



Kendall Bentz

[The Splendid and the Vile](#)

Erik Larson

A terrific book for Churchill-philes and -neophytes alike. This page-turning account of the Nazis' nine-month bombing campaign against the British digs deep into countless personal diaries and archival materials. Weaving together the stories of myriad individual characters, Larson provides a captivating, intimate view into the daily lives and minds of average British citizens, upper-class London elites, Whitehall leaders and the man made for the hour, Winston Churchill – while Hitler's Luftwaffe mercilessly terror-bombs the British population. We hear Churchill sustain British morale throughout – by leveling with the people about the difficulties confronting the nation while also embodying dauntless confidence in ultimate victory. We also hear Churchill entertain guests after dinner at Chequers ... while dressed in a flaming red dragon dressing gown, marching about to martial music, shouldering a rifle and practicing bayonet drills. The book is fantastic – but even better read to you in audio book form by the incomparable John Lee.

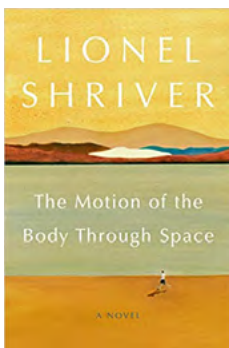


Daniel Casse

Under the Wild Sky

William Souder

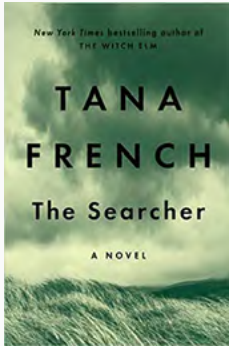
Like Tocqueville, Audubon came from France to discover America. More than a naturalist, a bird-watcher, or water-colorist, Audubon was a fearless explorer of a young country. He deserves to be in the pantheon of the founder-innovators alongside Franklin, Jefferson, and Hamilton, who all understood the potential of a vast country with unlimited resources. I read Richard Rhodes biography first, which won the Pulitzer prize. But William Souder's *Under the Wild Sky* is better. His story focuses not just on the majesty of discovering America, but also on the drudgery, personal politics, and frustration of bringing *The Birds of America* into print. A fantastic social and intellectual history of one of America's greatest immigrants.



The Motion of the Body Through Space

Lionel Shriver

Lionel Shriver is the most sophisticated observer of “the way we live now.” Her acerbic talks and interviews, found all over YouTube, are part theater, part social trolling. But it is in her novels where she really brings the thunder. This latest book is hilarious, even when it takes dead aim at sacred cows. When her protagonist, a life-long workout fanatic, discovers that her husband suddenly wants to become an iron man, a war of wills ensues. The story unfolds with one poke after another at all our current obsessions: diet, health, aging, relationships, religious fanaticism, political insensitivity, and, above all, exercise. No one else today has a better ear for our clichés, our prejudices, and our anxieties.

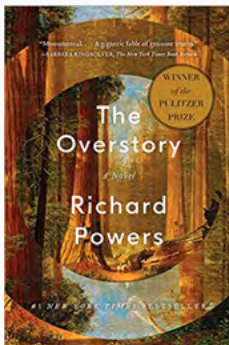


Cassie Dormond

The Searcher

Tana French

It's a quick, atmospheric mystery with truly lovable and thoughtfully-drawn characters at the center. Perfect for reading over the course of one day while curled up by the fire over the holidays.

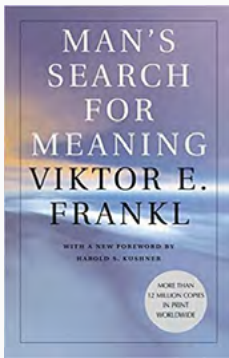


Meryl Ellingson

The Overstory

Richard Powers

This may be the most redundant recommendation of 2020, because this book won all of the awards – including the Pulitzer. So I'm not even going to try to write a review since there are probably a hundred better ones out there. This book is about humanity's deteriorating relationship with nature and, ultimately, with itself. I read it in late summer when the fires were raging in California, where I live, making an epic story centered around trees that much more tragic and powerful.

