

## 2021-22 Book Recommendations List

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**Rudolph Almasy**, Professor Emeritus, recommends:  
*Middlemarch*  
by George Eliot

*Bleak House*  
by Charles Dickens

This summer I reread, perhaps for the third or fourth time, two great British 19th century novels; and if someone out there hasn't read either, these are my recommendations: George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. In terms of storytelling, you can't get any better. Yes, they are long and complicated, but read them nevertheless since winter is coming.

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**Brian Ballentine**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Excuse Me While I Disappear*  
by Joanna Scott

"It is never enough," said Guy, sipping his tea that had grown lukewarm while he was talking, "to experience the magnificence of a beautiful thing that has been lovingly made...Delight matters little until it is communicated." The stories collected in *Excuse Me While I Disappear* are indeed

beautiful things. Although they vary in form, all Scott's stories wrestle with the perseverance of communication, of art, after the storytellers are gone.

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**Gwen Bergner**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Red at the Bone*  
by Jacqueline Woodson

Jacqueline Woodson's *Red at the Bone* upends the usual story of teen pregnancy, putting the unplanned event and its beloved issue, Melody, at the heart of this lyrical, multivocal account of three generations of an upper middle class Black family. Against a historical background of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre and the 2001 World Trade Center attack, the novel considers the meaning of legacy for a Black American family, the "fire and gold" of family ties.

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**Laura Brady**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Whereabouts*  
by Jhumpa Lahiri

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* is a very brief novel where the narrator (never named)



observes herself alone but almost always among others. It's a little melancholy, but an interesting reflection on solitude (rather than loneliness) and written in a beautiful, spare style.



**Mark Brazaitis**, Faculty, recommends:

*Lost Language: Poems*

by Faith Shearin

Faith Shearin's *Lost Language: Poems* is a haunting, beautiful collection that explores the author's grief in the wake of her husband's unexpected death. In precise, evocative detail, she writes about the life they shared— "...we were happy/in our honeymoon cottage/by the sea, dining beside/a window where the wind blew steam/from our pie, our napkins opening/like the pages of the afterlife"— and the life she (tentatively, haltingly) embarks on in his absence. The collection's depth of feeling is matched by the profundity of its observations about marriage, about memories, about mourning. From "Babylon": "I am like Adam among the animals,/after he was banished: all words replaced/by howls."



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

*I'll Be Gone in the Dark*,

by Michelle McNamara

Disclaimer: I am not a fan of true crime; but I *am* a fan of McNamara's writing style. While folks interested in serial killers might be drawn to this book for the content and

the lore surrounding the Golden State Killer, I was drawn to it for the moments where McNamara reflected on her own interest in the case. Her insights on how her amateur investigation crept into other aspects of her life are interesting, charmingly written, and relatable.



**Nancy Caronia**, Faculty, recommends:

*Fallam's Creek*

by Denise Giardina

Denise Giardina's *Fallam's Creek* was written a decade after her award-winning fiction focused on the WV mine wars. This novel returns to the West Virginia's mountains, but the plot focuses on a rift in time that finds the protagonist moving back and forth between the present day and Cromwell's England. A great suspense story that may remind you of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series. The only two things you'll want to know is Giardina didn't continue writing about Lydde and why Showtime has never picked up the television rights to this story!

*Beyond Babylon*

by Igiaba Scego

Igiaba Scego's *Beyond Babylon*, translated from Italian by Aaron Robertson is a coming-of-age novel set in Italy. Like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, *Beyond Babylon* is funny, biting, and incisive, only the setting is the fraught terrain of Italian belonging. Scego is one of the most prominent Black voices in Italy today.



**Anna Elfenbein**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Past Titan Rock: Journeys into an Appalachian Valley*  
 by Ellesa Clay High [Emerita Associate Professor of English, WVU]

Winner of the Appalachian Award for Literature in 1983, this up-close and personal, multi-genre, multi-vocal portrait of the mountain community in the Red River Gorge of Kentucky has staying power. Now in a new West Virginia University Press edition, *Past Titan Rock* will inspire a new generation of readers to wonder at the natural world and to resist the destructive forces that threaten it.



**Marilyn Francus**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Circe*  
 by Madeline Miller.

A smart rendering of Greek mythology, in which almost everyone—from Prometheus to Dedalus to Odysseus—appears.

*Deacon King Kong*  
 by James McBride

Life in the Brooklyn projects in the late 1960s and 1970s. There's drugs, gangs, and urban decay, but also community, compassion, and comedy.



**Rosemary Hathaway**, Faculty, recommends:  
*The Thursday Murder Club*  
 by Richard Osman

*The Postscript Murders*  
 by Elly Griffith

During the pandemic I've been on a steady diet of detective novels, which I find curiously comforting. I've especially enjoyed Richard Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club* and Elly Griffith's *The Postscript Murders*. Both feature residents of assisted-living centers who solve crimes, much to the consternation of the local CID. Both Griffiths and Osman render their aging characters with complexity, calling the reader's attention to the ways in which we too often discount the wit, savviness, and deep humanity of people who've been on earth a lot longer than most of us. Also, both novels are really funny, which is a must for me these days.



