



SUMMER READING 2021

11th and 12th Grades

In this packet, you will find information about Summer Reading for new and returning Commonwealth students. At the beginning of each school year, we break into small groups to discuss different book, representing a range of topics and genres, chosen by the faculty member leading the conversation. Please select one book from the “Summer Reading Discussion Groups” list and come to school prepared to share your observations!

Summer break can be a wonderful time to catch up on your reading—to discover new genres or authors, to re-read old favorites, or to finally tackle a literary classic. We encourage you to explore the titles on the attached lists, which include recommendations from the library, your teachers, and your classmates. If you liked a book in one of your courses last year, you might want to try another by the same author this summer. When you return to school in the fall, your advisor will be interested to hear what you have read and your responses.

These lists are also available on the library webpage (under Academics at commschool.org) where I have provided links to online ordering options for the required reading. Most books on this list will also be available at your local bookshop or library.

Happy reading!
Ms. Johnson

PART ONE: Summer Reading Discussion Groups

Each student will participate a discussion group for one of these books upon returning to school in the fall.

Leonora Chu, *Little Soldiers: An American Boy, a Chinese School, and the Global Race to Achieve* (Ms. Borman): Lenora Chu and her husband, both American journalists, moved to Shanghai and were quickly faced with a complicated decision: What kind of school should they choose for their 5-year-old son Rainey? After weighing options, they chose a Chinese public school. What follows is a funny, perceptive comparison of the relative merits and pitfalls of both Chinese and American approaches to education. She digs deeply into some of the stereotypes of both cultures - individualism versus collectivism, talent versus work ethic—and charts her own family's experiences with everything from homework to school lunches. She also brings her journalistic skills to bear and zooms out to look at wider trends in both countries. Chu, the child of Chinese immigrants, was raised in Texas and educated at Stanford and Columbia. She brings a unique bi-cultural lens to her storytelling as well as nuance, honesty, and humor.

Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (Mr. Korta): When the apprentices of a Paris printing shop in the 1730s held a series of mock trials and then hanged all the cats they could capture, why did they find it hilarious - so funny, in fact that they reenacted it in pantomime some twenty times? Why in the 18th century version of "Little Red Riding Hood" did the wolf eat the child in the end? What did the anonymous townsman of Montpellier have in mind when he kept an exhaustive dossier on all the activities of his native city? These are some of the provocative questions Robert Darnton answers in *The Great Cat Massacre*, a kaleidoscopic view of European culture during what we like to call the "Age of Enlightenment."

Elena Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend* (Ms. Eskelund): The friendship at the center of *My Brilliant Friend* begins with a lost doll, when Lenù and Lila are ten years old, and continues through their teenage years—but the word "friendship" is barely adequate to describe the contours of this life-long relationship (three novels follow this beginning of "The Neapolitan Quartet"). Elena Ferrante articulates things rarely put into words: how a relationship can fill, over years, with love and hatred, jealousy and idolotry, contempt and admiration; how "friends" might become points of origin and contrast for one another's intellectual and emotional lives. Ferrante portrays Naples in the 1950s and '60s as a place of claustrophobic violence, the city as much a character as Lenù, Lila, or any of the people who fill their lives. Really, this is an incredible novel.

Richard Feynman, *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out* (Mr. Barsi): From the publisher: "*The Pleasure of Finding Things Out* is a magnificent treasury of the best short works of Richard P. Feynman—from interviews and speeches to lectures and printed articles. A sweeping, wide-ranging collection, it presents an intimate and fascinating view of a life in science—a life like no other. From his ruminations on science in our culture to his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, this book will fascinate anyone interested in the world of ideas."

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (Ms. Tyson): From the publisher: "As children, Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy were students at Hailsham, an exclusive boarding school secluded in the English

countryside. It was a place of mercurial cliques and mysterious rules where teachers were constantly reminding their charges of how special they were. Now, years later, Kathy is a young woman. Ruth and Tommy have reentered her life. And for the first time she is beginning to look back at their shared past and understand just what it is that makes them special—and how that gift will shape the rest of their time together. Suspenseful, moving, beautifully atmospheric, *Never Let Me Go* is a modern classic.”