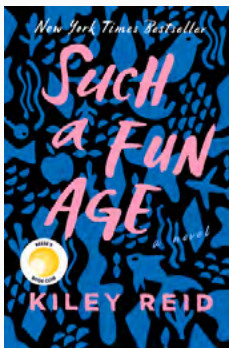


David Frey

Man's Search for Meaning

Viktor Frankl

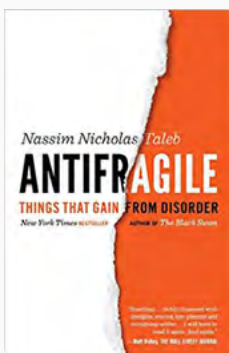
I was assigned this book for an intro-level philosophy class my freshman year of college, which was more years ago than I'd like to admit. Since then, Frankl's wisdom has stuck with me, and I frequently turn back to this book. I read it again this past spring and found its central messages even more resonant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Such A Fun Age

Kiley Reid

A sharp, satirical look at race, class and gender. The characters are accessible, and the plot is fast and straightforward—making Reid's insights all the more impactful.

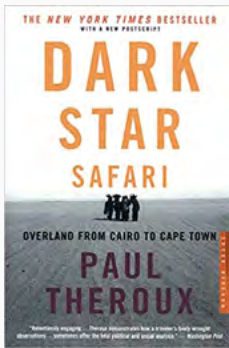


Rob Gluck

Antifragile

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

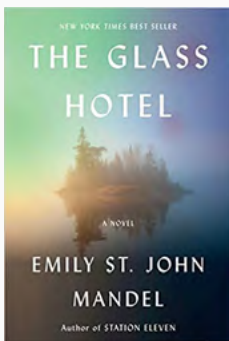
Having read *The Black Swan* by Taleb and loved it, I downloaded *Antifragile* when the pandemic hit in full force. It was perfect for the moment. The key insight: “anything that has more upside than downside from random events (or certain shocks) is antifragile; the reverse is fragile.” This book is an exploration of resilience in societies, organizations and individuals in the face of adversity; more than that, it describes how some competitors are strengthened by adverse events to such a degree that they become advantages.



Dark Star Safari

Paul Theroux

Theroux is possibly the best travel writer alive, and his books are a terrific antidote to being housebound. In *Dark Star Safari*, Theroux's goal is to get from Cairo to Cape Town by himself, with no itinerary, reservations or defined mode of transportation. Reading this was the next best thing to actually traveling through the countries and regions on the way, experiencing areas I knew next to nothing about. After reading this one, you'll want to pick up many of Theroux's other excellent books.

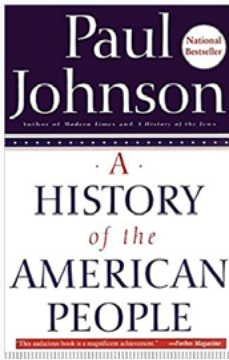


Yasmin Dias Guichot

The Glass Hotel

Emily St. John Mandel

I felt very fortunate to receive an invitation to join a friend's virtual book club by Zoom, with readers from Los Angeles, New York and D.C. We read *The Glass Hotel* by Emily St. John Mandel, which tells many stories of those impacted by the 2008 financial crisis, spinning a web of wealth and loss. The readers follow each thread - Paul on his recovery journey, his sister Vincent in her rise and fall in the Kingdom of Wealth, Leon and his work in the shipping industry Jonathan, and his ponzi scheme, Olivia in her reckoning with past selves, Walter in finding meaning alone in the glass hotel. The story was gripping, and felt particularly acute as we face another catastrophe, not just of wealth, but of health. It's a portrait of greed and guilt, love and delusion, ghosts and unintended consequences, and the infinite ways we search for meaning in our lives.

