

SUMMER READING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT 2011

MICHAEL ROBERTSON

A Book I Read This Year:

How had I missed David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* all these years? Published in 2004, it's one of the cleverest, most entertaining, and most profound novels of the last decade. The book consists of six interlocked narratives, ranging from the journal of a nineteenth-century British notary on a Pacific voyage to a hard-boiled detective story to the dystopian tale of a Korean cyborg to a post-apocalyptic fantasy.

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), another book of interlocking short narratives, is equally clever, entertaining, and profound. Plus it's all about rock-and-roll. What's not to like? Jurors for the National Book Critics Circle and the Pulitzer Prize agreed; it won both awards.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

I'm working my way through everything David Mitchell has published. Next up is his most recent, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, a historical novel set in Edo-era Japan.

DONNA SHAW

A Book I Read This Year:

For a book I read in the past year, I was fascinated by *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America*, by my former Philadelphia Inquirer colleagues Dan Biddle and Murray Dubin. We think of the civil rights movement as a creature of the 20th century, and we think of slavery in terms of the pre-Civil War South. Dan and Murray meticulously researched the story of 19th century black Philadelphian Octavius Catto to disabuse us of these notions. It was especially interesting to me because Dan is a scion of THE Biddles, one of the most famous and influential families of Philadelphia for the past 300 or so years.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

For a book I'm going to read this summer, I just ordered *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, by Nicholas Carr. It was a Pulitzer finalist for general nonfiction this year. Writing from his own experience as well as copious research, the author makes the case that the Internet is rewiring our brains in ways that are hurting us, making us unable to concentrate on longer stories and deeper thoughts. I've been a fan of Carr for a couple of years, ever since he wrote "Is Google making us stupid?" for The Atlantic. I'm not sure I buy all of his arguments, but they are provocative.

JEAN GRAHAM

A Book I Read This Year:

Hobson Woodward. *A Brave Vessel: The True Tale of the Castaways Who Rescued Jamestown & Inspired Shakespeare's The Tempest*. Viking, 2009. I'm not completely convinced by Woodward's argument that so much of *The Tempest* is drawn from Strachey's and other accounts of the shipwreck, but it's an interesting shipwreck anyway--one that involved no fatalities or serious injuries.

Adrian Tinniswood. *Pirates of Barbary: Corsairs, Conquests, and Captivity in the 17th-Century Mediterranean*. Penguin, 2010. Violence, slavery, culture clashes and cultural assimilation (many of the Barbary pirates were European converts to Islam)--this book has it all!

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

To read this summer: this may be the summer I finally read ALL of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (his epic poem based on Homer), because excerpts aren't enough. But I also plan to read the latest Tony Hillerman mystery.

DONNA RASKIN

A Book I Read This Year:

A book I read and enjoyed this year is *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. I know many people have already read it and I know it may seem like just another best seller to others, but I think it is a good read for English teachers/professors because it is flawed but still both a page turner and very well done.

I felt the same way about *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen. I stopped reading very close to the end because of what I thought was a deep flaw, but, I thoroughly loved and appreciated the first couple hundred pages.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

I plan to read more Salman Rushdie this summer. I am currently reading *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* and love it.

LINCOLN KONKLE

A Book I Read This Year:

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction when I was about halfway through it, and it has been optioned by HBO for a movie adaptation. It's a novel that goes back and forth in time with a set of related and unrelated characters, some of whose lives intersect later, and reintersect still later. We see Sasha, the closest character the novel has to a protagonist, at several stages of her life. Students will love the snarky narration of young characters.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

Arthur Phillips' *The Tragedy of Arthur*, a faux memoir of a writer named Arthur Phillips whose father is a Shakespeare aficionado and convicted forger who had produced a long lost play by Shakespeare. The entire 5-act fake (or is it?) tragedy about the Camelot myth, written in blank verse with some of W.S.'s stylistic habits, makes up the last part of the book.

