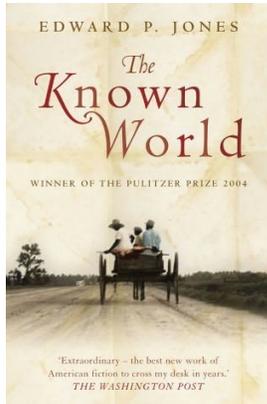


Faculty and Staff Reading Recommendations

Edward P. Jones' *The Known World*

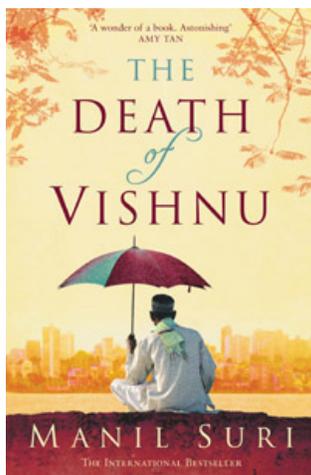


Suggested by: Susan Thompson

Jones explores an oft-neglected chapter of American history, the world of blacks who owned blacks in the antebellum South. His fictional examination of this unusual phenomenon starts with the dying 31-year-old Henry Townsend, a former slave-now master of 33 slaves of his own and more than 50 acres of land in Manchester County, Va.-worried about the fate of his holdings upon his early death. As a slave in his youth, Henry makes himself indispensable to his master, William Robbins. Even after Henry's parents purchase the family's freedom, Henry retains his allegiance to Robbins, who patronizes him when he sets up shop as a shoemaker and helps him buy his first slaves and his plantation. Jones's thorough knowledge of the legal and social intricacies of slaveholding allows him to paint a complex, often startling picture of life in the region. His richest characterizations-of Robbins and Henry-are particularly revealing. Though he is a cruel master to his slaves, Robbins is desperately in love with a black woman and feels as much fondness for Henry as for his own children; Henry, meanwhile, reads Milton, but beats his slaves as readily as Robbins does. Henry's wife, Caldonia, is not as disciplined as her husband, and when he dies, his worst fears are realized: the plantation falls into chaos.

Publishers Weekly

Manil Suri's *The Death of Vishnu*



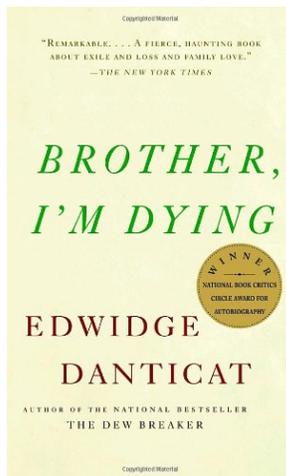
Suggested by: Barbara Grant

Visualizing a village, a hotel or an apartment building as a microcosm of society is not a new concept to writers, but few have invested their fiction with such luminous language, insight into character and grasp of cultural construct as Suri does in his debut. The inhabitants of a small apartment building in Bombay are motivated by concerns ranging from social status to spiritual transcendence while their alcoholic houseboy, Vishnu, lies dying on the staircase landing. During a span of 24 hours, Vishnu's body becomes the fulcrum for a series of crises, some tragic, some farcical, that reflect both the folly and nobility of human conduct. To the perpetually quarreling first-floor tenants, Mrs. Pathak and Mrs. Asrani, Vishnu is a recipient of grudging charity and casual calumny; each justifies her refusal to pay for his

hospitalization. Though locked in perpetual bickering, the women are united in their prejudice against their upstairs neighbors, the Jahals, who are Muslims. While Mr. Jahal seeks to test his intellectual agnosticism by seeking spiritual enlightenment, his son, Samil, and the Asranis' spoiled, willful daughter, Kavita, prepare to defy their families by running away together. On the third floor, reclusive widower Vinod Taneja still mourns his young wife, Sheetal; their story of tentative love blossoming into deep devotion and truncated by early death is an exquisite cameo of a marital relationship. Interspersed are Vishnu's lyrically rendered thoughts as his soul leaves his body and begins a slow ascent of the apartment stairs, rising through the stages of existence as he relives memories of his gentle mother and his passion for the prostitute Padmina. Suril has a discerning eye for human foibles, an empathetic knowledge of domestic interaction and an instinctive understanding of the caste-nuanced traditions of Indian society. By turns charming and funny, searing and poignant, dramatic and farcical, this fluid novel is an irresistible blend of realism, mysticism and religious metaphor, a parable of the universal conditions of human life.