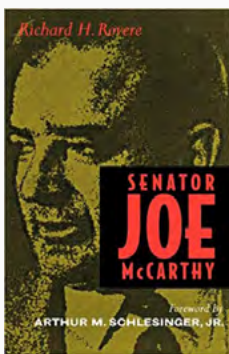


Michael Hodin

A History of the American People

Paul Johnson

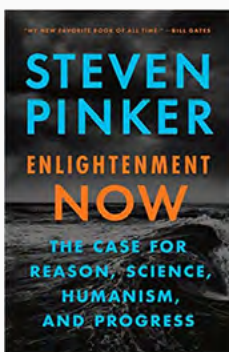
One of the best of the late twentieth century British Historians writing about the wonders of the American People (not our government or elites). One of the best by an outsider since Alexis de Toqueville's Democracy in America.



Senator Joe McCarthy

Richard H Rovere

A good history about the spectacle of McCarthy's anti-communist lists, his conspiracy theory and the havoc it did on our body politic and 1950s American society. A good reminder that things have been worse.



Mark Hoffmann

Enlightenment Now

Steven Pinker

Okay, I cheated. I read this book last year and watched Tiger King this year. But I thought about this book a lot in 2020, because it's everything this year isn't: an optimistic, non-alternative fact-based argument about why things are getting better. Education. Health. Equality. Non-violence. Even the environment. If 2020 was like a yearlong pre-brunch hangover, Enlightenment Now is the double oatmilk latte you need.



Drew Holzaphel

The Godfather

Mario Puzo

I re-read Mario Puzo's greatest work, *The Godfather*, in the early days of the pandemic. I had not read it since the summer between my sophomore and junior year in college. I loved it at the time and it sent me down a path of reading nearly all of Puzo's books. When I re-read it this year, it was even better than I remembered. Those critical would say, at times, it's a bit over-the-top, but those who can suspend disbelief will be entertained for hours. If Google Translate is right, "godere".



Megan Jackson

New Minimalism

Cary Telander Fortin & Kyle Louise Quilici

Less is more. Min not max. Enough with stuff.
A supportive guide to making pretty, simple spaces.

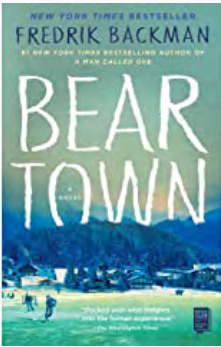


Jess Kemp

Dieter Rams: The Complete Works

Klaus Klemp

Dieter Rams is one of the most influential product designers of the twentieth century, who for more than sixty years has been defining the look, feel, and function of some of the world's best-loved consumer items. Using his 'ten principles for good design' as a philosophy and practice for improving the industry in a more holistic, responsible way, Rams has built a reputation with global resonance.

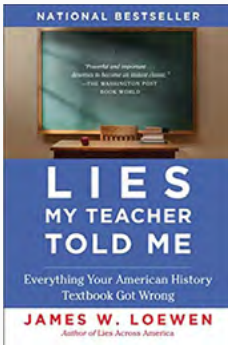


Brooks Kenny

Beartown

Fredrik Backman

A beautiful story of complex characters living in a small town with big dreams. Backman deftly captures the human experience.



Alissa Kurzman

Lies My Teacher Told Me

James W. Loewen

In this book, the author critically examines 12 popular American high school history textbooks, concluding that the textbook authors propagate false, Eurocentric and mythologized views of American history. A fun read that makes you rethink your high school history lessons.



Brett Landau

A Finer Future

Hunter Lovins

Imagine a better future. What would that look like to you? Hunter Lovins has a roadmap to a future for a regenerative economy. As a solution forward book, each chapter details either a technological advancement or reversion to lost knowledge that would start us on our way to a “Finer Future.”



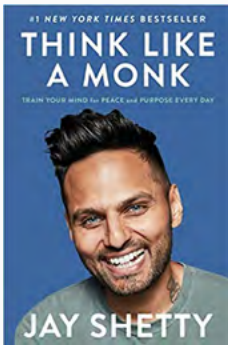
Beth Leuin

Watchmen

Alan Moore & Dave Gibbons

I jumped on the bandwagon and you should, too. Dark, creative and smart, Watchmen wrestles with those pesky moral quandaries: Where is the distinction between good and evil? Is life meaningless or miraculous? Can the ends justify the means... if you throw in a giant alien squid?

