

## 2025-2026 Book Recommendations List

Thinking of donating to the Department of English this holiday season? If so, you could be the recipient of three books from this year's booklist, including a signed copy of *Doll Parts* by WVU MFA alum Penny Zhang.

To be eligible to win, complete the steps listed below. Sometime between November 15, 2025 and February 1, 2026:

- 1) Scan the QR code at right or [visit this link to the form](#).
- 2) Share a book that you think should be on next year's list.
- 3) Follow the link at the bottom of the form to donate to the Department of English Operations fund.



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Proceeds will support undergraduate and graduate student development. Your continued support means so much to the Department of English!

### Rudy Almasy, Emeritus Faculty, recommends:

#### *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* and *The Sea, the Sea* by Iris Murdoch

Why not read one of Murdoch's novels? These are stories of love and loss, good and evil, sexual relations, and wonderfully drawn characters manipulating and manipulated. Then finish off with John Bayley's *Elegy for Iris*, a memoir of how both struggled with Iris' Alzheimer disease until her death in 1999.

### Brian Ballentine, Faculty, recommends:

#### *The Barn: The Secret History of a Murder in Mississippi* by Wright Thompson

Thompson's book lives up to the hype as it offers a deep and layered history of the murder of Emmett Till. Thompson weaves the intersections of land, laws, and people into a compelling and tragic narrative.

### Ben Bascom, Faculty, recommends:

#### *Who's Afraid of Gender?* by Judith Butler

I love a really accessible and culturally relevant theoretical text! Butler offers a provocative overview of the emergence of gender as a category and then does some brilliant speculations in the end.

**Katie Bonevento, PhD student, recommends:**

***Hummingbird Salamander* by Jeff Vandermeer**

A tense, gripping thriller about a middle-aged mom who gets swept up in a conflict between an ecoterrorist group and exotic wildlife traffickers, set in a dystopian near future that feels terrifyingly plausible. Impossible to put down!

**Mark Brazaitis, Faculty, recommends:**

***Devils* by Fyodor Dostoevsky**

Who wants to read about a cadre of manipulative, nihilistic, power-crazed individuals in 19th century Russia when we have the equivalent in today's politics? Dostoevsky's portraits of his antiheroes are searing, and he isn't inclined to release them from consequences. Let the reckoning begin.

**Erin Brock Carlson, Faculty, recommends:**

***Doll Parts* by Penny Zhang**

Combine spooky vibes, the complexity of friendships, and a lingering mystery, and you've got this novel. *Doll Parts* offers some deeply compelling moments that force us to think about the ways that grief and memory are intertwined. Best of all, this work is written by an alum from our MFA program!

**Rose Casey, Faculty, recommends:**

***David's Story or October* by Zoë Wicomb**

In honor of South African Wicomb, who was one of the very best writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and who passed away on October 13, 2025, I recommend reading one of her novels. *David's Story* reckons with the ending of apartheid and insistently prioritizes stories of women whose voices have been subordinated to those of men, while *October* explores the meaning of home for a woman who has long lived far away.

**Lara Farina, Faculty, recommends:**

***The Empusium* by Olga Tokarczuk**

The latest novel from a Nobel-winning Polish author, *The Empusium* weaves together mystery, a riff on Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, and feminist critique of philosophical traditions. Creepy goings-on in a Prussian sanatorium.

**Camille Gazoul, MFA student, recommends:**

***The Road to Tenderhearts* by Annie Hartnett**

This was such a fun read; I actually laughed out loud. It follows a non-traditional family road trip led by a lovable but hapless lottery winner and a cat who can sense death. It's also a page turner with a really sweet ending. I recommended it to everyone in my family, and we all loved it!

**Catherine Gouge, Faculty, recommends:**

***Make (Sneaky) Art* by Nishant Jain**

Because, as Jain says, “we are living in a difficult world in a time of great inhumanity,” he urges us to make art. It’s a call to creative expression as both refuge and resistance and a call to make art to “reach for something greater than ourselves, to make this life more bearable, to fill our days with joy, and to be as intensely human as possible.”

**Cody Grey, PhD candidate, recommends:**

***Literary Theory for Robots* by Dennis Yi Tenen**

In a time where we are often reminded about the death of the humanities and the rise of AI, Tenen's short reflection provides fodder for thinking about bridges between these two seeming opposites. I appreciate Tenen's emphasis on AI, reading, and writing's connections with labor, and his work encourages me to find new and different ways to broach these subjects with laypeople, students, and colleagues alike.

**Destinee Harper, PhD candidate, recommends:**

***Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power Across Neoliberal America* by Brett Story**

A book that will change the way you think about location—from mountaintop removal sites to playgrounds.

**Faith Lostaunau, MFA student, recommends:**

***Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver**

A retelling of David Copperfield set in rural Appalachia. It is a beautiful and heartbreaking story about a young boy’s resilience through foster care, poverty, and the opioid crisis in his community.

