

Whatcha Readin'?: Summer Flings



Back when summer actually meant a few months of relaxing and down time to New Yorkers, one of the most treasured rituals was the weekly trip to the neighborhood bookstore, to choose a new book (or stack of books) to keep one company at the beach or in the mountains or in the air-conditioned idyll of one's bedroom. In these recent, highly compressed and enervated times, reading has too often gone the way of carbs and cigarettes, as former readers now skim through their Netflix queue, choosing which movies to tote with them to the beach to watch on their portable Samsung DVD L-300. But interviews with some notable New Yorkers and others indicate that reading retains a hint of its former decadence, particularly if one is hefting some fiction or some arcane nonfiction. For example, this summer, Yale professor Harold Bloom is rereading all of James and Faulkner and Whitman. (Yes, that's re-reading.) Tom Wolfe is reading a car magazine to figure out how to Mau-Mau his Cadillac. Or how about architect Frank Gehry, his iPod whispering the complete works of Proust into his ears?

This being America, summer reading tends toward the careerist or the escapist, often bypassing more sublime waters. Note that none of the readers we spoke with had dipped into the new Cormac McCarthy or John Irving or Ian McEwan or Alan Hollinghurst. And is it comforting or distressing to learn that Bill Clinton is reading *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*? Don't we wish he'd just give in and read Jenna Jameson's *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*? (Then again, he's probably seen the movie.) It's also notable that he's carrying around a copy of John McCain's book; pundits are betting Mr. Clinton's wife may find herself running against Mr. McCain in the 2008 Presidential race.

There's a fat chunk of August left; disable your TiVo, throw out that molding stack of New Yorkers, and get thee to a bookstore.

Philip Seymour Hoffman, actor, *Capote*

The Known World by Edward P. Jones and *Under the Banner of Heaven* by Jon Krakauer.

Bill Clinton, former President

Faith of My Fathers by John McCain and Mark Salter
Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism by Robert Pape
Plan B: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble by



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After writing his memoirs, Bill Clinton has plenty of time this summer to read.

Lester Brown

Crusader's Cross: A Dave Robicheaux Novel by James Lee Burke

Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times by H.W. Brands

Heidi Klum, model, mogul

Trees Make the Best Mobiles: Simple Ways to Raise Your Child in a Complex World by Jessica Teich and Brandel France de Bravo: It is a great book for new moms. It's a small book but has some calming, practical ideas about how to keep things simple, trust your instincts and to not stress about the little things but instead, to just enjoy the process of helping your child grow up.

Janet Malcolm, writer, *The Journalist and the Murderer*

Great Expectations by Charles Dickens and Daniel Harris' *Diary of a Drag Queen*: What's not to like?

Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University

I've been rereading all of Henry James and all of Faulkner and all of Whitman in preparation for a book entitled *The Evening Lad*. The subtitle will be "Twelve Writers Who Define America," and they are three of the 12.

Which books of the great authors do you prefer?

For Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying*. For James, the extraordinary novel which everyone has read anyway but is always worth one more reading: *The Portrait of a Lady*. And for Whitman, I would recommend very strongly two little books I wrote the introduction for: the current 150th-anniversary Little Penguin volume of the 1855 original first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and if you combine that with a little *Selected Poems of Whitman*, you pretty much have the heart of Whitman.

And I always regularly reread a book that I wish more people would read: It is by a contemporary writer named John Crowley and it is called *Little, Big*. It is almost literally the most enchanting 20th-century book I know.

Jennifer Egan, writer, *Look at Me*

The Captive and the Fugitive, Volume V of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*: I've been reading Proust slowly with a group of friends over several years. Things bogged down seriously in Volume IV, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, but now they're picking up nicely.

Sam Tanenhaus, editor of *The New York Times Book Review*

With the Mayoral election nearing, I've been reading some oldies: William F. Buckley's *The Unmaking of a Mayor*, about his own high-spirited and sometimes hilarious campaign for the job in 1965; Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot*—the ur-text for that election year; Vincent Cannato's recent book about the Lindsay years, *The Ungovernable City*; and Norman Mailer and Jimmy Breslin's *Running Against the Machine*, about their election bid in 1969.

Given the time-warp conditions of editing a book review, my other "summer" reading actually consists of books not published yet. Some titles of particular interest: Joan Didion's memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*; Benjamin Kunkel's first novel, *Indecision*; and Jed Perl's *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century*.

Amy Sacco, restaurateur, club owner

I am currently reading *Nemesis* by Peter Evans, the same author of the biography *Ari*, all based on the life of Aristotle Onassis. It is all about the theory that Onassis was behind the assassination of Bobby Kennedy in

order to clear his way to marry Jackie O. and seek his revenge against the Kennedy family. Summer is the best time for conspiracy-theory novels ... or is it hidden truth? Maybe that's why it's rumored to be banned in America.