This was my first graphic novel, and I found the medium far more approachable than I expected. Don't miss the HBO show either - it's worth the hype.



Emily Lizotte

Think Like A Monk

Jay Shetty

I'm currently reading Think Like A Monk, which couldn't have come at a better time given the global pandemic. Over the years, I've enjoyed gaining insight and wisdom from Jay Shetty's podcast On Purpose; I was excited when he released his first book sharing all his wisdom on training your mind and living a more meaningful life. Hope you enjoy!

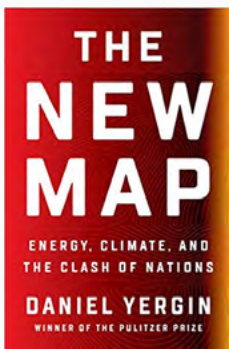


Clare Maher

My Kitchen Year

Ruth Reichl

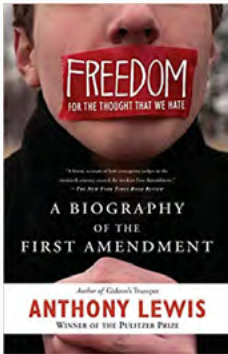
Ruth Reichl, former NY Times restaurant critic and long-running editor-in-chief of Gourmet magazine, was fired when Condé Nast shuttered Gourmet, the first magazine in the U.S. devoted to food and wine. Her cookbook details the recipes she made during the first year following her departure, in which she seeks the comfort of cooking, reminisces on her career and considers her future. If you haven't yet cooked your way through the pandemic, this includes many delicious, simple options to try, while offering an homage to the meaning of food and wine cooked and shared with those you love. Try the sautéed spinach.



The New Map

Daniel Yergin

Yergin never disappoints, particularly in live interview format, but he's especially good in this latest analysis of the global societal and economic importance of oil and gas, particularly the disruptive impact of the shale boom on U.S. energy independence. If you wish to have a thoughtful, well-informed point of view on the sector that stretches beyond polarized political narratives, I recommend this book (as well as Yergin's interview on the CFR podcast, "The President's Inbox").

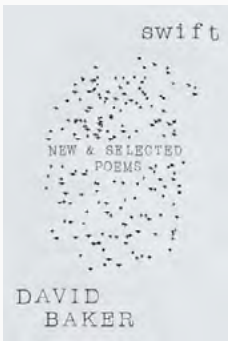


Gina Masino

Freedom for the Thought That We Hate

Anthony Lewis

A great read that tells the story of how free speech and freedom of the press became baked into American democracy. But the better lesson is that free speech means you actually have to listen to others express themselves even if you disagree with what they're saying. This book is a great reminder that dissent and disagreement are at the core of our nation's democracy. During a time of political disunity, tolerance—but not necessarily agreement—is a good objective to have.

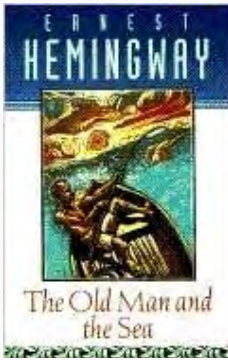


Chad McGinnis

Swift: New and Selected Poems

David Baker

Contemporary poetry, like contemporary art, can sometimes be a real chore to enjoy. Self-referential, overwrought, academic – it's not many people's idea of an enriching read. Suspend these notions and read this recent work by David Baker, which includes new poetry alongside selections from earlier works such as Scavenger Loop and Never-Ending Birds. Baker has a great capacity for combining observation of the pastoral and concrete world around him with intimate human experience – and more often than not, establishing a narrative line that emerges through the verses. Baker's real reverence for language, distilled into poetry, makes his work particularly satisfying to read. This is work that nourishes the reader and the writer.

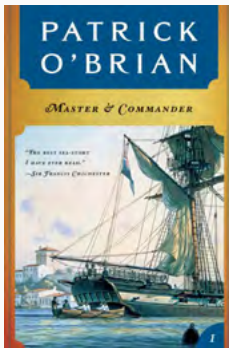


Connor McLaughlin

The Old Man and the Sea

Ernest Hemingway

A classic short story of a battle between an aging, experienced fisherman and a large marlin. Several lessons can be learned from the old man, including the power of perseverance and the simplicity of inner success.