Daniel Kahneman, et al., *Noise: A Flaw in Human Judgment* (Ms. Budding): The book discusses how and why irrelevant factors influence human decision-making. “The earth has been so fully explored that scientists can’t possibly discover a previously unknown mammal the size of an elephant. The same could be said about the landscape of decision-making, yet Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein have discovered a problem as large as an elephant: noise. In this important book they show us why noise matters, why there’s so much more of it than we realize, and how to reduce it. Implementing their advice would give us more profitable businesses, healthier citizens, a fairer legal system, and happier lives.” — Jonathan Haidt, NYU Stern School of Business

Michael Lewis, *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story* (Ms. Haber): In this narrative account of the why the government reacted to COVID-19 as it did, Michael Lewis has found a topic that makes sense with his three most famous books, *Moneyball* (about the use of data in baseball), *The Big Short* (about the global financial meltdown in 2008), and *The Fifth Risk* (about the importance of expertise in government). Global meltdown? Check! Was data important? Check! Did we need experts in government? Check! The book reads like a thriller with a rollicking narrative style and great characters—not to mention brain-eating amoebas and an autopsy conducted with garden shears. It also raises important questions about whether democracies can respond to disasters (including global warming!) and why outsiders and sometimes better than experts in diagnosing a situation.

Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* (Mr. Pérez): *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih is widely considered one of the best Arabic novels of the twentieth century, and deals with the brutal and complex effects of colonialism on colonial subjects’ lives. It has been read, among other things, as a postcolonial response to Conrad’s brilliant but controversial *Heart of Darkness*.

Claude M. Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* (Ms. Boppana): Claude Steele, who first coined the term “stereotype threat,” walks us through how something seemingly minor such as bubbling in one’s gender before a math standardized test can affect performance. It is full of actionable insights relating to DEI.

PART TWO: Recommendations from the Class of 2021

Graduating seniors share some of their favorite books.

SASHA BATES—*War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy: “This book is the best guide for how to find meaning in a world without objective truth that I have ever found. A cliché, I know, but just read the book. I promise you won't be disappointed.”

MAOZ BIZAN—*A General Theory of Oblivion* by José Eduardo Agualusa:

SOPHIE GARDINER—*Animal Dreams* by Barbara Kingsolver

SOL GUTIÉRREZ-LARA—*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* by Yuval Noah Harari: “Really interesting, fun to think about, and handy to have in your head as you go about your life. The audiobook version by Derek Perkins is also great, if you're short on reading time but have a long commute to school.”

KAE HOANG—*The Best We Could Do* by Thi Bui

OLGA KAZAROV—*Welcome to the Monkey House* by Kurt Vonnegut

PART THREE: Books Recommended for Students Entering 11th and 12th Grades

NOVELS

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (2013): Both a sharp social commentary and a heartfelt love story, *Americanah* explores the idea of “blackness” in the United States, England, and the author’s native Nigeria.

Nadeem Aslam, *The Golden Legend* (2017): A searing but beautiful novel about religious intolerance. The *Washington Post* calls it “A powerful and timely comment on the precarious state of religious minorities in Pakistan, and...an honest mirror to the Pakistani state and society.”

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985): In a near-future dystopia, an authoritarian theocracy has overthrown the United States government; women are stripped of their rights as society is restructured along Biblically literalist lines. A thought-provoking exploration of female identity and independence. (And, if you pay attention, you’ll notice that it’s set in the Boston area.)

Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818): Jane Austen’s most romantic novel! (A controversial statement that this recommender stands by.) A moving story about second chances and finding people who understand and respect you, when your hilariously horrible family do not.

Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters: A Comedy* (1985): A bitingly satirical novel about art. The *London Review of Books* says of Bernhard’s writing: “All this goes to show just how different Bernhard’s novels are from the run of novels. They are sculptures of opinion, rather than contraptions assembled from character interactions. Each book is a curved, seamless rant.”

Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives* (1998): A wild ride through a fictionalized version of the 1970s literary world of Latin America, as told in part through the diaries of a teenage initiate into the militant Visceral Realists movement. Bolaño was one of the greats in contemporary Spanish-language fiction.

T. C. Boyle, *Tortilla Curtain* (1995): A tragicomedy about two worlds colliding—literally, in this case, as a car collision brings an undocumented Mexican couple and a well-off American family into each other’s orbits. An excellent read for Spanish students and those interested in issues of immigration and identity.

Lois McMaster Bujold, *The Warrior’s Apprentice* (1986): This book introduces the irascible Miles Vorkosigan who, having been rejected from his planet’s military due to his physical disabilities, *accidentally* forms his own private militia. The sixteen books in Bujold’s Vorkosigan Saga follow the space adventures of Miles, his (amazing) parents, and his assorted family and friends through decades and across planets and genres.

Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (1967): Written during Stalin’s regime, this book was not published until the 1960s, many years after the author’s death. It is both a fantastical story of religion and magic that crosses time and space as it travels between 1930s Moscow and ancient

Jerusalem and a cutting satire of Soviet society. Be sure to read a modern edition that restores previously censored material and provides footnotes to contextualize the story.

Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (1979): Dana Franklin, a young African-American woman living in 1970s California, finds herself being repeatedly called back through time—to a slave plantation in the antebellum South. Butler is best known for her futuristic science fiction, but this fantastical story about race, history, and slavery's terrible legacy may be her best work.

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (1899): In late 19th century Louisiana, free-spirited Edna Pontellier finds herself more and more at odds with her society's image of femininity and motherhood.

Yangsze Choo, *The Night Tiger* (2019): Drawing from folklore, Choo crafts a gripping murder mystery that plunges you into the underworld of 1930s Malaysia (plus weretigers).

Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* (2004): The year is 1806, the Napoleonic Wars are underway, and no magic has been done in England since the Middle Ages—until the two men in the title decide the time is right to bring magic back from the realm of theory and scholarship and to put it into practice. This sprawling fantasy offers a sly pastiche of Dickensian 19th century novels, with a healthy dose of warfare, social critique, madness, and fairy lore.

Jenny Erpenbeck, *Go, Went, Gone* (2017): This very current novel by German author Jenny Erpenbeck tells a moving story, while taking a scathing look at the response to the European refugee crisis.

E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (1924): This ambiguous modernist novel explores the tensions between the colonizers and the colonized in the years just before the end of British rule in India. While very much of its time, Forster's book tackles race, gender, and sexuality in a way atypical to the era and it remains a moving and thought-provoking read.

Kaitlyn Greenidge, *We Love You, Charlie Freeman* (2016): Greenidge, a Commonwealth alum, tells the story of the four members of the Freeman family, who leave their home in diverse Dorchester for the Tonybee Institute for Ape Research in the all-white Berkshires. There they will be the subjects of a scientific study as they learn how to live with a fifth family member—a chimpanzee named Charlie. This unusual premise becomes a framework for exploring the troubling intersections of science and race in our nation's past.

Jens Peter Jacobsen, *Niels Lyhne* (1880): This is the book the poet Rainer Maria Rilke recommended to the 19-year old Franz Kappus in his Letters to a Young Poet. It is the story of an artistic soul's apparently unsuccessful attempt to find meaning in his increasingly tiresome life. It exercised enormous influence on the modernist movement.

Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street* (1920): The story of Carol Kennicott, née Milford, the new bride of Dr. Will Kennicott, physician and leading citizen of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota. Fresh out of Blodgett College in Minneapolis, Carol travels home with her husband, hoping to satisfy her reformist zeal. Unfortunately, the good citizens of Gopher Prairie do not want to be reformed.

Anthony Marra, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* (2013): The lives of six people in a small village in Chechnya intersect in this beautiful, tragic novel about connection in the face of the

senselessness of war. An excellent novel to read to learn more about a sometimes-overlooked chapter in recent history (the two Chechen Wars lasted from 1994-1996 and 1999-2009 and the Chechen-Russian conflict is ongoing).

Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967): A constantly surprising, endlessly inventive novel following the history of the Buendia family and the imaginary South American town of Macondo. In the end it becomes a metaphorical history of the world.

Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore* (2002): The stories of Kafka Tamura, a runaway seeking to be “the toughest 15-year-old in the world,” and Satoru Nakata, the elderly survivor of an incident during World War II in which sixteen schoolchildren mysteriously vanished (an incident which took away Nakata’s memory but left him with the ability to talk to cats), interweave in this dreamy magical realist novel.

Flann O’Brien, *The Third Policeman* (1967): After committing a botched robbery and terrible murder, the narrator of O’Brien’s comic gem finds himself down the rabbit hole with three very peculiar police officers.

Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1996): In lyrical prose, Roy tells the story of fraternal twins in India whose lives are shaped by social and historical forces beyond their control and by the “Love Laws” that govern “who should be loved, and how. And how much.” This is a beautiful, challenging, unusual book.

Mary Doria Russell, *The Sparrow* (1996): This book combines science fiction with philosophy and religion as it recounts the story of humankind’s first, doomed encounter with alien life.

George Saunders, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017): Saunders crafts a unique historical ghost story about love and loss. At the outbreak of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln has just suffered a more personal blow—the death of his 11-year-old son. Young Willie finds himself in the *bardo*, in Tibetan tradition a purgatory where the fate of his soul will be decided.

Namwali Serpell, *The Old Drift* (2019): An inventive debut novel which tells the overlapping stories of three families, one European, one Zambian, and one Indian, tracing through them a history of colonialism.

Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow* (2016): It’s after the Revolution, a man of the leisure class is sentenced to spend his years in a hotel room in Moscow. His encounters and thoughts are fascinating.

Weike Wang, *Chemistry: A Novel* (2017): On the cusp of achieving everything she has worked for—a position in a top PhD program, a proposal from her loving boyfriend—the unnamed protagonist of *Chemistry* realizes that she has no idea what she wants. Wang, a former PhD candidate in Chemistry at Harvard, has an insider’s understanding of the pressures of academia.

Sarah Waters, *Affinity* (1999): In the wake of family tragedy, upper-class Margaret Prior seeks meaning in her life by volunteering in a women’s prison. She meets and soon finds herself in the thrall of the fascinating Selina Dawes, a spirit medium—but is Selina all she seems to be? Waters writes delicious historical fiction, and this Victorian thriller is no exception.

Evelyn Waugh, *Vile Bodies* (1930): Characters like Edward Throbbing, Mr. Outrage, and Miss Runcible do terrible things to one another in a medium of frothy chatter and invincible high-society—English caprice. It's a very funny book. It's like a kite that, nearly weightless, leaves cuts on your hand.

Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985): A semi-autobiographical novel about a young woman raised in a devoutly Pentecostal family in England who faces conflict between her faith and her desires when her lesbianism is revealed to the community. The author paints a specific portrait of a particular setting and experience, but her exploration of growing up, first love, and complicated family relationships is universal.

SHORT STORIES, POETRY, AND PLAYS

Isabel Allende, *Stories of Eva Luna* (1989): A collection of short fiction concerning the relations between men and women, parents and children, real people and ghosts, richly spiced with sex, religion, and a delightfully magical kind of realism.

James Baldwin, *Going to Meet the Man* (1965): Baldwin provides vivid snapshots into black and white racial identity in mid-century America that still feel vital and relevant today.

Lydia Davis, *Break It Down: Stories* (2012):

"He's sitting there staring at a piece of paper in front of him. He's trying to break it down. He says, I'm breaking it all down."

Written in a spare, precise style, the 34 short stories in this collection are surprising and complex.