Publishers Weekly

Edwidge Danticat's *Brother, I'm Dying*



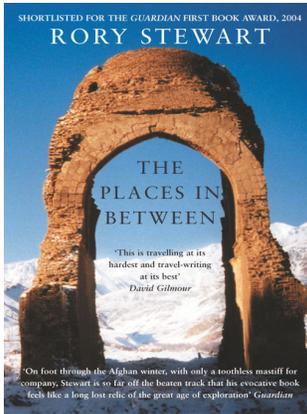
Suggested by Judith Siporin

In a single day in 2004, Danticat (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*; *The Farming of Bones*) learns that she's pregnant and that her father, André, is dying—a stirring constellation of events that frames this Haitian immigrant family's story, rife with premature departures and painful silences. When Danticat was two, André left Haiti for the U.S., and her mother followed when Danticat was four. The author and her brother could not join their parents for eight years, during which André's brother Joseph raised them. When Danticat was nine, Joseph—a pastor and gifted orator—lost his voice to throat cancer, making their eventual separation that much harder, as he wouldn't be able to talk with the children on the phone. Both André and Joseph maintained a certain emotional distance through these transitions. Danticat writes of a Haitian adage, *Â* 'When you bathe other people's children, you should wash one side and leave the other side dirty.' I suppose this saying cautions those who care for other people's children not to give over their whole hearts. In the end, as Danticat prepares to lose her ailing father and give birth to her daughter, Joseph is threatened by a volatile sociopolitical clash

and forced to flee Haiti. He's then detained by U.S. Customs and neglected for days. He unexpectedly dies a prisoner while loved ones await news of his release. Poignant and never sentimental, this elegant memoir recalls how a family adapted and reorganized itself over and over, enduring and succeeding to remain kindred in spite of living apart.

Publishers Weekly

Rory Stewart's *The Place In Between*

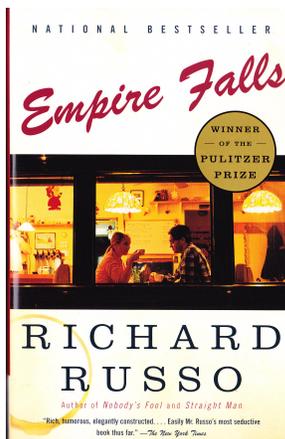


Suggested by Judith Siporin

In January 2002 Rory Stewart walked across Afghanistan—surviving by his wits, his knowledge of Persian dialects and Muslim customs, and the kindness of strangers. By day he passed through mountains covered in nine feet of snow, hamlets burned and emptied by the Taliban, and communities thriving amid the remains of medieval civilizations. By night he slept on villagers' floors, shared their meals, and listened to their stories of the recent and ancient past. Along the way Stewart met heroes and rogues, tribal elders and teenage soldiers, Taliban commanders and foreign-aid workers. He was also adopted by an unexpected companion—a retired fighting mastiff he named Babur in honor of Afghanistan's first Mughal emperor, in whose footsteps the pair was following. Through these encounters—by turns touching, con-founding, surprising, and funny—Stewart makes tangible the forces of tradition, ideology, and allegiance that shape life in the map's countless places in between.

Publishers Description

Richard Russo's *Empire Falls*

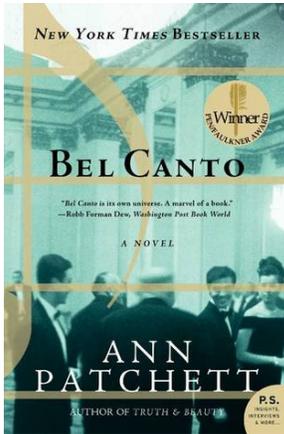


Suggested by Bill Wharton

In this droll, unsentimental, and occasionally hilarious novel, Richard Russo tells the story of a big-hearted man who becomes the unlikely hero of a small town with a glorious past but a dubious future. The one (barely) viable business in Empire Falls, Maine, is the diner where Miles Roby has worked for twenty years, a job that cost him his college education and much of his self-respect. What keeps him there? It could be his bright, sensitive daughter, Tick, who needs all his help surviving the local high school. Or maybe it's Janine, Miles' soon-to-be ex-wife, who's shed fifty pounds and taken up with the

noxiously vain health-club proprietor. Or perhaps (most gallingly) it's the imperious Francine Whiting, who owns everything in town -- and believes that includes Miles himself. With *Empire Falls* Richard Russo cements his reputation as one of America's most compelling and compassionate storytellers. *Library of Congress*