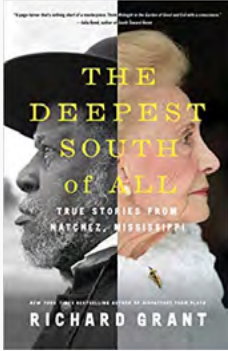


Cortland Mercer

Master & Commander

Patrick O'Brian

My quarantine escape this year was Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey and Maturin series. Set during the Napoleonic wars, the novels follow the adventures of two unlikely friends, Captain Jack Aubrey of His Majesty's Royal Navy and Dr. Stephen Maturin. Though opposite in temperament, the protagonists are brought together from a deep love of music and a shared ambition to stop Napoleon's global conquest. It takes a while to adjust to O'Brian's lengthy prose and nautical jargon – my wife would prefer I'd stop yelling at my dog to 'tack the jib-boom' or 'jury rig the mizzen mast' – but the language is central to what makes these novels so immersive and compelling. When I started reading, I was ready for the roar of cannons, the search for adventure, and the heroic figure that inspired Russell Crowe's character in the film adaptation *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. I found instead an insightful series about the human condition. Richard Snow's 1991 New York Times book review says it best, "on every page O'Brian reminds us the most important of all historical lessons: that times change but people don't, that the griefs and follies and victories of the men and women who were here before us are in fact the maps of our own lives." There are 21 books in the series, so if you start *Master and Commander* now, you may just be able to finish in time for next year's recommendation.

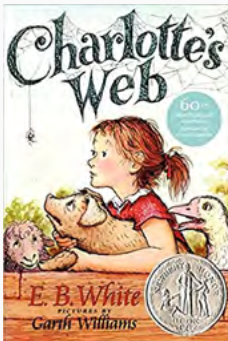


Melissa Gong Mitchell

The Deepest South of All

Richard Grant

When I visited the antebellum mansions in Natchez, Mississippi, on a grade school field trip more than 30 years ago, I was just way too young to comprehend the significance of this Old South town. Now in the year 2020, Richard Grant brings the history, cultural contradictions, and gravity of Natchez into present-day context with colorful narratives and characters. He recognizes that for those who are part of Mississippi's cultural and political evolution, the road is long, the challenges complex, and the answers not always as simple as black and white.



Charlotte's Web

E.B. White

So, I've read this one word for word during the pandemic - three times in fact. This book brings me great joy, not only because my 4-year-old is drawn to the classics or because it takes me back to my own childhood and discovering learning through reading, but also because it's the purest of stories about life, death and friendship. It's just the heartwarming tale we all need in crazy times like these.

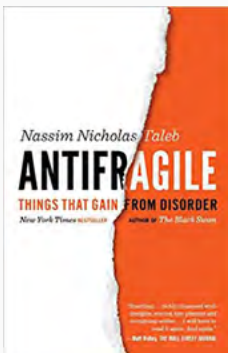


Mario Ottiglio

Maradona

Diego Armando Maradona

Maradona was one of my few heroes when I was a boy. However controversial he was, he was and will always be the best ever interpreter of one of the most beautiful sports. And, for all Neapolitans like me, Maradona was way more than a football player. He was a symbol, the enabler that helped one of the most beautiful and stigmatised cities in Europe in the early 80s to start dreaming again, have a vision, nurture hope for a social, cultural and economic rebirth. All of that, through such a trivial thing like soccer. Maradona was a rebel and a revolutionary. And for me, a manifesto of meritocracy (coming from nowhere and joining the Gods) and at the same time a case-study about the risks of fame and the need to keep focus when things are beyond control. It's a great story overall. He's probably one of the last icons of 20th century, alongside Marilyn, JFK, Muhammad Ali.