Anna Deaveare Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (1992) and *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994): These two plays draw on interviews and statements by real people to explore the Crown Heights riots of 1991 and the Rodney King riots of 1992—moments when an act of racialized violence sparked an outpouring of emotion and anger. These plays are 25 years old, but remain relevant in the age of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Seamus Heaney, *Selected Poems*: Heaney's subjects of the poems range from the 10,000-year-old execution of a young adulteress, to a boy folding sheets with his mother, to a conversation with the ghost of James Joyce. His masterful translation of *Beowulf* is well worth a read too!

Tony Kushner, *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985): An earlier work by the master behind *Angels in America*. The *Chicago Tribune* review of this play describes it as "unabashedly political, thought-provoking, a little scary, and frequently a good deal of theatrical fun." It follows a group of Leftist artists and intellectuals in the 1930s Weimar Republic, who are shaken by the rapidity with which their lives and country change when Hitler comes to power. The play also (somewhat controversially) digs into then-contemporaneous Reagan-era politics, insisting that audiences engage with the present as well as the more comfortably distant past; in the production notes, Kushner writes that the present-day scenes should be updated in performance to reflect "whatever evildoing is prevalent at the time of the production." If you are reading Isherwood for your summer reading, this would make an excellent pairing.

James Merrill, *The Book of Ephraim* (1976): This long-form poem by James Merrill, the younger brother of Commonwealth's founder, explores the afterlife in an unorthodox way, drawing from Merrill's sessions with a Ouija board. Originally published as part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Divine Comedies*, an annotated standalone version of the poem has been published recently.

Otessa Moshfegh, *Homesick for Another World* (2017): Moshfegh (another Commonwealth author) delivers an unsparing short story collection about hopeless people yearning for something they cannot name.

Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Refugees* (2017): Nguyen's follow-up to his Pulitzer Prize-winning first novel, *The Sympathizer*, is this beautiful collection of stories of people caught between the two worlds of the homeland they have been forced to leave and their new adoptive country.

Flannery O'Connor, *Everything that Rises Must Converge* (1965): A short collection of her best stories. (If you get hooked, go out and get the full *Collected Stories*.) Look up the word "grotesque"—in all its facets—in the dictionary. If it applies to any American writer, it does most of all to Flannery O'Connor, whose characters—misfits, cripples, hapless creatures, lost souls—discover the truth about the world in the course of surprising, often shocking misadventures. And she is *funny*.

Emily Wilson, trans., *The Odyssey* (2017): This new translation of the *Odyssey* is the first published in English to be written by a woman. Wilson's version of the poem is lyrical and contemporary, challenging our traditional ways of reading Homer. If you read the *Odyssey* in 9th grade and would like a new perspective, give this one a try! (For another fresh take on the *Odyssey*, try Madeline Miller's novel *Circe*, which came out earlier this year.)

GRAPHIC NOVELS

Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006): Bechdel's classic memoir about growing up in a funeral parlor traces her complicated relationship with her father—who, like her, was gay.

Ellen Forney, *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me* (2012): After getting diagnosed with bipolar disorder at age 30, cartoonist Ellen Forney fears that her illness and her creativity might be tied together, and that treating one might destroy the other. This is a funny, touching, and unflinchingly honest look at an artist's search for balance in her life and work.

John Lewis, *March: Books 1-3* (2013-15): A riveting account of the Jim Crow South and the early Civil Rights movement through the eyes John Lewis, former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and current congressman from Georgia.

Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis* (2000): This two-part graphic novel memoir paints a vivid picture of life in Iran in the 1980s as the Islamic Revolution brought on rapid social changes. Satrapi's child's-eye view of the Revolution is affecting, sometimes funny, and often relatable.

Art Spiegelman, *Maus* (1991): Moving deftly between timelines—the author interviewing his estranged father in 1978, and that father's experiences in Nazi Germany—*Maus* tells an unforgettable

story of family, history, and the horror of the Holocaust echoing through generations. With its bold art and trenchant subject matter, this book expanded our idea of what comics could be.

Chris Ware, *Rusty Brown* (2019): Chris Ware’s distinctive art style and inventive layouts come together to tell the story of one day in the life of an elementary school in 1970s Omaha. He is a master of the craft who makes the most out of the everyday.