Howard Wolfson, Democratic strategist

In between rereading the previous Harry Potter in anticipation of the new one, I read Fred Siegel's overly laudatory but still useful look at the Giuliani years (*The Prince of the City*), and a pretty damning political biography of George Wallace by Dan Carter. As Democrats who have lost three Mayoral elections in a row and are trailing in a fourth, it's well past time to make our peace with the positive aspects of Rudy's record. Songs about Wallace by the great Alabama band Drive By Truckers prompted me to learn more about him. While political leaders no longer make common cause with the Klan, the anger and alienation Wallace cultivated echo today.

Isaac Mizrahi, fashion designer

I just finished *Them*, which is Francine Du Plessix Gray's book about her monster parents, which is so entertaining. I'm swamped with books about Arthurian legend, because I'm designing an opera of Purcell's, the *King Arthur* which is at English National Opera next spring. I've been reading really boring books like *The Grail: A Casebook*, edited by Dhira Mahoney, and *Arthurian Legend for Dummies* and all kinds of delicious stuff. I just read *The Innocents Abroad* by Mark Twain, and it made me want to go away really badly. I got the new Harry Potter, which I'll devour next week, and then I feel like I have to get into this Edgar Allan Poe that a friend of mine loaned me called *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. I forced the new Murakami (*Kafka on the Shore*, which I adored beyond words) on her and she loved it, so I feel obliged to read her pick. Also, I really love Poe. In snippets, I'm rereading *The Comedy of Errors*, the Shakespeare play, because I was talking about it with a group of friends, making a point about it, when I was embarrassed to find I couldn't remember the storyline. Lovely to be making a heated point about something you've completely forgotten.

Heather Hunter, porn star, rapper

Emotional Blackmail: When the People in Your Life Use Fear, Obligation, and Guilt to Manipulate You by Susan Forward, *Sacred Contracts: Awakening Your Divine Potential* by Caroline Myss, and *XXX: 30 Porn-Star Portraits* by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders.

Tucker Carlson, pundit; talk-show host, *The Situation*

I'm reading Charles Portis, *Masters of Atlantis* and *Norwood*. I have one here with me in the city and the other up in Maine. They're excellent. Next I have *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning* by Jonathan Mahler, but I haven't started it yet.

Mary G. Berner, president and C.E.O., Fairchild Publications

The Historian by Elizabeth Kostova is the new *Da Vinci Code*. It gives quite an interesting historical perspective on the actual historical figure of Dracula. *Towelhead* by Alicia Erian—I thought it was great. *Luckiest Man: The Life & Death of Lou Gehrig* by Jonathan Eig—incredibly compelling read about an incredibly compelling person. *The Closers* by Michael Connelly is great beach reading. And *Winning* by Jack Welch and Suzy Welch—I always take away something from whatever he writes.

Danny Meyer, restaurateur, Union Square Café

Three Nights in August by Buzz Bissinger: As an inveterate St. Louis Cardinals baseball fan, this book is candy of the highest order. It's fun and

gives me an intriguing look at the never-ending thoughts that dance behind Tony La Russa's dark glasses.

Nicholas Kristof, New York Times Op-Ed columnist

I just finished the latest Harry Potter, which was excellent. Before that it was Jasper

Becker's *Rogue Regime*, a good new look at North Korea; *Freakonomics*, which is the first page-turner ever written about economics; and a Lee Child thriller for airplane reading. I'm dipping into Leslie Reagan's *When Abortion Was a Crime*, to help me think about the Supreme Court fight, and an advance copy of *The Health Care Mess*, since I'm struggling to understand health-care economics. I'll shortly be rereading a couple of Shakespeare plays in preparation for my annual visit to the Oregon Shakespearian Festival. Plus, at bedtimes, I've been reading *Heidi* to my 7-year-old daughter.

Louis Begley, writer, *About Schmidt*

J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*, a wondrously brilliant demonstration of the author's skill and intelligence. And Dante Alighieri's *Purgatorio*, which grows more awe-inspiring with each rereading.

Gloria Steinem, feminist, writer

Actually, at this moment, it's not a *new* book—I came to feel that everyone had read it but me, you know? *A Chorus of Stones* by Susan Griffin. Its subtitle is "The Private Life of War," but what she is really doing, in a very deep and creative way, is showing the parallel path of family secrets and government secrets.

Yo-Yo Ma, cellist

Gore Vidal's *Creation* and Jared Diamond's *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*.