EMILY MEIXNER**A Book I Read This Year:**

A book I read and enjoyed this year was *Poetry Speaks Who I Am* (a collection edited by Elise Paschen and Dominique Raccach). For the last year, I've been looking for a new book of poems to use in LIT 310, so I was excited when I found this one. It's a nice blend of old and new poems (and poets) and it received generally high marks from this semester's class.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

There are two books I'm looking forward to reading this summer: (My "adult" book) *The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir* by Kao Kalia Yang. This book was recommended to me by a friend knowing that I enjoy memoirs and that I was fascinated by Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (which I'd also highly recommend). (My young adult choice) *Matched* by Ally Condie. It's the first in another trilogy of YA dystopian novels, and since I've already plowed through *The Hunger Games*, this looks to be next.

ELLEN FRIEDMAN**A Book I Read This Year:**

I've just finished reading *Just Kids* by Patti Smith about this punk-rock singer-songwriter's relationship with artist Robert Mapplethorpe when they came to NYC. Patti Smith grew up in New Jersey and Mapplethorpe grew up in Floral Park, Queens. It's a quick read about an artistic friendship and romantic relationship. It also depicts the artistic circle around the Chelsea Hotel that influenced them while they were creating their artistic careers.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

This summer I plan to read many books, but I am starting with *Brodeck* by Philippe Claudel.

LARRY MCCAULEY**A Book I Read This Year:**

Wolf Hall by Hilary Mantel. Last fall, this novel enthralled me and when I recommended it to my friends, I learned that Professors Carney and Robertson were already fans. The focal character is Thomas Cromwell, the commoner who rose to become Henry VIII's most powerful advisor. I found Cromwell himself to be an irresistible character and, if you are as ignorant of Tudor history as I am, the book is really suspenseful. *Wolf Hall* is substantial--not a quick beach read--but if you want a novel to inhabit for a while this could be the summer book for you.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

The Snow Leopard by Peter Mathiesson. I have read and admired both fiction (*Far Tortuga* and *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*) and non-fiction (*The Tree Where Man Was Born*) by Mathiesson, but I've never read this, his best-known work. From what I can tell it is about climbing large mountains, watching interesting animals, and seeking . . . well, seeking something. Summer shouldn't be too goal oriented, right?

JO CARNEY**A Book I Read This Year:**

Téa Obreht, *The Tiger's Wife: A Novel*. Perhaps the novel received too much hype, but it's still an impressive feat of storytelling. Obreht brings together stories of a tiger's wife, a medical mission in war-torn Yugoslavia, and profound familial relationships in a wonderful blend of realism and magical realism.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

Arthur Phillips, *The Tragedy of Arthur: A Novel*. This novel about a long-lost Shakespearean play (including the play itself) is attracting a lot of praise. Phillips is a smart, clever writer and I'm really looking forward to his variation on the theme of authenticity and fraud, Shakespearean and otherwise.

Karen Russell, *Swamplandia!* Readers of Russell's short fiction know that if she can write a great tale about a pack of girls raised by wolves, then she can probably pull off a novel about a family of alligator wrestlers in the Florida Everglades. The novel has been praised for its "shimmering prose" and "memorable characters" so I'm in. And it's fun to follow the writers our students have brought to campus in the Visiting Writer Series.

MARY BIGGS**A Book I Have Read This Year:**

Two years ago, I started a Book Club near my home in the Bronx. Most of those who attend are African American, and they have led me to read many black novelists who either were new to me or whom I knew by reputation but had never read. One of my favorites so far is Buchi Emecheta, a Nigerian writer who emigrated to the U.K. and writes about women in her homeland. She absorbs Western readers completely in a very different, and for many women a tragic, world. I've read *The Bride Price* and *The Joys Of Motherhood* so far and will continue to read her this summer.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

And Then We Heard Thunder, by the classic African-American writer John Oliver Killens (another Book Club choice). The title is taken from Harriet Tubman's description of a Civil War battle; the story concerns African Americans in World War II.