Ann Patchett's *Bel canto: A Novel*

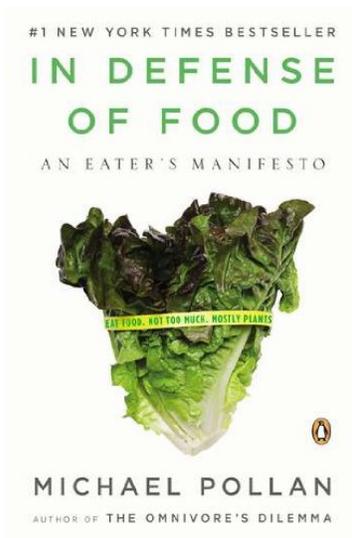


Suggested by Bill Wharton

Somewhere in South America, at the home of the country's vice president, a lavish birthday party is being held in honor of Mr. Hosokawa, a powerful Japanese businessman. Roxanne Coss, opera's most revered soprano, has mesmerized the international guests with her singing. It is a perfect evening -- until a band of gun-wielding terrorists breaks in through the air-conditioning vents and takes the entire party hostage. But what begins as a panicked, life-threatening scenario slowly evolves into something quite different, as terrorists and hostages forge unexpected bonds and people from different countries and continents become compatriots. Friendship, compassion, and the chance for great love lead the characters to forget the real danger that has been set in motion and cannot be stopped.

Boston Public Library Catalog

Michael Pollan's *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*



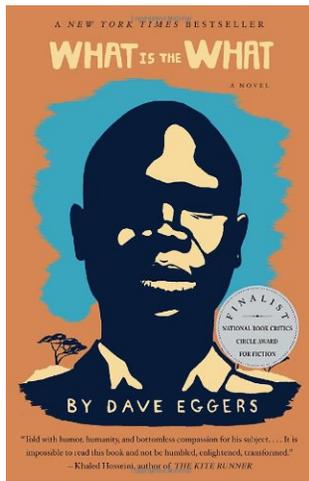
Suggested by Bill Wharton

In his hugely influential treatise *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan traced a direct line between the industrialization of our food supply and the degradation of the environment. His new book takes up where the previous work left off. Examining the question of what to eat from the perspective of health, this powerfully argued, thoroughly researched and elegant manifesto cuts straight to the chase with a maxim that is deceptively simple: Eat food, not too much, mostly plants. But as Pollan explains, food in a country that is driven by a thirty-two billion-dollar marketing machine is both a loaded term and, in its purest sense, a holy grail. The first section of his three-part essay refutes the authority of the diet bullies, pointing up the confluence of interests

among manufacturers of processed foods, marketers and nutritional scientists—a cabal whose nutritional advice has given rise to a notably unhealthy preoccupation with nutrition and diet and the idea of eating healthily. The second portion vivisections the Western diet, questioning, among other sacred cows, the idea that dietary fat leads to chronic illness. A writer of great subtlety, Pollan doesn't preach to the choir; in fact, rarely does he preach at all, preferring to let the facts speak for themselves.

Publishers Weekly

David Eggers' *What is the What*

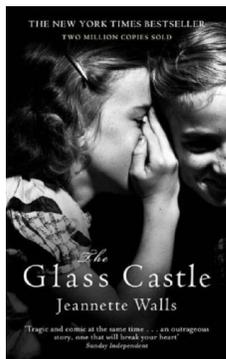


Suggested by Kate Bluestein

Valentino Achak Deng, real-life hero of this engrossing epic, was a refugee from the Sudanese civil war—the bloodbath before the current Darfur bloodbath—of the 1980s and 90s. In this fictionalized memoir, Eggers (A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius) makes him an icon of globalization. Separated from his family when Arab militia destroy his village, Valentino joins thousands of other "Lost Boys," beset by starvation, thirst and man-eating lions on their march to squalid refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya, where Valentino pieces together a new life. He eventually reaches America, but finds his quest for safety, community and fulfillment in many ways even more difficult there than in the camps: he recalls, for instance, being robbed, beaten and held captive in his Atlanta apartment. Eggers's limpid prose gives Valentino an unaffected, compelling voice and makes his narrative by turns harrowing, funny, bleak and lyrical. The result is a horrific account of the Sudanese tragedy, but also an emblematic saga of modernity—of the search for home and self in a world of unending upheaval.

Publishers Weekly

Jeannette Walls' *The Glass Castle*



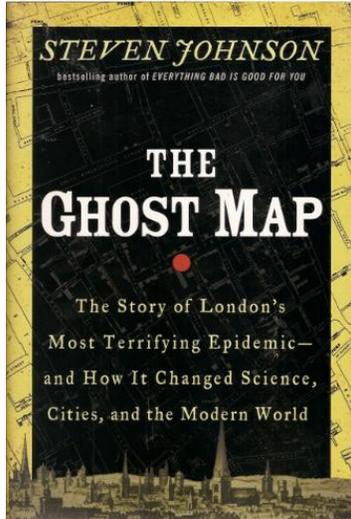
Suggested by Audrey Budding

Jeannette Walls tells the story about her childhood. She talks about living like nomads, moving among Southwest desert towns, camping in the mountains. Retreating to the dismal West Virginia mining town—and the family—her father, Rex Walls, had done everything he could to escape. He drank. He stole the grocery money and disappeared for days. As the dysfunction of the family escalated, Jeannette and her brother and sisters had to fend for themselves, supporting one another as they weathered their

parents' betrayals and, finally, found the resources and will to leave home.

