

## 2020-2021 Book Recommendations List

**Rudolph P. Almasy**, Professor Emeritus, recommends:  
*All the Light We Cannot See*  
by Anthony Doerr

Set in pre-WW II and during the war. Extraordinary, powerful narrative of the interwoven stories of a blind French female and an orphaned German male, both children in their separate countries when the story begins whose teenage lives come together during the allied bombing of Saint Malo on the Brittany coast in 1944.

**Brian Ballentine**, Faculty, recommends:  
*The Space Between Us*  
by Thrity Umrigar

Stark disparities of class and wealth are only part of the story revolving around a Parsi housewife and her long-time servant. Set in Bombay, Umrigar's striking novel shows her characters' intimate connections as well as their deepest divides.

**Patricia Bello**, Retired, recommends:  
*Marine Tigers: A Newyorican Story*  
by José Bello

A true American story told by a self-described Newyorican. 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:  
*Piecing Me Together*  
by Renée Watson

Recent protests of racial injustice in the Northwest and across the country make this novel about a Black girl from a low-income neighborhood in Portland attending an elite and predominantly white private high school even more timely. Jade, a talented collage artist and standout Spanish student who wants to study abroad, navigates friendships, family, and school to reveal the challenges of inequality for teenagers trying to chart a future. Engaging and accessible—without parental advisory warnings—for youth, families, teachers, and others who want to explore the thorny issue of race in this country.

**Kate Blackburn, M.D.**, recommends:  
*Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*  
by Olga Tokarczuk

Man Booker International winner for 2018, and a worthy one. Now the Nobel Prize as well. She is brilliant, original and this mystery covers a lot of ground—philosophy, astrological fore, William Blake (from whom the title is taken). Jennifer Croft's translation is fluid and matches the brilliance of the author.

**Laura Brady**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Black Water Rising and Pleasantville*  
by Attica Locke

If you need a break from the chaos of 2020, why not restore a little order with a mystery novel? Attica Locke's mysteries offer suspense along with sharp social commentary. *Black Water Rising* (2009) introduces her detective Jay Porter, a former civil rights activist turned attorney. He returns in *Pleasantville* (2016).

**Mark Brazaitis**, Faculty, recommends:  
*I'm Thinking of Ending Things*  
by Iain Reid

A literary horror novel in which the narrator, an unnamed young woman, drives with her boyfriend to his parents' house, to a Dairy Queen (in a raging snow storm), and, finally, to an isolated high school. She keeps doing what no one would recommend, including going into a dark, dank basement that serves as the world's creepiest artist's studio.

**Betijane Christopher Burger**, Retired English Teacher, recommends,  
*The Clue of the Broken Locket*  
by Carolyn Keene

Found at a used book sale, the mystery book takes me back to adolescent reading and it holds up well. Nancy Drew is determined and helps the reader practice inductive thinking! It was fun.

*The Blackberry Tea Club*  
by Barbara Herrick

This is a joyful embracing of life and aging – go ahead with adventure in what she calls “the Glory Years.” Keep moving, keep learning.

**Erin Brock Carlson**, Faculty, recommends:  
YA book series *The Raven Cycle*  
by Maggie Stiefvater

Stiefvater's series is a mystical tale set in the woods of Appalachia with a host of strong female characters. Keep your eyes peeled for Jesse Dittley, who is perhaps the most endearing character I've ever encountered. Great for the teenage fantasy reader in your life, too!

**Christopher Carson**, Communications Center Supervisor – HCC Brandon, recommends:  
*Everything Begins & Ends at the Kentucky Club*  
by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

Sáenz reminds us about the humanity of our differences. His stories invite the reader to explore a world of grey, both in character and morality. Lines become blurred and all you're left with is pure story.

**Cari Carpenter**, Faculty, recommends:  
*The Age of Miracles*  
by Karen Thompson Walker

Something about our current reality made this novel delightful to me: perhaps because the thought of the earth spinning a little more slowly makes the horrors of 2020 a little less stark. Gracefully written and endearing, it is a perfect way to escape an epidemic.

*The Overstory*  
by Richard Powers

This is one of those books that is hard to describe without simplifying it rudely. So I won't attempt it. It's about trees, in the best way. A book you won't ever forget.

**Rose Casey**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Hurricane Season*  
by Fernanda Melchor

Fernanda Melchor's *Hurricane Season* is a bewitching novel about love, desire, grief, and gendered violence. Translated into English in 2020 by the exceptional Sophie Hughes, Melchor's fable about femicide in contemporary Mexico offers insightful social commentary through tender prose and taut plotting. Part mystery, part fairy-tale, *Hurricane Season* is a must-read.