Russell Jacoby, professor of history at UCLA; writer, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*

For a bleak period like ours, I find little more bracing than Lewis Mumford's *The Story of Utopias* (1922), a spirited defense of utopian thinking against, well, everyone. Insofar as we have pinned our hopes to current movements for reconstruction or revolution, our plans are sickly and debilitated. For something more recent—and a wonderful read, and completely appropriate for a list of recommended books that only spreads guilt inasmuch as few of us will obtain the bruted books—pick up the slender *So Many Books: Reading and Publishing in an Age of Abundance*, by the Mexican writer Gabriel Zaid. This is worth the price of admission, if only because he eases our guilt in acquiring books and not reading them, and he eases the pain of those of us who write books that find few readers. But it is more than that—a meditation on why we love books even as we love our laptops. Next to Zaid, I am looking at Yuri Slezkine's *The Jewish Century*, which is a perfect match—bigger and denser, but also provocative and thoughtful: "Modernization is about everyone becoming Jewish," and guess what? "No one is better at being Jewish than the Jews themselves." With Mumford, Zaid and Slezkine, I am set. So will you be.

Jay McInerney, writer, *Bright Lights, Big City*

Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George* (the "Arthur" of the title being Conan Doyle), which is probably his most engrossing novel ever and definitely his longest. And unlike some recent novels by my friends, I can read it safe in the knowledge that I don't appear as a character in it.

Viola Davis, actress, *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*

The Historian by Elizabeth Kostova, and Harry Potter. Also, *The Human*

Stain by Philip Roth—a great character study. I have to stick with it, you know, because he's just despicable, but there are a few times when I just lose all empathy for him.

Jonathan Franzen, writer, *The Corrections*

I've just finished reading the second issue of the new journal *n+1* basically cover to cover—something I almost never do with any magazine. I especially enjoyed a novella-length, terrifically funny essay on Isaac Babel and modern Babel scholarship by a woman named Elif Batuman, and a smart, affecting riff on J.M. Coetzee by the smart, affecting young novelist Benjamin Kunkel. Just when you're thinking you're intellectually alone in the world, something like *n+1* falls in your hands.

Amy Sedaris, writer, comedian, *Strangers with Candy*

I just picked up *A Private Family Matter* by Victor Rivas Rivers. It's about domestic violence. The father is so evil and mean. I like reading about domestic violence; it takes my mind off lots of stuff. Whenever my brother David calls, I immediately get books he recommends—like *Monkeys* by Susan Minot. I always run out to get them. He also recommended *Random Family: Love, Drugs, Trouble, and Coming of Age in the Bronx* by Adrian Nicole LeBlanc—one of the best books I ever read.

Other books I've recently read:

A Changed Man by Francine Prose.

Blue Angel by Francine Prose—flawless, perfect.

The Glass Castle: A Memoir by Jeannette Walls—I like reading about the poor. I'm from North Carolina. She writes really good poor.

Lost in the Forest by Sue Miller.

Under and Alone by William Queen.

Frank Gehry, architect

What makes you think I read? I just finished the new translation of *Don Quixote*. The new one gets closer to the real Spanish humor than the old one. My wife is Panamanian, so she's clued me in a little. And I'm reading *A Confederacy of Dunces*. It's very strange.

I'm also listening to *The Iliad*. I put all the books in my iPod. I have one iPod that has the complete works of Proust, and I take that with me—when I'm depressed, I listen to it. And I try not to read architecture books.

Tom Wolfe, writer, *I Am Charlotte Simmons*

Maggie: A Girl of the Streets by Stephen Crane. If Stephen Crane hadn't died at the age of 29, he would have been remembered as a giant. I'm literally rummaging around my desk to see what exciting things I have here *The Abs Diet* by David Zinczenko. Here's the thing: I never really had sharply defined abs, even when I was an athlete. I always wanted them to look like a cobblestone street. That was before six-packs; they didn't have six-packs, but they did have cobblestone streets. My wife said, "You have cobblestone streets, but they've been paved over." Here's a real barn-burner: *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by Keith Thomas. This has to do with what I hope to write: a history of the last 1,000 years of the world in 98 pages. It was going to be 100 pages, but 98 sounds so much shorter, don't you think? No one is interested in this book but me. There's a book called *Status Anxiety*; the fellow has kind of a French name. [Alain de Botton.] That's another thing I want to write—a book about status

And *Hemmings Motor News*, which is a thick periodical—this one I'm looking at is 672 pages. It's full of ways to either fix up old cars or do things with new cars This is all part of my desire and attempt to, as they now say, pimp my ride. I have a Cadillac DeVille, which people think

of as a stodgy old-people's car, but I have the intention to show people that this is a sensational old-people's car once I pimp it.

