Summer reading runs the gamut from plot-driven thrillers to compelling character studies, from nature treatises to historical narratives. This newsletter represents a small and select sampling of some of the staff’s favorite recent books. Here you won’t find the latest bestsellers and other books for which we’ve held events—not because we don’t favor them, but because we wanted to call your attention to some lesser-known titles that we like very much. In a season of big political books by such personalities as Elizabeth Warren and Hillary Clinton—or simply big books like The Goldfinch—we hope you’ll have a chance to look at some of these fine works, whether you’re planning an exotic vacation or a quiet staycation.

**SHORT FICTION FOR LONG SUMMER DAYS**

*American Innovations* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $24), *Rivka Galchen’s* astonishing debut short-story collection, is smart, slyly funny, and usually at least a bit off-kilter. In the opening story, “The Lost Order,” a woman answers her phone and, rather than tell the caller that he’s dialed the wrong number, takes the man’s order for Chinese food delivery. The title story is an homage to Gogol’s “The Nose”; in this version, a woman comes home from abroad to discover that she’s grown a breast on her back. In “Wild Berry Blue,” a girl having breakfast with her dad at McDonald’s encounters her first love, a heavily tattooed, recovering drug addict working behind the counter. Galchen’s stories can be strange and mysterious, but it’s difficult to read them without grinning and marveling at her charm, imagination, and command of language. *Mark LaFramboise*
Lydia Davis’s stories are dreams. They’re also letters and lists, animal fables and obituaries; others recount episodes from Flaubert’s life. Her stories—but are they stories? Can’t and Won’t (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $26), the cannily defiant eighth book of fiction by the noted translator freshens the world and teases the imagination, as stories do; though Davis is as apt to use crisp observations and tart comments as she is recognizable plots to achieve this end, she is also meticulous in recreating scenes of daily life. This very precision is marvelously suggestive: why exactly these details? Are any essential to shaping a life, or are they all more or less arbitrary? Change one—and new plots, new characters, new stories will emerge. Along with hints of such untold tales, Davis has a delightful and disarming brand of wordplay; a story about an odd crime—the disappearance of salamis—turns into a parable of identity theft when news reports call the salamis “sausages.” Then there’s the meticulous journal of how three cows in a neighboring field spend their days—a rumination on ruminants. Laurie Greer

The nine stories of Francesca Marciano’s The Other Language (Pantheon, $24.95) feature characters in foreign lands during transitional times in their lives. In one, a middle-aged married couple on holiday in India makes spontaneous decisions that affect the rest of their lives. In another a recently divorced woman has just purchased a house in a small Italian village; hoping for serenity, she is instead confronted by her fractured familial relationships, an eccentric villager with a remarkable talent, and a movie star who just won’t go away. The collection perfectly encapsulates the bittersweet, lonely feeling of traveling or living abroad. Marciano is a natural storyteller, and reading her work is like listening to a friend talk about people she knows. As well as being conversational, Marciano’s language has an almost cinematic quality—I was utterly engrossed in each scene as it played out before me. Whether you’re going on vacation or just dreaming about one, I can’t imagine a more atmospheric book to accompany and inspire you. I simply love this book. Janice Leadingham
A father who disciplines his daughter “looked as if he’d been sent all the bills in the world and couldn’t pay them.” A little girl “sounded small and strange, as if she lived in a fairy tale”; in fact she does live in a fairy tale, and by its rules, she is perfectly normal. In such lines, New Zealand’s Janet Frame crystallized whole lives, and her short stories, in turn, encapsulate much larger narratives. Frame’s characters are generally outsiders; they’re poor, ill, or disenfranchised by some perceived oddness. But they are not passive. Frame describes one woman as having “a kind of helplessness” in her eyes that “would change in a flash to defiance.” The two dozen works in Between My Father and the King (Counterpoint, $15.95) are stories of that flash. Frame (1924-2004) was institutionalized herself (saved from a lobotomy by winning a writing award) and she questions authority by showing how even those who have it—the rich, the doctors—are subject to fate’s reversals. Frame has tremendous empathy as well as imagination, and her brilliant portrayals of life from the perspectives of children and patients show how these marginalized individuals supplement their partial understanding of reality with dreams, myths, and stories, creating for themselves alternate realities that may collide with the accepted one, but that may also allow them to thrive. Laurie Greer
From The Girl in the Flammable Skirt to Willful Creatures, the fiction writer Aimee Bender has proven herself a master of the short story. The fifteen meticulously crafted pieces in her latest collection, The Color Master (Anchor, $15), feature characters such as a woman who mends the torn-apart flesh of tigers and a child who cannot recognize other people’s faces—figures that provoke an elegant disquiet. Enter Bender’s spare, strange, and often heartbreakingly lovely small worlds, and when you re-emerge, it’s with something fundamentally shifted. Bender is that rare writer who can achieve much with few words—just one quality which makes this work so compelling, important, and utterly enjoyable. Angela Maria Spring

