

2020 Book Recommendations List

Rudolph Almsy, Professor Emeritus, recommends:

Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood.
by Trevor Noah

The autobiography of an exceptional individual born into the insanity of apartheid South Africa.



Amy Alvarez, Faculty, recommends:

Jaws of Life
by Laura Leigh Morris

By turns hilarious and soul-shattering, this collection of short stories set in northern West Virginia portrays an array of characters with depth and clarity. While Morris shines a light on the struggles of our state, her characters are resilient and empowered. Overall, a hopeful portrait of present-day Appalachia.



Brian Ballentine, Faculty, recommends:

The Overstory
by Richard Powers

“The redwoods do strange things. They hum. They radiate arcs of force.” The characters in *The Overstory* radiate, too, as their narratives intersect through their environmental activism. Offering more than warnings over climate change and unfettered resource extraction, Powers shows us the danger of our growing dislocation from the natural world.



Patricia Bello, Parent of 2008 WVU alumni, recommends:

Marine Tigers: A NewyoRican Story
By José Bello

It begins on the colorful island of Puerto Rico and goes on to New York City, where his story of assimilation into American Life begins. A tale of personal and economic struggles and urban survival with a New York City backdrop.



Gwen Bergner, Faculty, recommends:

Sing, Unburied, Sing
by Jesmyn Ward

Set in the Mississippi Delta in current times, Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* follows just-turned-twelve Jo as he travels north with his neglectful, meth-addicted mother, Leonie, and his little sister, Kayla, to Parchman Prison to bring his father home. Along with Jo’s father, they pick up Richie, the ghost of a black boy who was at Parchman years ago with Jo’s grandfather. Richie and Jo both seek Pop’s love and protection, their sapling spirits bent by the capricious, vicious winds of racial injustice. Though ghosts don’t keep their promises, Ward does. Despite the harsh history and bare-boned present she explores, the prose and spirits sing.



Laura Brady, Faculty, recommends:

Washington Black
by Esi Edugyan

Washington Black opens in 1830 Barbados. “Wash” Black is a young slave on a sugar plantation. When the brother of the plantation owner, Christopher “Titch” Wilde, chooses Wash to assist him with his various scientific pursuit, the adventure begins. The novel moves from Barbados to America, the Arctic, Nova Scotia, London, Amsterdam, and Morocco as the reader views slavery, abolition, early nature studies, and much more through the eyes of the 18-year-old protagonist. Travel along with Wash Black. Esi Edugyan’s page-turning adventure is quite a trip.



Nancy Caronia, Faculty, recommends:

The Seven or Eight Deaths of Stella Fortuna
by Juliet Grames

A brilliant coming-of-age narrative that takes the reader on the heart-breaking, terrifying, and epic journey of Stella Fortuna in and from Calabria, Italy, to Hartford, Connecticut. *O Magazine* said, “Grames’ clear and compassionate voice lets the figures of her heritage move freely.”

Cari Carpenter, Faculty, recommends:

Bitterroot
by Susan Harness

A fabulous memoir by a Salish woman who was adopted before the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) came into existence, Harness is one of the many who experienced the trauma of being completely separated from her Indigenous family and community. *Bitterroot* is tremendously well written and captivating: a story of interracial adoption that sketches the challenges faced by so many Native Americans.



Rose Casey, Faculty, recommends:

Ghost Wall
by Sarah Moss

Sarah Moss’s short novel *Ghost Wall* is a haunting and profoundly moving story about contemporary Britain, xenophobia, misogyny, and trauma. Moss’s description of events on a two-week long archaeology fieldtrip in the north of England reveal an unusual ability to evoke sensation, especially touch and smell. Perhaps read as a Brexit novel, *Ghost Wall* works magic on the body and mind.



Anna Elfenbein, Faculty, recommends:

The Bite, The Breast and the Blood: Why Modern Vampire Stories Suck Us In
by Amy Williams Wilson

Are you human? Have you sought and/or suffered from a lack of connection and intimacy? Do you want to know what happens at “cuddle parties”? If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, reading Amy Williams Wilson’s *The Bite, The Breast and the Blood: Why Modern Vampire Stories Suck Us In* (McFarland 2018) will redeem your day. Laying bare our fascination with vampires and exploring its causes, *The Bite*’s wide-ranging research and fast-breaking prose hold up a mirror for us to look into, if we dare.



Katie Fallon, Faculty, recommends:

The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature
by J. Drew Lanham

This beautiful book explores the intersections of nature, race, history, and family. Lanham, a professor at Clemson University, writes about what it means to be an African American bird watcher and nature lover in his native South Carolina.