**Meabh McGuigan, PhD student, recommends:**

***Prairie Edge* by Conor Kerr**

A heartbreaking but deeply touching examination of Métis resistance and survival on the Canadian prairies, this book is deeply important for anyone interested in Indigenous pasts, presents, and (most crucially!) futures.

**Dalan Nelson, MFA in Poetry, recommends:**

***My Name is Asher Lev* by Chaim Potok and *Vita Nova* by Louise Gluck**

Potok crafts a beautiful story about an artist who finds his voice, while Gluck writes with maturity and clarity. She is vulnerable and honest.

**Jess Munley, MFA student, recommends:**

***Easy Beauty* by Chloé Cooper Jones**

*Easy Beauty* is a captivating memoir with a lot to offer about the beauty and wholeness of other humans. I was fascinated by her exploration of disability and human experience through philosophy and personal narrative.

**Emily Noe, MFA student, recommends:**

***Never Whistle at Night: An Indigenous Dark Fiction Anthology* edited by Shane Hawk and Theodore C. Van Alst Jr.**

An excellent fall/spooky time read capturing short stories grounded in Indigenous mythology with a chillingly new twist. Cozy up and read one short story before bed to have the most vibrant nightmares.

**Tara Salvati, PhD Student, recommends:**

***The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien**

O'Brien toes the line between fact and fiction while also crafting chapters that are both individually and collectively moving. The book is incredible in both its writing and composition, with each entry carefully placed for maximum effect. *The Things They Carried* doesn't just showcase the horrors of war, but it highlights the mental and emotional toll from before and after a soldier's time in battle.

**Mary Ann Samyn, Faculty, recommends:**

**Agatha Christie novels and *The Leopard* by Giuseppe di Lampedusa**

I read Agatha Christie for the same reason I read Nathaniel Hawthorne (yes, really!): insight into character. During these relentlessly tumultuous times, I find myself returning to Christie novels, re-reading (or listening) to them for their clarity and humor and for the satisfaction of mysteries solved. Favorites: *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *A Murder Is Announced* (Miss Marple); *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *Dumb Witness*, and *Appointment with Death* (Hercule Poirot).

Recommended audio book narrators: June Whitfield and Hugh Fraser.

An Italian classic, *The Leopard* is one of those novels that just has "it," that know-it-when-I-read-it quality the best prose possesses. The sweep of history + an eye for detail. Translated by Archibald Colquhoun.

**Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Faculty, recommends:**

***Empire of AI* by Karen Hao**

An important read that provides context for understanding the current generative AI moment.

**Nathalie Singh-Corcoran, Faculty, recommends:**

***Starling House* by Alix E. Harrow**

Starling House is a gothic novel with a Stranger Things vibe (think, The Upside Down) except Harrow's monsters seem to be telling us that not all monsters are evil; maybe they are just misunderstood.

**Sam Stebbins, Lecturer and Alum, recommends:**

***Stay and Fight: A Novel* by Madeline ffitch**

This novel is perfect for those of us who have said "forget it, I'm going off the grid." It features a stunning Appalachian setting and flawed yet endearing characters who form a chosen family. The chapters from seven-year-old Perley's perspective are especially fantastic.

**Tim Sweet, Faculty, recommends:**

***Big Chief* by John Hickey and *Old School Indian* by Aaron John Curtis**

Both novels center on the return of someone who has lived a "successful" life off the rez. In the thriller *Big Chief*, Anishinaabe Mitch Caddo gets deeply involved in tribal politics, but events pit him against his family. In the serio-comic *Old School*, Mohawk Abe Jacobs ambivalently seeks out his community's healer, who is also his uncle.

**David Stewart, Faculty, recommends:**

***The Blind Spot: Why Science Cannot Ignore Human Experience* by Adam Frank, Evan Thompson, and Marcelo Gleiser**

Written by two physicists and a philosopher, this book is a provocative exploration of how science's objectivist methods detach the embodied observer from the observed, yielding abstract theories that sideline the phenomenological truth that the body is our primary mode of being-in-the-world.

**Nick VanNuland, MFA student, recommends:**

***No One Belongs Here More than You* by Miranda July**

No one writes about sex quite like Miranda July.

**Kelly Keel, MFA student, recommends:**

***Sink* by Joseph Earl Thomas**

A deeply impactful memoir written in a surprising style that immerses the reader in the world of early 90's poverty and self discovery.

**Lisa Weihman, Faculty, recommends:**

***Small Things Like These* by Claire Keegan**

Keegan's novella is a contemporary retelling of the Christmas story set in a small town in Ireland in 1985. It follows Bill Furlong, a middle aged coal merchant, husband, and father of five daughters, in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Bill's resistance to the social norms that define his small community proves that small acts of compassion can be heroic acts of resistance.

## Want to see your name next year?

Share your updates and book recommendations with us. We'd like to know what you've been up to! Visit this QR code at right or visit <https://forms.gle/Ead3hK2ko61M5cme6> and prepare to see your name in print in our next set of recommendations.



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