A writer as prolific as Edna O’Brien—author of novels, short stories, plays, screenplays, and biographies—whose first book appeared in 1960, when she was thirty, and her latest just last year, would seem to have little time for anything else. But this Country Girl (Back Bay, $16) has traveled widely and hobnobbed with the best and the brightest. Her memoir moves at a steady clip from her upbringing in an archetypal Irish town, complete with a hard-drinking father, a stern mother, sterner priests, and a local Mad Mable, and on to her “gallivanting years,” which included eloping at age seventeen. Two sons and a string of literary successes followed, along with a short-lived marriage to a man who listened in on her phone calls and demanded she sign her earnings over to him. All this makes for great stories, and they’re told by a master; it also leads O’Brien to reflect on “the mystery about writing: it comes out of the afflictions, out of the gouged times, when the heart is cut open.” Laurie Greer
**Bright Summer Novels**

**Falling Out of Time** (Knopf, $24.95) unfolds somewhere between folk tale, Greek tragedy, and a brilliant and innovative novel. Its structure, too, is multifaceted, with elements of prose, poetry, and drama combining for a narrative about strength and despair in the face of the loss of a child. The odd, eclectic characters that populate these pages—mothers, fathers, a net mender, a midwife, a chronicler, a centaur—also inhabit a liminal region somewhere between the present and the past. Though they must continue to live their daily lives, these characters cling to the past, the only place where the child still lives. **David Grossman**, author of *To the End of the Land*, movingly explores the territory of mourning and the complex passage through grief. His language (translated from the Hebrew by Jessica Cohen) is by turns haunting, funny, and insightful; it intensifies, dissolves, and then resolves as the story progresses. Frequently, I found myself reading pages aloud; you'll want to do the same. **Anna Thorn**

Whether considered an episodic narrative or a series of linked stories, **Simon Van Booy**’s bittersweet second novel highlights the degrees of separation between people and, in the same breath, collapses them. Set in various years from 1937 to 2011 and ranging among France, Britain, and the East and West coasts of the U.S., **The Illusion of Separateness** (Harper Perennial, $14.99) really takes place where memory and imagination overlap; one character recounts his experiences and another picks up the threads, inventing plausible scenarios to fill the gaps in the stories she grew up with. Most of these stories center on John Bray, an American World War II pilot, his family, friends, and the strangers their lives touch, often in profound and surprising ways. Van Booy is unfailingly compassionate to his characters and they return the favor to each other, finding ways to redeem a painful and destructive world. **Laurie Greer**

**Kristopher Jansma**’s original and unusual novel, **The Unchangeable Spots of Leopards** (Penguin, $16), is akin to a journey through a hall of mirrors. On the surface, it’s the dazzling life-story of an aspiring writer. Entranced by his best friends—perpetually successful, witty, beautiful, and creatively modernist—the unnamed narrator turns their exploits into the foundations of his own stories. But does he unfairly idealize these unwitting muses? Is he plagiarizing not their work, but their lives? And if so, does this make his work fraudulent? From chapter to chapter, names and relationships change, until the reader can no longer discern what is “real” from what is imagined—which leaves only the truth that appropriation is ultimately disastrous. **Andrew Getman**
In Susan Choi’s fourth work of fiction, Regina recounts the lessons she learned outside of class. *My Education* (Penguin, $16) starts with the twenty-one-year-old graduate student enrolling in a course taught by the magnetic, roguish, English Professor, Nicholas Brodeur, whose non-academic reputation precedes him. Hoping to learn more about him, Regina soon manages to become his graduate assistant. Choi lays the ground for a classic naïve student/older professor affair, but Regina instead falls in love with Brodeur’s wife, Martha. The women embark on a reckless, passionate relationship that threatens to overtake not only Regina’s education, but her very life and sense of self. Yet as Regina gets more obsessed with Martha—a process Choi evokes with vivid and steamy detail—she loses perspective of what love means. It’s not until fifteen years later, when she looks back to tell the story, that Regina fully understands what she experienced—and learned—with Martha. Susan Skirboll