And finally for this summer: Reetika Vazirani's third and last book of poetry, *Radha Says* - reputed to be her best.

NAGESH RAO

A Book I Have Read This Year:

Kevin Anderson's *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies* provides one of the most convincing and well-researched books on Marxism that I've read in a while. Anderson tears to bits the widely-accepted notion that Marxism is Eurocentric, Orientalist, and teleological, and reveals how this academic myth survives at the expense of the actual archive of Marx's writings.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights by Omar Barghouti comes at a time when the calls for reigning in the Israeli state's actions in the Occupied Territories is growing. The book argues for the need to adopt a strategy similar to that which brought down the apartheid system in South Africa. With our campus launching a study-abroad program in Tel Aviv this Fall, I am looking forward to better understanding the case for an academic boycott of Israel.

PHOEBE NOBLE

A book I've read this year:

Kathleen Graber's brilliant book of poems, *The Eternal City*. Lays one geography over another like transparencies (overhead projector metaphor!)-the Starlight Ballroom, the Three Coins Motel, the Pequod, the Coliseum, the Delaware, the Danube--lit by memory, empire's afterglow, wild meditations.

Colm Toibin, *The Empty Family*

When she turned on the light in the kitchen she gasped when she saw the fridge. Someone had wound a rusty chain around it and locked it so that it could be opened a chink, but not any more than that. Once Ferran had examined the lock, they stood back in amazement.

"No sandwiches tonight," he said. "And no cold water either. Who did this?"

"My mother," Carme said.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer (at the pool):

Cervantes, *Don Quixote*. (trans. Edith Grossman).

CHARLOTTE BOULAY

A Book I Read This Year:

A book I've really enjoyed this year was Monica Youn's *Ignatz*. This poetry takes its inspiration from George Herriman's 1920s comic strip Krazy Kat. That may sound unlikely, but the book

transforms Ignatz, the mouse of the comic, into an object of passion, and the results are surprising, and gorgeous.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

A book I'm looking forward to reading this summer is James Gleick's *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood*. I aspire to a better understanding of science, and Gleick (author of *Chaos*) is a great science writer.

FELICIA STEELE

A Book I Read This Year:

David Mitchell, *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2011)
Cloud Atlas was always on my list of books to read, because one of our retired faculty members, Lee Harrod, always spoke so highly of it. Since I'd just come off reading an engrossing long novel about sea travel (*The Baroque Cycle*, by Neal Stephenson), I thought I would read this piece, about a Dutch East India company bureaucrat drawn into dynastic and religious intrigue in late 18th century Japan, just as its closing itself to the West. It was breathtaking in scope, thoroughly believable, and challenging to readers well-versed in colonial and post-colonial discourses.

Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011)

I really enjoyed this book, probably because it inspired tremendous nostalgia for my high school self and because it reminded me of one of my favorite books, *Trainspotting*, by Irvine Welsh. I'm not entirely certain if it's a novel or a collection of related stories, but it's an innovative and engrossing narrative about punk rock, families, and friends.

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

Every summer I try to fill some literary gaps, and I've done well at, especially since I got a nook so that I can have the collected works of H.G. Wells, or Jane Austen, at my beck and call. This year I've committed to filling the whale-sized gap in my literary experience, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Please wish me well.

I'm also excited to finish the stories in Jess Row's collection, *Nobody Ever Gets Lost*, as well as another book by the new press that published his book, Emma Straub's *Other People We Married*.

DIANE STEINBERG

A Book I Read This Year:

A book I read this year and really enjoyed was Lorene Cary's *Black Ice* -- I only read it because it was the Sigma Tau Delta conference book read, but I really enjoyed its portrayal of growing up black in Philly and being transported to an elite prep school as a scholarship student -- of trying to bridge two different worlds. It is a fairly brief text, and well worth the time.