Lara Farina, Faculty, recommends:

Refugee Tales
by David Herd (editor) and Anna Pincus (editor)

This collection of stories has admired authors like Ali Smith and Patience Agbabi retell the experiences of migrants, detainees, and asylum seekers unable to speak freely for themselves. The harrowing and deeply moving narratives are placed in a frame recalling that most famous portrait of pilgrims telling stories, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. You can listen to a sample here: <http://refugeetales.org/the-appellants-tale-david-herd/>



Marilyn Francus, Faculty, recommends:

Hunger
by Roxane Gay

A beautifully written memoir on self-knowledge, body image, sex, rape, culture, and power.

An Odyssey: A Father, A Son, and An Epic
by Daniel Mendelsohn

Mendelsohn’s 81 year old father sits in on his freshman seminar on Homer’s *Odyssey*, with unexpected results.

WVU English alum? We’d like to know what you’re up to! Send us a brief update for inclusion on our website and in future mailings. Please email Marsha Bissett: marsha.bissett@mail.wvu.edu.

Kirk Hazen, Faculty, recommends:

Rural Voices
by Elizabeth Seale and Christine Mallinson
(eds.)

The authors explore how people in rural areas around the world speak against the myths of rural backwardsness. Looking at how language connects many social qualities, the authors explain how rural speakers develop their culture from their rich heritage of place.

Mountaineers Are Always Free
by Rosemary Hathaway

Hathaway tackles the long and complicated history of “the Mountaineer” with deft prose and rock-solid research. For people who value freedom, the image of the Mountaineer is important, and Hathaway works with the full range of stories, from achieves to mascot interviews, to show its metamorphosis over the last century.



Doug Phillips, Faculty, recommends:

The Design of Everyday Things
by Don Norman

The book challenges you pay attention to the little details of the world around you – from light switches to sliding doors – and to consider how design influences our interactions with objects and processes. Norman takes a deep dive into psychology and behavior that correlates to theories of rhetoric and language use. His work has played a significant role in the development of user experience design, a key area for professional and technical writers.



Mary Ann Samyn, Faculty, recommends:

Wild Things: The Joy of Reading Children’s Literature as an Adult
by Bruce Handy

If, for whatever reason, you’re still reading and thinking about *Goodnight Moon* and Peter Rabbit and Dr. Seuss and *Little House*, if you still love Garth Williams’s illustrations, if you (like me) identify with Frances the badger, then this book is for you. Author Bruce Handy is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and his prose has the flair you’d expect. A delightful book about books both delightful and dreadful-in-a-good-way... though if you're a fan of *Little Women*, be forewarned: Jo herself is praised as a “terrific character,” but the novel, says Handy, is “irritating.” Personally, I couldn't agree more.

Nathalie Singh-Corcoran, Faculty, recommends:

Grief Cottage
by Gail Goodwin

Grief Cottage features an orphaned child, an abandoned and dilapidated house, and a ghost. While the ingredients may make for a kind of gothic novel, it’s a quiet, contemplative, and beautifully written book.

Lynn Stahl, Staff Librarian, recommends:

The Golden State
by Lydia Kiesling

The Golden State offers a feminist take on the road-trip novel, following the misadventures of a mother who abandons her university job and sets off for the California wilderness along with her toddler. Kiesling’s plot weaves together the chaos of the patriot movement, immigration-related bureaucracy, and the ineluctable minutiae of single parenthood and a protagonist subject to the respective tyrannies of all three. *The Golden State* is alternately funny, poignant, rageful, and serene, and it is unwaveringly compelling.



Timothy Sweet, Faculty, recommends:

Future Home of the Living God
by Louise Erdrich

From the author of one of the 20th century’s best novels, *Love Medicine* (1984), comes a new venture in a new genre, speculative fiction. Erdrich is still exploring the long aftermath of the conquest of America and the intertwined fates of indigenous peoples and European Americans, but she does so here in a near future in which, along with global warming, the pace of genetic mutation has increased exponentially and the state responds by attempting to control women’s reproduction. The novel isn’t perfect, she may have rushed it in response to the 2016 elections—even so, it’s chilling and all too plausibly rendered.



Glenn Taylor, Faculty, recommends:

The Trojan War Museum and other stories
by Ayse Papatya Bucak

The stories in this collection are startling in their vision. They are fevered dreams, and yet they are systematically crafted. They are seemingly both new and ancient, the voices in each one as generous as they are dangerous. It would be foolish to label this work as Turkish or American, French or Armenian, rooted or refugee, mythologically Greek or contemporarily Appalachian. This work is all of those things, and we, its readers, are too.