**Anna Elfenbein**, Faculty, recommends:

*Dark Money*  
by Jane Mayer

If you are reeling from the events of the last four years, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* by Jane Mayer of *The New York Times* will add to your understanding of how we arrived at this point, as a nation and as a region. (Among the many evidences of the “hidden hand” of the Billionaires’ Caucus that Mayer detects and analyzes are the smudges left by their “Dark Money” on West Virginia University.)

**Glenn Gallagher**, Laborer, recommends:

*Christine*  
by Stephen King

I love rock ‘n roll, antique cars and love triangles (in fiction). If you love these three, you’ll love *Christine*.

**Sara Georgi**, Managing Editor, WVU Press, recommends:

*The House of Broken Angels*  
by Luis Alberto Urrea

A beautifully told Mexican American immigrant story and family saga, set over the course of one weekend with two big events: a birthday party and a funeral. *The House of Broken Angels* is filled with humor and heartbreak, in equal measure.

**Rosemary Hathaway**, Faculty, recommends:

*March*  
by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell

The death of Civil Rights leader John Lewis during a summer of Black Lives Matter protests was both a blow and a reminder that there are still many battles to be fought and won. For a powerful testament to Lewis’ life, work, and humility, I highly recommend *March*, a three-volume graphic memoir about Lewis and his role in the Civil Rights movement. Powerfully drawn by Nate Powell, the three books take the reader from Lewis’s childhood

preaching to chickens on his Alabama farm through the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, all inside a frame story about Barack Obama’s inauguration.

**Kirk Hazen**, Faculty, recommends:

*Language in the Trump Era: Scandals and Emergencies*  
by Janet McIntosh and Norma Mendoza-Denton

The rhetoric of Donald Trump has disgusted and infuriated some people and enthralled others. How does his divisive rhetoric whip up such fervent hatred? This book explains how Trump’s language in Tweets and speeches actually operates. The editors have crafted a readable exposition of Trump’s rhetorical gears that is sure to entertain and educate all.

**Christine Hoffmann**, Faculty, recommends:

*Divers* (album)  
by Joanna Newsom

“What muppety nonsense is this?” was my first reaction to Joanna Newsom’s music. The complicated lilt of her voice grows on you, I promise, plus the experimental poetry of her lyrics. This is a woman who never met a feminine rhyme she didn’t love (grass her / master; obsolescence / fluorescence), and whose alliterative storytelling will make music on the page when you don’t feel like turning on the volume. (The cause is Ozymandian / The map of Sapokanikan / Is sanded and bevelled / The land lorn and levelled /By some unrecorded and powerful hand.) If someone told me Kate Bush and Seamus Heaney had created Joanna Newsom in a lab, I’d believe them. All the stuff in parentheses is from “Sapokanikan,” a labor-of-love song that uncovers the obscure(d) history of Manhattan Island; it performs the restorative work it celebrates as somehow both accidental and inevitable, and I really like it.



**Jenny Johnson**, Faculty, recommends:  
*How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*  
 by Jenny O'Dell

“What if curiosity is the emergency?” O'Dell asks in this stirring meditation. An unexpected call to action, O'Dell beautifully weaves together interdisciplinary ideas from Martin Buber to John Cage to Audre Lorde. This book will spur you to say no to all that divides your attention and yes to all that sparks your senses.

**Helen King**, Retired Librarian, recommends:  
*Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic*  
 by Sam Quinones

A fascinating if sad story of how drugs became such a part of our lives. There are no easy solutions but the author offers reasons for hope.

**Richard Kookan**, Retired Teacher, recommends:  
*Washington Black*  
 by Esi Edugyan

*Washington Black* is a fictional slave narrative and a fast-paced nineteenth century adventure novel. Protagonist-narrator “Wash” escapes bondage in a balloon piloted by his mentor-rescuer who has encouraged the boy to develop his prodigious artistic talent for making scientific drawings. The narration becomes a rumination on the effects of alienation.

**Janice (Jan) Lapp (Wilson)**, Retired English Teacher, recommends:  
*The Elephant Whisperer*  
 by Lawrence Anthony with Graham Spence

My book club read this nonfiction book for one of our 2019 readings, though it was published in 2009. I read a good deal and remember outstanding fiction like *Poisonwood Bible* and *Nightingale*, but I have never been as mesmerized by a subject and writing style as this book.