Guiding you through this slim modern saga is Valdimar Haraldsson, the eccentric, pompous author of *Fisk og Kultur*, a seventeen-volume work on the link between fish consumption and the superiority of the Nordic race (set in 1949, the book is suggestive, but never explicitly moralistic). From Valdimar’s self-important and sometimes oblivious perspective, we follow a Danish merchant ship across the Black Sea. During the voyage, second mate Caeneus regales the passengers with tales from his time with Jason on the quest for the Golden Fleece. Caeneus weaves his increasingly fantastic stories into the daily life of the current expedition, blurring the boundary between myth and truth. *The Whispering Muse* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $12), the third novel(la) by the Icelandic writer Sjon, succeeds at both the surface level of a quirky, satirical story and a deeper, darker exploration of cultures and peoples. Anna Thorn

Kent Wascom’s impressive debut historical novel, *The Blood of Heaven* (Grove, $16), features Angel Woolsack, orphan son of a roving “preacher-father” who believes sucking on coals is the only proper penance for one’s transgressions. As Angel grows up he discovers—as do his brothers-in-crime, Samuel and Reuben—that he has as much talent for raising hell as he does for proselytizing against it. Together, he and his partners attempt to carve out their own chunk of West Florida territory, much as a butcher carves meat. Forget what your history books taught you—Wascom’s anarchic vision of America’s tumultuous adolescence is one of Manifest Destiny by any means necessary, be it genocide, enslavement, pillage, or preaching. *The Blood of Heaven* unleashes all the energy of a tent revival, the suspense of a midnight raid, and the heady, intoxicating speechifying of a poet on pay-day for a thrilling read that puts us face-to-face with our early outlaw past. Pat Brennan

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My pick for the must-read book of the season, **Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See*** (Scribner, $27), opens on the Breton coast in the days just following D-Day. Marie-Laure is a blind French girl who escaped from Paris with her father but is alone while Allied planes drop leaflets and German artillery batters the town of Saint-Malo. Werner, a young German radio operator, is trapped in the basement of a bombed-out building just blocks away. Doerr’s exquisitely plotted novel traces the paths of Marie-Laure and Werner from childhood to their inevitable meeting. Short chapters move the story at a brisk pace, and Doerr’s unerring eye for detail makes the book hard to put down and impossible to forget. *Mark LaFramboise*

In his second novel, **Adam Foulds**, one of *Granta*’s Best Young British Novelists and the author of the Booker-nominated *The Quickening Maze*, plunges readers into the thick of the action as American and British troops close down World War II in Africa and Sicily. Foulds’s narrative is episodic, with prose that flashes like the bullets and explosions it evokes; grim scenes are sharply noted—as when a man suddenly becomes a “body full of incomprehensible space”—and the troops move on, “catching up with the battlefield.” When the Allies reach Sicily, where *In the Wolf’s Mouth* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $26) is slang for “good luck,” the soldiers’ perspectives are joined by those of princes, peasants, and thugs; with the world war out of the way, the local battle for Sicily goes into high gear, and the traditional feudal system gives way to the Mafia. Speaking for the latter is Ciro Albanese—a truly scary character. Naturally brutal, he becomes breathtakingly ruthless as he returns to his village from America to claim what’s his. *Laurie Greer*

