

Favorite Books XIII

Reading suggestions by Wisconsin legislators & legislative staff, May 2014

www.legis.wisconsin.gov/lrb/pubs/tapthepower.htm

The following titles and book reviews were gathered as an activity for National Library Week 2014. Submitted by legislators and legislative staff, the reviews were not altered except to edit for length or to correct typographical errors. Web sites of interest to book club groups, and to readers in general, are also included. Many more reading suggestions can be found in the previous 12 issues of Favorite Books. All of the previous issues are listed on the Tap the Power Web page.

Fiction

Burrough, William S. *Cities of the Red Night*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981.

My favorite book of the moment is William S. Burrough's *Cities of the Red Night*. I have only read it a handful of times, but each time I notice something new. The prose is simply captivating.

Diffenbaugh, Vanessa. *The Language of Flowers*. New York: Random House, 2012.

This story of the childhood and early adulthood of a young woman aging out of foster care is a wonderful window to the challenges and joys of foster life. Victoria decides, over and over again, whom she'll trust, how she'll conduct her life and whether she can hope for a future. She brings us along for the journey.

Heinlein, Robert A. *Starship Troopers*. New York: Putnam, 1959.

Ostensibly, it's a story about a future soldier as he goes from bootcamp, to officer candidacy school, and onto the frontlines of a war versus an alien threat. The true value of the story, however, are the lessons of civic duty hidden within political commentary that, despite having been written over 50 years ago, prove to be as true now as when it was first written. It's very different than the action and violence-inspired movies, and definitely worth the read.

Kidd, Sue Monk. *The Invention of Wings*. New York: Viking, 2014.

The book follows Hetty 'Handful' Grimke, a Charleston slave, and Sarah, the daughter of the wealthy Grimke family. The novel begins on Sarah's 11th birthday, when she is given Handful as a birthday gift. It follows their lives for the next 35 years. Sarah is an abolitionist and a feminist at a time when neither is looked upon kindly. The story is based loosely on the life of Sarah Grimke.

Moriarty, Liane. *The Husband's Secret*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2013.

In the course of just a week, many people's lives are changed forever by a domino-effect series of secrets coming to light in different ways. This great vacation or book club book grabs you and is hard to put down. The unusual epilogue fleshes out more of the story from the author's point of view, and makes for good discussion with your friends. I love how this shows no one ever truly knows 'the whole story' about anyone. Rather

than be frustrated by this, we should embrace it, respect one other's privacy, and consider it part of life's mystery.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Gilead*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004.

This book is written in the voice of a 76-year-old minister in the 1950s nearing the end of his life, in the fictional town of Gilead, Iowa, as a letter to his 7-year-old son. It's a meditation on fathers and sons, forgiveness, love, fear, resentment, faith, and the beauty that can arise out of ordinary life. The narrator weaves in stories from his family's past, based on the true history of settlers, abolitionists, and the underground railroad in that part of Iowa. The writing is just beautiful, and this book left a lasting impression on me. Winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Weir, Andy. *The Martian*. New York: Crown, 2014.

I was intrigued by the premise of *The Martian*, a NASA astronaut stranded on Mars, and expected it to be interesting but maybe a little dry. Boy was I wrong. Along with intelligence and resourcefulness, Watney's sense of humor is what makes him such an outstanding character. The plot seemed realistic, both in the characters triumphs and failures. The book was obviously meticulously researched, with the research lending believability to what is really a character story. If you enjoy adventure or science fiction, do yourself a favor and pick up this book. You won't be disappointed. Highly recommended. I was fortunate to receive an advance copy of this book.

Biography/Autobiography

Lindbergh, Anne Morrow. *Against Wind and Tide*. New York: Random House, 2012.

All her work is worth reading, but this is an especially good book. Reeve (her daughter) edited this last of Anne's journals, from the time Anne was 40-80ish. Excellent observations of life, marriage, etc. I think it's wonderful and rare that a daughter could get to know her mother so well, and Reeve seems to enjoy it. I especially liked the section Anne wrote detailing what she would write for marriage vows after decades of marriage, as opposed to the traditional vows most people make.

Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2001 .