**Kirk Hazen**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter: Then, Now, and Forever*  
 by John McWhorter

Frolicking through profanity, this book is fun, salty, learned, and bawdy all within the same pages. McWhorter, author of 20 books and a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*, brings his deep understanding of English to the history and modern usage of swearing. The book works through nine long-standing, sometimes squatting, English curse words to examine them in all their guttered glory. Which nine you ask? You have to look in the book to find out if your favorite taboo terms made the list!



**Caroline Riley**, WVU English Graduate Teaching Assistant recommends:

*Pew*

by Catherine Lacey

Set in an unspecified town in the American south, *Pew* tells the story of a religious community trying to “deal” with a helpless person (whose markers for race, gender, and age are inscrutable) who finds their way into town. Short and lyrical, dark and funny.

*The Cipher*

by Molly Brodak

The poems in this collection vary in length and shape and mood, while maintaining an attractive edginess throughout. Brodak completed her MFA at WVU.

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

*Leonard and Hungry Paul*

by Ronan Hession

*Rosetown*

by Cynthia Rylant

*Escargot*

by Dashka Slater with illustrations by Sydney Hanson

For those looking for a reprieve from the nonstop drama and heightened emotions of, well, almost everything nowadays, *Leonard and Hungry Paul* by Ronan Hession is just that: a story of friendship and kindness and the gentle power of assuming the best. Fans of middle grade

novels probably already know West Virginia native Cynthia Rylant’s work. I especially liked *Rosetown*, and if you’ve ever made a new friend, treasured an old book, loved a cat or dog, or discovered something truly special about yourself, so will you. And for fans of picture books, I recommend *Escargot*, the delightful story of a snail making his way toward a salad with a light vinaigrette. If you’re looking for a new favorite animal, this charming snail is the one for you.

**Krista Sarraf**, Faculty, recommends:

*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*  
by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

When was the last time you lost track of time, totally immersed in an activity? That's what psychology researchers call "the flow state," and, according to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, our happiest moments occur when we're lost in rapturous flow. An oldie but a goodie, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* is a perfect read to help you find enjoyment in hobbies, relationships, menial tasks, and—dare I say it—even work.

**Timothy Sweet**, Faculty, recommends:

*The Sympathizer*

by Viet Thanh Nguyen

A Vietnam War novel like none you’ve ever read, *The Sympathizer* begins with the fall/liberation of Saigon and follows a group of ARVN soldiers to the U.S. and

ultimately back to Vietnam. Among them is a communist mole, a man who can see both sides and who by the end comes to a new understanding of Ho Chi Minh's slogan, "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom." One chapter satirizes the filming of *Apocalypse Now*.



**Natalie Sypolt**, WVU MFA Alum, recommends:

*F\*ckface*  
by Leah Hampton

*True Grit*  
by Charles Portis

*The Prettiest Star*  
by Carter Sickles

These are all great reads for anyone, but particularly important for a reader or writer interested in studying narrative voice.



**Glenn Taylor**, Faculty, recommends:  
*Living Nations, Living Words: An Anthology of First Peoples Poetry*  
by Joy Harjo

Since WVU has the immense honor of hosting Joy Harjo this spring through the Native American Studies Program, I thought it fitting to recommend a book I recently picked up. It is *Living Nations, Living Words: An Anthology of First Peoples Poetry*. It was collected and includes an Introduction by Harjo herself. It was

published by Norton through a collaboration with The Library of Congress and includes such contemporary writers as Louise Erdrich and Natalie Diaz. Harjo writes, in the Introduction, "Maybe we are at the place where many roads come together under the dimming sun. We must make a new map, together where poetry is sung."



**Tara Teets**, WVU English Graduate Teaching Assistant, recommends:  
*Punch Me Up to the Gods*  
by Brian Broome

Brian Broome, recently published his memoir *Punch Me Up to the Gods* and it received incredibly well-deserved national acclaim.

Broome writes about growing up as a gay black man in the Rust Belt in an innovative, moving, and real voice. He is unflinching in his recollection of racism, homophobia, and misogyny he experienced through the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. Reminiscent of James Baldwin, this narrative of growth and transformation is an important and timely read.



**Sarah Trautwein**, WVU English Graduate Teaching Assistant recommends:  
*Big Fish*  
by Daniel Wallace

This novel "of mythic proportions" explores the larger-than-life character of Edward



Bloom through the stories real, imagined,  
and told to and by his son William.

## 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.

- Name
- Email
- Address
- Connection to the Department of English (Faculty, Alum, Friend, Donor, or other)
- Degree Earned and Year of Graduation
- Current Occupation (optional)
- Title and Author of Recommendation
- Brief Recommendation (50-100 words)