MEMOIR & AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Nicole Chung, *All You Can Ever Know* (2018): Chung writes candidly and emotionally about her experiences as a transracial adoptee—one of the only Asian faces in a small Oregon town—and about the repercussions, both painful and affirming, of deciding to learn more about her family and culture of origin.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (2015): Written as a letter to his teenage son, *Between the World and Me* movingly and thoughtfully reflects on the experience of being black and on the “racist violence that has been woven into American culture.”

Anne Fadiman, *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* (1998): Each essay in this slim volume, which mixes literary criticism and memoir as the author reflects on life as a voracious bookworm, is a gem. Whether discussing *true* commitment (the day she finally merged her book collection with her husband’s) or her fascination with doomed polar expeditions (she has sixty-four books on the subject), Fadiman writes with wit and intelligence.

Roxane Gay, *Hunger* (2017): In *Hunger*, Gay—a novelist, essayist, and, recently, comic book writer—shares her trenchant reflections on sexual violence and its ripple-out effects on her life, including her continued struggle with body image and weight.

Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face* (1994): In elegant, unblinking prose, without a trace of self-pity, Grealy tells the wrenching story of growing up “different” and “disfigured” by major jaw surgery for cancer at the age of five. The pain, fear, and isolation of her cancer treatments and of the more than thirty reconstructive procedures which followed, the confusion and anger at being ostracized by her peers, the perverse pleasures of highlighting her uniqueness, will strike startlingly familiar chords in anyone who has ever felt ugly or inadequate—that is, in anyone.

Suki Kim, *Without You, There is No Us: My Time with the Sons of North Korea’s Elite* (2014): Suki Kim, a U.S.-based journalist from Seoul, went undercover for six months as a teacher at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology. She witnessed daily life in a country that few outsiders are ever allowed to visit as she worked with the sheltered teenagers who will one day belong to North Korea’s elite. This book provides a fascinating glimpse into a society where paranoia, surveillance, and misinformation are daily facts of life.

Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (1974): A 17-day motorcycle road trip with his teenage son, Chris, becomes a philosophical journey in which Pirsig reflects on questions of Truth and Quality and finds unexpected paths to inner peace.

William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary* (1941): A vivid day-to-day account of Hitler's rise to power.

Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933): Insider gossip about Picasso, Matisse, Braque, Apollinaire, Hemingway, Stein, et al.; shrewd remarks about Art and Life; Paris when it was the place to be for new departures in just about everything (1907-32).

Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle* (2005): A classic memoir of growing up as one of America's rural poor, *The Glass Castle* centers around Walls' relationship with her captivating, creative, chaotic alcoholic father.

NON-FICTION

Karen Abbott, *Liar, Temptress, Soldier, Spy: Four Women Undercover in the Civil War* (2014): There is no shortage of good books about the Civil War, but this one takes a unique approach, looking at women on both sides of the conflict who engage in risky and often scandalous behavior for their causes—one disguises herself as a Union soldier, another seduces prominent Northern politicians and passes information to the South.

Roger Angell, *Late Innings* (1977): If you like baseball, you must read Angell. His articles in *The New Yorker* covered the unfolding drama of passing seasons, pausing to reflect on the enduring beauty of the game itself. He is the philosopher king of sportswriters, the one man to whom ballplayers seem willing to speak with real intelligence about why this pursuit engages them heart and soul.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (2018): Appiah (Professor of Philosophy and the New York Times "ethicist,") has been writing about what identity means to him, a mixed-race, mixed-religion, transnational human being. In this easy-to-read collection of essays, he examines the twin ways we are "bound" by categories of identity: the positive bonds that link together in community and the negative bonds that act like shackles upon us. Arguing against the "essentialism" of race, class, religion, gender, and other categories, Appiah aims to shake up the way we are thinking about identity without denying the way those time- and space-bound categories shape our experience.

Petr Beckmann, *A History of Pi* (1970): Excellent history of the number Pi wound together with an examination of how, historically, knowledge and academics have been treated and why. A fun and trivia-packed journey as well as a politically motivated one.

Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (2012): This Pulitzer Prize-winning piece of reporting shines a light on the lives of families in Annawadi, a slum on the outskirts of Mumbai's luxury tourist areas.

T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006): Writing about two paintings that he returned to again and again in the Getty Museum—Poussin's *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* and *Landscape with a Calm*—Clark explores the captivating qualities of art. A great read for students of Art History.

William de Buys, *A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American Southwest* (2013): This gives a very thorough and engaging account of the history and future of water in the Southwest. It may deter you from moving there but will also help you understand some of the complexity of climate change.

Alice Goffman, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (2014): What is the true cost of the War on Crime? Goffman spent six years in a Philadelphia neighborhood, observing the day-to-day impact of the criminal justice system on its residents—young people caught up in the drug trade, Black men targeted by police, “clean” residents working hard to get by.

Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (1977): A correspondent in Vietnam, Herr tells the GIs’ story in their own language and tells it in all its horror—not as it was gussied up for the American newspapers. It cost Herr 10 years and a breakdown to write the book.

Roland Huntford, *The Last Place on Earth: Scott and Amundsen’s Race for the South Pole* (1979): An exciting and detailed account of the early 20th-century race between the Norwegians and the British to be the first to reach the South Pole and the complex men who led each expedition—Roald Amundsen, a daring, experienced explorer, and Robert Scott, a Naval officer whose tragic death made him a beloved hero in England. This book was explosive when it was published, upturning the conventional sentimentalized narrative about the Scott expedition and seeking to restore credit to Amundsen for his accomplishments.

Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Nation Identity* (1998): This book tells the story of King Philip’s War—a conflict that nearly extinguished early New England between 1674-76—in a fresh and innovative way. One of the best features is the final section, which shows how the war was commemorated, distorted, mythologized and forgotten to the point that, for many readers, Lepore’s New England will seem foreign and exotic. Lepore writes in a sparkling, eloquent prose that is all too rare in academic history today.

Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851): Mayhew set out to discover how the vast new urban underclass of 19th-century London made its living, thought, and talked. He found hundreds of highly evolved groups, each with its own specialized skill, character, lore, customs, slang. Dip into this immense work, based largely on interviews, and see what Malthus and Marx might have missed about the sewer-scavengers, sellers of monkeys, pickpockets, swindlers, flea-circus men, etc.

Heinz Pagels, *The Cosmic Code* (1982): An introduction to the history and ideas of quantum mechanics, with discussions of the philosophical implications of the uncertainty principle, wave-particle duality and the many-worlds model of reality.

Tom Reiss, *The Black Count: Glory, Revolution, Betrayal, and the Real Count of Monte Cristo* (2012): Born the son of a slave in Haiti, Alexandre Dumas’ father rose through the ranks of the military and reached social heights usually unattainable for people of color in 18th-century France. His swashbuckling adventures inspired many of the feats in *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1985): Sacks presents a dozen or so short portraits of people with bizarre neurological conditions: a sailor with no ability to make new memories, who meets Sacks as if for the first time every day; a man who temporarily attains the

olfactory discrimination of a bloodhound after a drug overdose; and the title character. Sacks' goal is not to explain the underlying pathology —virtually none of these conditions is understood well—but to explore the extraordinary range of traumatic changes in the self to which the self nonetheless adapts and which it incorporates.

Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (1969): Hitler's invasion of Russia got as far as Leningrad. This is the story of the German attack and siege of the city; of what breaks down and what endures under starvation, Russian cold, grinding warfare. Grim reading, but a revelation of what people could find worth fighting for.

Gaia Vince, *Transcendence: How Humans Evolved through Fire, Language, Beauty, and Time* (2020): Where does culture come from, anyway? This book looks at four tools—the titular fire, language, beauty, and time—to trace the history of humankind.

Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942): Woolf's novels stretched that form past its limits, and her talk could dazzle even the most brilliant guests. The searching restlessness of her mind could yield torments of self-doubt, but also gives these essays great reflective range, depth, and imaginative force. For an idea of what “the life of the mind” might be, this is a hard book to beat.