JT LeRoy, writer, *Sarah: A Novel*

I am reading *Telegraph Messenger Boys: Labor, Technology, and Geography, 1850-1950* by Gregory J. Downey. David Milch, writer and creator of *Deadwood*, gave me the book.

Edward Hayes, lawyer

Oh, God knows I love to read. First of all, I have been reading Barbara Nadel's series—*Belshazzar's Daughter*, *Arabesk*, *1759*—about when the British became the primary world power. *The Watcher in the Pine* by Rebecca Pawel—it's like an Indian name, but she's not Indian, she's from New York. It's a new mystery about a Spanish detective after the Civil War. Oh! Oh! I know who else I read who was terrific! Derek Raymond! He wrote a book called something like *He Died with His Eyes Open* or something. That was very good.

Erica Jong, writer, *Fear of Flying*

I was in Provence, and we were staying in a tiny town called Grillon, and it was right near the castle of Grignan. And that's where Mme. de Sevigny's daughter lived with her husband, and that's where her mother came and wrote many of those famous letters. Since the first thing we did was go to the castle, I picked up a Penguin edition of the letters of Mme. De Sevigny and I read them. And they're pretty juicy. And they're letters by a woman of a certain age, giving advice to her married daughter and a ton of other people. She knew Voltaire. She seems to have had flirtations with all the great men of her age. She had a famous salon in Paris. She was also a bitchy mother, I think, who wanted her daughter to do absolutely everything she said. And of course her daughter wouldn't.

And then I started reading the memoir of Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun was the court painter to Marie Antoinette. And when Marie Antoinette lost her head to the guillotine, *somehow* Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun managed to escape to the court of Russia. I keep thinking her life would make an incredible musical comedy or movie.

Michael Ian Black, actor, *Stella*

I just finished reading *My Friend Leonard* by James Frey. If you like books about recovering alcoholics who befriend gay Mafia kingpins, this is the book for you. Also, just picked up *In the Little World: A True Story of Dwarfs, Love, and Trouble* by John Richardson. The title pretty much explains my interest in this book. And a friend just gave me the Richard Grieco biography by Grace Catalano. So I'll be holed up in my Hamptons estate for weeks to come with that.

Neal Pollack, writer, *Never Mind the Pollacks*

We Need to Talk About Kevin—that was really good. It was probably the best of the why-did-Columbine-happen novels. I have this big stack of books from Hard Case Crime, which is this publisher that is doing reprints of pulp novels. I have a Ross Macdonald book on my nightstand ... he'd be familiar for anyone who knows the genre. *Fat City*—it's a book about boxers in Northern California by Leonard Gardner. My reading list doesn't really have a very logical order to it.

Ann Patchett, writer, *Truth and Beauty*

The Edge of Maine by Geoffrey Wolff—I've been a huge Geoffrey Wolff fan ever since his brilliant book, *Duke of Deception*. I would read his grocery list. So while I had no particular interest in the coast of Maine going into this, I have to say I'm finding the whole thing riveting. This book has everything: history, geography, economics, gentrification and

sailing. It was also the closest I'm going to get to a summer rental in Maine.

Michael Musto, writer, gossip columnist

When Blanche Met Brando: The Scandalous Story of "A Streetcar Named Desire" by Sam Staggs. I'm loving it—maybe because I'm a total gay stereotype. It's a quick read and easy to absorb. You don't even have to buy it; you can just stand there reading it in the bookstore.

David Brooks, New York Times Op-Ed columnist

For earnest self-improvement, I'm reading Donald Kagan's *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*. For political fun, I'm reading Evan Thomas' excellent biography of Robert Kennedy. For plane and beach reading, I've got Daniel Silva's smart thriller *Prince of Fire*, and in my efforts to shoot under 100, I'm reading *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Golf*.

Francine Prose, writer, *A Changed Man*

I am reading a first-edition Mavis Gallant collection—stories and a short novel—that I found in the local library sale on Saturday. It's called *My Heart Is Broken*, it was published in 1964, and it is the best thing that I have ever read.

Rob Corddry, comedian, *The Daily Show*

I'm reading books about New York City in the 70's. I just finished *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning* and I'm about to start *Blackout*. I've been chasing them with the Ric Burns documentary *New York*. I was six in 1977, and my parents drove through New York City once on our way to Maryland. They said, "Bobby, how do you like New York?" and I said, "Dirty." I've been waiting for these books to be written ever since. I can't put them down; they're like crack—though I guess that's a very 80's reference. They're like anonymous sex and cocaine.

—Compiled by Michael Grynbaum, Anna Lindow, Raquel Hecker,
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