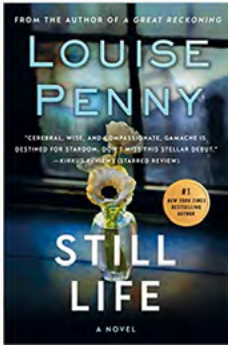


Charles Pennell

Antifragile

Nassim Nicholas Taleb

A great contrarian read. The guy who coined the term "Black Swan" puts together a grand theory for how to withstand, or even thrive from, unpredictable events (like, say, COVID), then deploys that theory to punch holes in conventional wisdom about almost everything.



Katy Schneider Riddick

Still Life

Louise Penny

This is the first of a series of beautifully-crafted series of murder mysteries, better than a beach read but still light and engrossing escapism. Set in Montreal and surrounding villages, the narrative style is exaggerated with rich detail and emotional intensity. Prepare to read this one and then 15 more in the series.

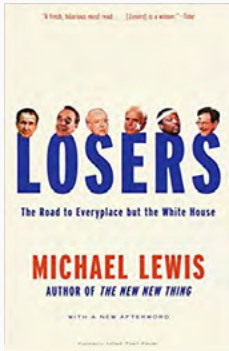


Sophie Robert

Civilizations

Laurent Binet

I got this as a Christmas present when it was published last year. The book is an inverted history—or uchronia—of the world which sees the victory of the Incas over the Conquistadores and their conquest of Europe. “What if,” the author imagines, Vikings had landed in America around the year 1000? “What if,” the horse, the secret of iron and the antibodies that would have made the local populations resistant to European diseases had then been transmitted to the natives? Starting from this beginning, Laurent Binet reverses the course of history. It’s fascinating when you think about the infinite possibilities offered by each moment, private or historical.



Sagar Sane

Losers

Michael Lewis

Lewis flips the script on the post-campaign recap, choosing to chronicle the “losers” of the 1996 GOP primary instead of the leading candidates. In doing so, he carefully exposes the inconsistencies, eccentricities and fatal flaws of the candidates, consultants, activists and voters who participate in this quadrennial charade.

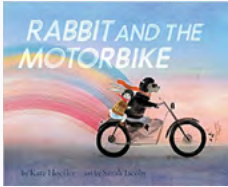


Sam Savin

Meet Me in the Bathroom

Lizzy Goodman

The definitive oral history of the resurgence of rock and roll in NYC during the early 2000s. It's the next best thing to sitting at the bar with Julian Casablancas, Karen O, James Murphy, and others.

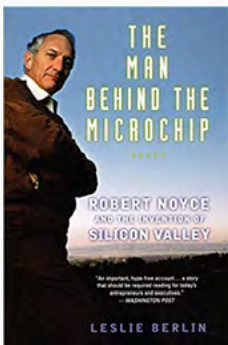


Susan Wile Schwarz

Rabbit and the Motorbike

Kate Hoefler

This has been a tough year, but in the midst of a global pandemic, being grounded in place has actually given rise to a lot of beautiful moments and the opportunity to pause and appreciate all that we had, and all that we have. I will freely admit that I do not think I have read a single adult book this year, but this one was a new and valued addition to our family's library. It quietly and beautifully captures so much about the texture of life and what gives it value and meaning - true friends who see us and accept us for who we are, grand adventure, pushing ourselves out of our comfort zone, and coming home again. I highly recommend. Added bonus: it will only take you 5 minutes to read.



Kevin Stach

The Man Behind the Microchip

Leslie Berlin

How did a preacher's son from a small town in Iowa go on to co-invent the microchip, found two of the most influential technology companies in history, put Silicon Valley on the map, and launch the computer revolution? Find out in Leslie Berlin's fascinating account of Robert Noyce.



Ben Westhoven

WIZZYWIG

Ed Piskor

WIZZYWIG merges the lives of three well known hackers including Kevin Mitnick, Chief Hacking Officer of the security company KnowBe4 (you've probably taken one of their security courses for work). Piskor's graphic novel is an alt-comic's historical depiction of phone phreaking (what the hell is that?), monolithic tech systems (sounds familiar), and the ultimate hack: social engineering (I would never fall for such simple tricks). It's a quick and relevant read.