**Renée Nicholson**, Director of Programs for Multidisciplinary Studies and Director of the Humanities Center, recommends:  
*Cinderland*  
 by Amy Jo Burns

A memoir set in the Pittsburgh suburb of Mercury, PA, focuses on a town both down-and-out from the collapse of steel, and rocked by a piano teacher accused of sexually assaulting preteen female students. It's a well-drawn portrait of small-town Western Pennsylvania in the 1990s, well-observed and emotionally resonate. It shows the best and worst of a youth-obsessed culture, showing a complicated coming-of-age for a young girl in this not-quite ghost town.

**Sally Porter Roberts**, Retired, recommends:  
*Gilead*  
 by Marilynne Robinson

“*Gilead* (is) a quick, deep, celebration of life that you must not miss,” *The Christian Science Monitor Review*. I loved this book.

**Katy Ryan**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Felon*  
 by Reginald Dwayne Betts

“Name a song that tells a man what to expect after prison.” *Felon* is that song. From the opening ghazal to the closing crown of sonnets, Betts' third book of poems reckons with loss, longing, regret, violence, cages, and what does not end. There is a line spoken by a mother in a courtroom that may haunt me forever. It is a gorgeous and devastating book.



**Mary Ann Samyn**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Louisiana's Way Home*  
by Kate DiCamillo

*I Capture the Castle*  
by Dodie Smith

*The Dutch House*  
by Ann Patchett

Lots of good pandemic reads, but so far, these have been the best, bringing the comfort that only good storytelling can: Kate DiCamillo's *Louisiana's Way Home* for readers of all ages; Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* for those who can remember just when it was they grew up; and Ann Patchett's *The Dutch House* for those in the mood to look forward by looking back. Three novels about home, which seems appropriate these days.

**Frances Simmons**, Retired Teacher, recommends:  
*Where The Crawdads Sing*  
by Delia Owens

Set in the marshlands of the North Carolina coast and written in beautiful prose, this novel deals in abandonment, trust, coming of age, an engrossing whodunit, and a lovely tribute to the natural world.

**Lynne Stahl**, Faculty, recommends:  
*In the Dream House*  
by Carmen María Machado

I used to think I liked memoir, then I realized I just liked cultural critique framed through personal experience. Then I read *In the Dream House* and realized I do in fact like memoir, at least when it helps me see the form of memoir itself and the act of reading it in a new light. Written in the second person, *In the Dream House* is a dark archive and testimony of an abusive relationship, yet it also casts a Medusan gaze on all things literary--including its readers--that is both illuminating and empowering.

**Timothy Sweet**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Washington Black*  
by Esi Edugyan

*Underground Railroad*  
by Colson Whitehead

*The Water Dancer*  
by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Several recent historical novels have creatively engaged with the experience of slavery, such as Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black* or Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad*. Maybe the best of these is Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*. It's realist with just a touch of magic.

**Kate Van Sant**, Retired, recommends:  
*The Mask of Command*  
by John Keegan

Keegan is probably the best military historian of the 20th Century. His meticulous description of battles and the psychology of the commanders involved are spot on, as General Giap said, "Your people have not read enough history."

**Lisa Weihman**, Faculty, recommends:  
*The Dutch House*  
by Ann Patchett

Ann Patchett's eighth novel is a contemporary gothic tale of a family haunted by the eponymous house, a 1922 mansion that forces its occupants to reconsider who is family and what makes a home. Over the course of five decades, siblings Danny and Maeve Conroy endure a series of adversities straight out of a fairy tale: the loss of their parents, a wicked stepmother, and a quest to understand the rise and fall of their family's fortunes. The novel investigates the power of family myth in our construction of the self, and how our lives are often shaped by our fractured memories of an unrecoverable past.

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**Johanna Winant**, Faculty, recommends:  
*The City and the City* and *Embassytown*  
by China Mieville

I've been deep in the oeuvre of China Mieville for my pleasure reading, and I highly recommend two of his novels: *The City and the City* (a police procedural set in imagined eastern European twin cities) and *Embassytown* (a science fiction novel set in a far distant future planet that's also an exploration of how metaphor works). Both are incredibly original, quite moving, and will make you think about our own world in new ways.

## 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! Please send an email to [Marsha.Bissett@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:Marsha.Bissett@mail.wvu.edu) with the following information, and your recommendation will be featured on next year's list.

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