never heard the term “spectacular fiction” prior to reading this scifi-ish novel, but I was intrigued by the term and enjoyed this particular example. A species of anarchist wasps and a species of hyper-intelligent spiders use humans as their vehicle for war by invading human hosts, taking over their minds and bodies, and causing them to wage war in a realm referred to as the Simulacrum (a la Baudrillard). The novel comments on elements of the Simulacrum that are already present in our own lives and also displaces humans as the central actors in the universe and instead presents them as unwitting pawns of the warring insects. The novel is fun in an allegorical sense, and much of the writing is witty and insightful.

The Severed Head

Peter Kent

Iris Murdoch

Intriguing tale by one of the most impressive novelists of the modern age.

Shortcomings

Jeff Sommers

Adrian Tomine

A contemporary graphic novel about Ben Tanaka, a former grad student at Berkeley, his friends, his life, and his loves. The book superbly includes issues of race, sexual orientation, and the struggle to establish one’s place in the world—funny, touching, and artful.

The Slap

Linda Myrsiades

Christos Tsiolkas

Longlisted for the Booker Prize.

The Song of Ice and Fire (Series title),
starting with *A Game of Thrones* (Book I)

B.G. Betz

George R. R. Martin

This brilliant fantasy series is long on character development and complex plotting and even includes a dragon or two. The five novels are well-paced and addictive, perfect tomes to lug to the beach.

A Star Called Henry

Erin Hurt

Roddy Doyle

I just re-read this book recently for a book club discussion, and I was reminded of how much I love this book (as well as all of Doyle's work). *A Star Called Henry* follows the birth, childhood, and focuses especially on the coming-of-age of Henry Smart during the Irish fight for independence from 1916 to 1921. Smart gives readers a bawdy and compelling narration of his life during this historical period, and through him we meet a cast of characters (some are historical while others are fictional but memorable). After I finished this, I wanted to read it all over again.

Straight Man

Mary Buckelew

Richard Russo

This novel was on the recommended reading list in 2009 – if you didn’t have time to read it in 09 – don’t miss it this summer. The main character in Russo’s novel is Chair of the fictitious West Central Pennsylvania University’s English Department.

The Swerve: How the World Became Modern

Eleanor Shevlin

Stephen Greenblatt

Despite its subtitle, this work is not truly about “how the world became modern” —although Greenblatt does suggest that the rediscovery of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* effects a swerve toward the secular. Rather *The Swerve* recounts the search for classical manuscripts by medieval humanists, and it is in this telling, reminiscent of detective or political/spy thrillers that the narrative acquires its verve. Engagingly written, Greenblatt’s narrative covers much territory and offers a number of swerves of its own: it sets forth the principles of Lucretius’s Epicurean philosophy, the state of the Vatican in the first half of the fifteenth century, and the biography of Italian scholar Poggio di Duccio who rediscovered Lucretius’s manuscript.

The Tiger's Wife: A Novel

Eleanor Shevlin

Téa Obreht

Highly original and well-crafted, this Croatian-born author’s novel takes place in an unnamed country after the cessation of political, ethnic conflicts, with numerous, extended flashbacks to life before and during the war. The novel combines Balkan fables, a coming-of-age story, relationships between generations and more and interweaves strains of magical realism with the realities of war, adolescence, family, and political and social tensions.

Underworld

Randall Cream

Don DeLillo

This recent novel (published in 1997 and set from the 50s to the 90s) offers more than 800 pages of non-linear intersecting narratives that embrace baseball, J. Edgar Hoover, mafia violence, and love—lost, found, and that which ought not to be. Probably his best book, this novel made me want to listen to the Kinks again.

Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West

Hyojin Yoon

Gregory Maguire

The weirder and darker basis for the Broadway musical *Wicked*, about the life of Elphaba the Wicked Witch of the West.

Winter's Bone

Jeff Sommers

Daniel Woodrell

A wonderful novel about a sixteen-year-old girl’s struggle to help her family hold onto its home and survive a bitter Ozark winter. Poetic, powerful, and memorable with a terrific protagonist. Vastly superior to the pretty excellent film version...wear a warm coat and drink a hot chocolate while reading this one.

Wolf Hall

John Ward & Hyojin Yoon

Hilary Mantel

Prof. Ward writes: A brilliantly detailed and profoundly reflective fictional treatment of the career of Thomas Cromwell and the machinations of the court of Henry VIII. In a fairly recent discussion of her novel, Mantel asserts that it was primarily her interest in the man rather than the era that motivated her to write the novel. I think this text goes at least some distance toward validating Mario Vargas Llosa's assertion that novelists frequently surpass historians in their ability to deal with the past.

Prof. Yoon writes: Winner of Man Booker Prize and National Book Critics Circle. A historical novel that gives a sympathetic portrait of Thomas Cromwell as a devoted family man and provides insights into the aporias and blinders of ambition. A nice companion piece to other depictions of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, recent ones in the popular media including *The Tudors*, *The Other Boleyn Girl* (also not a bad novel), *Elizabeth*, etc.

You Know When the Men Are Gone
Siobhan Fallon

Jeff Sommers

A recent collection of 8 stories that focus on the lives of women married to US soldiers deployed in Iraq. A nuanced portrait of the war's impact on the non-combatants whose family lives are disrupted by the war.