For my second book, I'd like to recommend *Three Cups of Tea* by Greg Mortenson and David Relin. I know that Mortenson is coming under fire (for one thing, the CIA despises him), but his

story of founding schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan is very moving. It doesn't exactly count, because I read it last summer, but this summer is still too fluid for me to know what I'm doing.

LISA ORTIZ-VILARELLE

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

One of our majors was studying in Italy this semester where he found me a copy of *The Great Gatsby* in Italian! I took some time to check out chapter one, and it reads beautifully! I'm going to make that my summer reading. I'm always reading books in English. Why not use my undergraduate minor for a change?

JESS ROW

A Book I Have Read This Year:

Charles Baxter, *Gryphon: New and Selected Stories*. These are stories I've read and re-read and lived with for many years, and it's great to have them in one place. Baxter is an extraordinarily wise and subtle writer who's had an enormous influence on me. Also, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. This novel is extraordinary and deserves all its recognition. (If you don't read the rest, at least read the chapter written in PowerPoint).

A Book I Plan To Read This Summer:

Renata Salecl, *Choice*. Salecl is one of a number of contemporary thinkers trying to examine why, in a late capitalist society, having so much choice—so much ostensible autonomy—makes people anxious and unhappy. I've also been reading Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, about the origins of American pragmatism, and I'm hoping to catch up on some reading in contemporary pragmatist thought—Cornel West's *Keeping Faith* and *The American Evasion of Philosophy* in particular.

JUDA BENNETT

A Book I Have Read Over and Over Again This Year:

It is a meditation to read (or should I say view?) *A Humument*. It is an artist book, a treated novel, a cut-up, and it is the life-time project of Tom Phillips, who took a Victorian novel called *The Human Document* and painted over the words, highlighting some phrases, letters, or words to make an engaging work of poetry. The entire text is online, and you can also buy a Humument app for your Ipad.

A Book I Plan to Read This Summer:

Jonathan Safran Foer impressed me with *Everything Is Illuminated* and stunned me with *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. I want to read *Tree of Codes*, which begins with Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles* and erases just enough of that novel to find the new novel. It is, according to its product description, "as much a sculptural object as it is a work of masterful storytelling."

PIPER KENDRIX WILLIAMS

A Book I Read This Year:

"Cutting for Stone" by Abraham Verghese. This novel weaves a very compelling story of a complicated family: twins born of a mysterious relationship between a British surgeon and an Indian nurse, working together in Ethiopia and a historical, cultural, and social mediation on cross cultural contact.

A Book I Plan to Read This Summer:

The Invisible Line: Three American Families and the Secret Journey from Black to White by Daniel J. Sharfstein. I first read a review of this in *The New York Times Book Review* (2/25/2011), called "Shades of White." The review focuses on one man: Randall Gibson, who was a "white," Yale graduate, Confederate war hero and United States senator in Post-Reconstruction, who "apparently knew nothing of his African American Ancestors until a political opponent challenged his status as a white man." What's telling for the idea of race as socially constructed is although he was in fact descended from a free black slave, who went on to become a wealthy, slave-owning planter in South Carolina, the only records to be found could only "confirm(ing) that his ancestors were men and women of property." And at this time that could only mean that they were "white."

DAVID BLAKE

A Book I Read This Year: Last summer, everyone in my family agreed to read Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, a non-fiction chronicle of the African-American woman whose cells helped produce thousands of medical advances. It was a tremendously interesting and thought-provoking story. On my own, I read Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, a dystopian novel about the United States "in the very near future." The novel is not nearly as absorbing as Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, but it continues to haunt me nine months later.

A Book I Plan to Read This Summer: Aside from catching up with my colleagues (am I the only one in this department who hasn't read the *Goon Squad* and the works of David Mitchell?), I hope to tackle Ian McEwan's satiric novel *Solar* and Manning Marable's *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*.