An eminently readable historical biography of Oliver Wendell

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Continued

Holmes, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey, the men responsible for developing the American philosophy of pragmatism. These men were highly influenced by the horrors of the American Civil War, a time when the nation was divided into two main groups who felt that their differing ideas and beliefs could not be reconciled with one another. The pragmatic way of thinking espoused by these men is particularly relevant for us today in the face of growing division and polarization in American society.

X, Malcolm, and Alex Haley *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

This book illuminates the fascinating life of Malcolm X, an often misunderstood but very important figure in American history. It details the many unlikely transformations over the course of his life, from poverty, crime, and drug addiction, to voracious intellectual appetite, religious fervor, and societal idealism, and later, after a trip to Mecca, an astonishing shift in his views not long before he was killed. On its own, the chapter about his self-education in prison and becoming an insatiable reader is a stunning testament to the power of literacy.

Nonfiction

Carvin, Andy. *Distant Witness*. New York: CUNY Journalism Press, 2012.

I would have to say my favorite book I've read recently is *Distant Witness* by Andy Carvin. The book follows Arab Spring as it unfolds on Social Media. I wish I had downloaded it instead of the buying the paper copy because he includes links direct to sources in the book. The way the author pieces everything together the reader is on the edge of their seat the whole time.

Moore, Kenny. *Bowerman and the Men of Oregon: The Story of Oregon's Legendary Coach and Nike's Cofounder*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 2007.

I rekindled my interest in running last year and was looking for books about running to fuel my enthusiasm. Bill Bowerman is one of the most famous American track coaches. Needless to say, it's a book about running, but, it's also really a book about a slice of American history that would interest more than just the hardcore running enthusiast. Kenny Moore writes in an easy to read style and tells the story in a very entertaining way. It's also well-researched, due in large part to the remarkable access he was given to the family as a former athlete and insider at both Oregon and with the Olympic teams. Moore also provides his personal perspective, which adds even more flavor to the book.

Fessler, Ann. *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006.

While the title may imply that this book is a push for a pro-choice agenda, it is not. The author, herself an adoptee whose birth mother relinquished her unwillingly, wrote this as a catharsis

for herself, and also to make public what happened to so many women and men years ago. This is not just a bunch of case histories. As you get deeper into the book your astonishment is reduced and your sad realization that our culture allowed and encouraged this involuntary surrender of babies (with the best of intentions the majority of the time) seeps in and sits on your heart. Fessler is eloquent, questioning, and very human in her reticence to find out her own history. It would make a great book club discussion book.

Woodard, Colin. *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. New York: Penguin Books, 2011.

A fascinating look at the history of North America starting in 1590 with settlers from Spain and continuing to 2010. The author ignores geopolitical boundaries and looks at how each culture to arrive shaped the United States we know today. Very interesting and very readable at 371 pages (with notes and index).

Related Web Sites

American Library Association. "Recommended Reading." <http://www.ala.org/tools/libfactsheets/alalibraryfactsheet23>.

Book Group Buzz. <http://bookgroupbuzz.booklistonline.com>
"A Booklist Blog. Book group tips, reading lists, & lively talk of literary news from the experts at Booklist Online."

TheCapitol.net. "Political and Government Classics." www.thecapitol.net/Recommended/bookspolit.htm.

Go Big Read – U.W.-Madison Common Reading Program. <http://www.gobigread.wisc.edu/>.

"UW-Madison's common-reading program, has thousands of people reading, talking and sharing their reactions and opinions. That's the idea: to engage students, faculty, staff and the entire community in a vibrant, academically driven experience."

GoodReads. www.goodreads.com and Shelfari: www.shelfari.com.

Two (unrelated) social networking sites for book lovers. Share your reading lists and reviews with online friends.

Government Book Talk. <http://govbooktalk.gpo.gov>.

Government Printing Office blog about new books and other documents published by federal government agencies.

LibraryThing. www.librarything.com.

An online service that allows users to catalog their personal libraries. Both free and subscription accounts are available.

The New York Times – Books. www.nytimes.com/pages/books.

Link to best sellers, Sunday book reviews, "Paper Cuts: A Blog About Books," and much more.

ReadingGroupGuides.com. www.readinggroupguides.com.

The online community for reading groups.

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