Boston Public Library

Steve Johnson's *The Ghost Map*

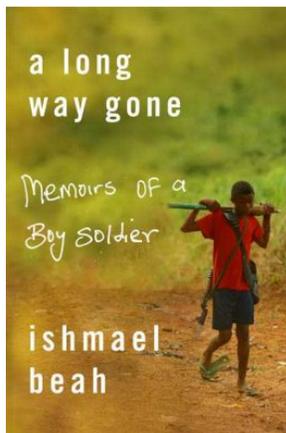


Suggested by Kate Bluestein

On August 28, 1854, working-class Londoner Sarah Lewis tossed a bucket of soiled water into the cesspool of her squalid apartment building and triggered the deadliest outbreak of cholera in the city's history. In this tightly written page-turner, Johnson (*Everything Bad Is Good for You*) uses his considerable skill to craft a story of suffering, perseverance and redemption that echoes to the present day. Describing a city and culture experiencing explosive growth, with its attendant promise and difficulty, Johnson builds the story around physician John Snow. In the face of a horrifying epidemic, Snow (pioneering developer of surgical anesthesia) posited the then radical theory that cholera was spread through contaminated water rather than through miasma, or smells in the air. Against considerable resistance from the medical and bureaucratic establishment, Snow persisted and, with hard work and groundbreaking research, helped to bring about a fundamental change in our understanding of disease and its spread. Johnson weaves in overlapping ideas about the growth of civilization, the organization of cities, and evolution to thrilling effect. From Snow's discovery of patient zero to Johnson's compelling argument for and celebration of cities, this makes for an illuminating and satisfying read.

Publishers Weekly

Ishmael Beah's *Long Way Gone: Memories of a Boy Soldier*



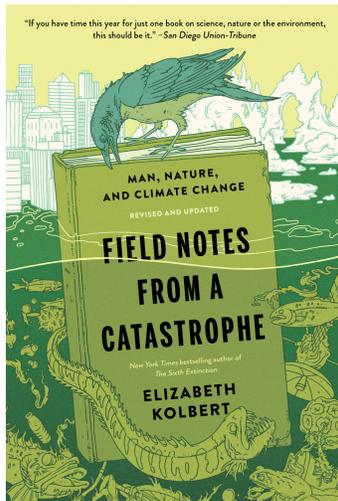
Suggested by Kate Bluestein

This absorbing account by a young man who, as a boy of 12, gets swept up in Sierra Leone's civil war goes beyond even the best journalistic efforts in revealing the life and mind of a child abducted into the horrors of warfare. Beah's harrowing journey transforms him overnight from a child enthralled by American hip-hop music and dance to an internal refugee bereft of family, wandering from village to village in a country grown deeply divided by the indiscriminate atrocities of unruly, sociopathic rebel and army forces. Beah then finds himself in the army—in a drug-filled life of casual mass

slaughter that lasts until he is 15, when he's brought to a rehabilitation center sponsored by UNICEF and partnering NGOs. The process marks out Beah as a gifted spokesman for the center's work after his "repatriation" to civilian life in the capital, where he lives with his family and a distant uncle. When the war finally engulfs the capital, it sends 17-year-old Beah fleeing again, this time to the U.S., where he now lives. (Beah graduated from Oberlin College in 2004.) Told in clear, accessible language by a young writer with a gifted literary voice, this memoir seems destined to become a classic firsthand account of war and the ongoing plight of child soldiers in conflicts worldwide.

Publisher Weekly Review

Elizabeth Kolbert's *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*



Suggested by Kate Bluestein

On the burgeoning shelf of cautionary but occasionally alarmist books warning about the consequences of dramatic climate change, Kolbert's calmly persuasive reporting stands out for its sobering clarity. Expanding on a three-part series for the New Yorker, Kolbert (*The Prophet of Love*) lets facts rather than polemics tell the story: in essence, it's that Earth is now nearly as warm as it has been at any time in the last 420,000 years and is on the precipice of an unprecedented "climate regime, one with which modern humans have had no prior experience." An inexorable increase in the world's average temperature means that butterflies, which typically restrict themselves to well-defined climate zones, are now flitting where they've never been found before; that nearly every major glacier in the world is melting rapidly; and that the prescient Dutch are already preparing to let rising oceans reclaim some of their land. In her most pointed chapter, Kolbert chides the U.S. for refusing to sign on to the Kyoto Accord. In her most upbeat chapter, Kolbert singles out Burlington, Vt., for its impressive energy-saving campaign, which ought to be a model for the rest of the nation—just as this unbiased overview is a model for writing about an urgent environmental crisis.

Publishers Weekly