

# 2024-2025 Book Recommendations List

**Rudy Almsy, Emeritus Faculty, recommends:**

***The Aspern Papers* by Henry James**

All readers should tackle a Henry James every once in a while, something like this novella. A greedy critic after the papers of the famous poet Aspern—papers held by a former mistress in Venice—the mistress and Venice both old and crumbling yet with treasures.

***Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee**

Last year I had wanted to recommend this book but couldn't find the right words for this powerful story of a father and daughter caught up in the years following the end of apartheid.

**Brian Ballentine, Faculty, recommends:**

***Blood and Thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West* by Hampton Sides**

Kit Carson, a mountain man, trapper, hunter, scout, and soldier, is at the center of this non-fiction telling of westward expansion. Sides offers a captivating and sometimes brutal rendering of Carson, the military leaders he served, and the Navajo people they displaced.

**Mark Brazaitis, Faculty, recommends:**

***Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White**

My sister asked me recently if I'd read *Charlotte's Web*. I said yes, even though I hadn't. But I didn't want to be untruthful, so I grabbed a copy out of my older daughter's room and read it. It's wry, moving, funny, and deeply existential. A book about friendship, it speaks to our age of loneliness and isolation.

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

***Circe* by Madeline Miller**

I'm a sucker for an adaptation of mythology, and especially those that re-cast a minor character or even better, a villain, into someone with whom the reader can empathize. The story is told so compellingly that I was riveted during 3 a.m. feedings with my baby, and if that isn't an endorsement for Miller's craft, I don't know what is.

**Rose Casey, Faculty, recommends:**

***Enter Ghost* by Isabella Hammad**

Stunning novel about Palestinian experience, narrated through a staging of Hamlet in the Occupied Territories. Beautifully crafted, theoretically complex, and politically astute, *Enter Ghost* is a novel that we all should read.

**Ren Clarke, MA Student, recommends:**

***The Message* by Ta-Nehisi Coates**

Coates presents a much-needed and topical personal novel in which to reimagine current dominant narratives. Follow Coates through three essays: trips to Senegal, to South Carolina, and finally to Palestine. You will find yourself haunted by his prose as Coates shares his thoughts on race, racism, apartheid, colonialism, humanity, inequality, and journalism.

***The Wager: A Tale of Shipwreck, Mutiny, and Murder* by David Grann**

For anyone who got lost in the tales of Robinson Crusoe as a child, this book fulfills every wish my childhood self could imagine in a castaway story. Full of naval adventure, danger, survival, and mutinous whispers, Grann keeps you on your toes the entire read with a satisfying blend of historical research and narrative.

**Brent Cronin, MFA Student, recommends:**

***Speedboat* by Renata Adler**

Full of sharply observed vignettes and anecdotes, this book is catnip for writers. I got swept up in Adler's voice—sparse, funny, enigmatic—offering quirky snapshots of 1970s New York.

**Camille Gazoul, MFA Student, recommends:**

***We Were the Universe* by Kimberly King**

This book is a psychedelic and stunning take on motherhood, sisterhood, and the body in its many confusing forms. It follows Kit, a stay-at-home mother to a four-year-old, who is looking for meaning and purpose in the wake of her sister's tragic death.

**Catherine Gouge, Faculty, recommends:**

***The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui**

*The Best We Could Do* is a graphic memoir about Bui's family's escape after the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s. Bui offers a deeply personal account of family, immigration, and the legacy of trauma, highlighting the impact of war on multiple generations.

**Jason Kapcala, Alum, recommends:**

***Postscripts* by Renée K. Nicholson**

Reading *Postscripts* feels like stumbling across a box of long-forgotten postcards. Written by an alum of WVU's MFA program, *Postscripts* is a surreal collection of poems that plays with the ideas of travel, correspondence, and home. Sometimes, it's quite literal, describing trips from West Virginia to New York to Ecuador to Spain. In other cases, these journeys are more like slanted and wondrous

encounters with topics that hit close to home, like illness and grief, the opioid crisis, consumerism, environmentalism, and cultural identity.

**Andy Kerstetter, MFA Student, recommends:**

***The Yellow Birds* by Kevin Powers**

Powerful exploration of PTSD, masculinity, US military culture, recent history. Beautiful, difficult, and affecting.

**Kanza Fatima Mirza, Ph.D. Candidate, recommends:**

***Bewilderment* by Richard Powers**

I recommend this book to readers deeply concerned with environmental issues and the emotional impact of ecological loss. The novel beautifully explores "solastalgia," the distress caused by environmental destruction, offering a poignant reflection on our fragile world and a deep emotional connection to the environmental crisis.

**Sanchita Sahoo, MFA Student, recommends:**

***Sorrow and Bliss* by Meg Mason**

One of the best books on mental illness that is as powerful as it is oddly comforting.

***Gharchar Ghochar* by Vivek Shanbag**

A short, tight lesson in storytelling with a gripping plot—the perfect read for writers.

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

***War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy**

Does this novel have it all? Well, yes, of course, at 1300 pages there's room for everything: love stories and war stories, comedic and tragic bits, moments of lyric beauty, lots of timeless insight into characters and their motivations [Hawthorne is also very good at this sort of thing], and, my favorite, history lessons. Tolstoy reminds us that everything that seems so clear in retrospect was not so at the time. Beware of certainty. I've enjoyed reading the novel as part of a year-long, chapter-a-day, read-along. Both on and off the page, the seasons come and go.

***Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie**

Of course I've seen movie and play versions,, but wow—the book! Parts of it feel dated; parts of it ought to feel more so. Alas. In any case, on nearly every page: something delightful and/or frighteningly too-true. For example, make-believe is fine "by day with the chairs and table-cloth... but in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very real. That is why there are night-lights." Yikes. Goodness, yes.

***The Wisdom of Sheep: Observations from a Family Farm* by Rosamund Young**

I've really enjoyed reading this book for its wisdom and humor and, especially, for moments like this: "As November becomes December, it starts to get dark so early that we have to visit the sheep by

torchlight. Their eyes are sparkling fairy lights of gold and nearly red, of icy blue and twinkly green, and of the silver that makes the stars.”

**Andrea Starr, MA Student, recommends:**

***Lady Tan’s Circle of Women* by Lisa See**

Simultaneously uplifting and heartbreaking story about the friendship between two women from different classes in 15th century China—a midwife and a noble. Both girls connect over womanhood and work as a pair with traditional Chinese medicine to treat other women. If you like historical fiction and feminist works, this is for you!

**David Stewart, Faculty, recommends:**

***Emperor of Rome* by Mary Beard**

The black dinner of Emperor Domitian where everything was painted black—the table, chairs, dishes, walls, the naked male slaves who served—and the places for the guests inscribed on imitation tombstones placed on seats, is one of the many household topics Beard explores. Others include laundry, the role of servants in the palace, vacations, the handling of daily correspondence and, of course, dinners, details of which provide a fascinating and unorthodox account of the Roman emperor from 33BCE to 235CE.

**Tim Sweet, Faculty, recommends:**

***James* by Percival Everett**

In this brilliant and funny novel, Everett retells *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in Jim's voice, fixing Twain's problematic ending and revealing a truth that Twain's readers didn't dare to suspect.

**Michael Vozniak, Interim Associate UWP Coordinator, recommends:**

***What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* by Elizabeth Catte**

A direct counter to J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*, Elizabeth Catte’s *What You Are Getting Wrong about Appalachia* demonstrates that the region is much more complex than is commonly imagined. Glenn Taylor called this book “a spiky polemic,” and that “you couldn’t kill this book with a hammer.” An effective antidote against anti-Appalachian prejudice.

**Cassandra Whisenant, PhD Student, recommends:**

***Demon Copperhead* by Barbara Kingsolver**

Appalachia and a Charles Dickens retelling in the hands of a masterful author is always a recipe for success. Even Oprah agrees.

**Emily Yandel, MFA Student, recommends:**

***If Cats Disappeared from the World* by Genki Kawamura (translated by Eric Selland)**

"I'm sorry I don't remember her. But I do remember that I was happy." *If Cats Disappeared from the World* is an often humorous, often deeply profound look at life, love, and loss.