**Paris Illuminated: December 7 – December 13**

Winters in Paris are typically mild and the perfect time to visit the City of Light. This is not group travel as you know it; there will be no clambering onto busses or jamming en masse into touristy restaurants. Whether or not you’ve been to Paris before, you’ll get to know the city in a more intimate way. View the itinerary: www.politics-prose.com/winter-paris
We live in a golden age of comics. Graphic memoirs, novels, histories, literary criticism, and good old-fashioned comic strips are thriving like never before, and this fascinating collection features examples of each. Running the gamut of notable cartoonists from Scott McCloud to Alison Bechdel to Chris Ware and many others, Outside the Box (Univ. of Chicago, $26) contains twelve interviews, three of them not previously published, between Hillary Chute and these innovative artists. The conversations let you in on the stories behind the stories; you earn about the artists’ different perspectives, glimpse the rich graphics community, and come to understand the past, present, and future of graphics. Each chapter features several examples of a cartoonist’s work or inspirations, adding up to seventy illustrations altogether. Tracking the ascent of comics from the 1940s to today, this anthology is great for comics buffs and novices alike. Anna Thorn

From the brilliant minds at Tin House and the mighty pen of Allen Crawford comes a brilliant portrait of the catalog of human godliness and failing that was Walt Whitman's work. Whitman Illuminated: Song of Myself (Tin House, $28.95) is the defining poem of the American ideal of individualism, illustrated in the manner of a medieval manuscript. The colorful artwork, however, doesn’t stay in the margins, but entwines and interacts with the text. While this may not afford the easiest reading experience, it is an experience, one true to Whitman's playful, iconoclastic, and dynamic spirit. Engage with Song of Myself through this kinetic illumination, and the other senses evoked in the poem—the scents of the grass, the brushes against skin, the sound of the cries of the American people—all blossom, revealing themselves anew. Hannah Depp
Summer lethargy often inspires the greatest adventures or the worst tragedies—or both. In *Visitation Street* (Dennis Lehane Books, $15.99) June and Val look to escape the sun-baked oven of their Red Hook neighborhood with a nocturnal rafting trip. The next morning, Val washes ashore alone and dazed—with no idea where June is. What happens next affects the entire community in several different ways. One local merchant tries to unite the neighborhood. Richard, who rescued Val, takes an uncomfortable stock of his past failures. Meanwhile, Val is left desperately praying for a miracle to bring back her friend. *Visitation Street* is the second book published under Dennis Lehane’s imprint and, like the accomplished literary mystery writer, *Ivy Pochoda* makes the setting as much a character as the people. Red Hook’s crumbling warehouses, creaking docks, and the smells of diesel and salt water combine to create a symphony for the senses. This is a rare mystery that entrances us with its sense of place while keeping us engaged in its suspenseful tale. *Pat Brennan*

The *Enigma of China* (Minotaur Books, $15.99) is that its business practices are called socialist, but are in reality capitalist, materialist, and driven by corrupt cronynism. In addition, as the Hirshhorn’s recent Ai Weiwei exhibit instructed us, metaphor is a crucial tool for art in a land where images and words are closely monitored and censored. *Qiu Xiaolong*’s Inspector Chen Cao explores this theme, bringing a poet’s sensitivity to the art of detection when he must be extremely careful not to cross his superiors. This is all the more dangerous when the apparent suicide of a disgraced party leader may actually be murder. *Andrew Getman*

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Lexicon (Penguin, $16), Max Barry’s heart-racing and thought-provoking futuristic thriller, will have you looking at words in a whole new way. Combining recent neurological discoveries with the far older knowledge that language has a deep and abiding power, Barry constructs an ingenious maze for the no-privacy age—a puzzle worthy of some future Indiana Jones. Pulsating on the edge of paranoia, Lexicon unfolds a scenario reminiscent of the Tower of Babel, one that is rooted in our current age of digital media. Into this story—which takes place uncomfortably close, in an exclusive Arlington, Virginia, school—Emily and Wil, recently graduated “poets” of a particular sort, prepare to engage in the next war of the words.

Paige works in the black market and what she trades in is magic; her specialty involves scouring other people’s minds for information. Alarming as this is, it is far less disturbing than the world of 2059 which, suspicious of magic, locks up those that possess it, forcing Paige and her kind into an outlaw existence. The Bone Season (Bloomsbury, $17) is the first installment of a new series by the exciting young Oxford author Samantha Shannon, and when the action enters those hallowed halls, it makes moves that will cause you to spend your hard-earned vacation hours turning these pages—tracking the secret societies, brutal hierarchy, and the magic that summons our most ancient understanding of the mythic while coexisting in a world of tablets and human programming. The Bone Season and its sequels will surely take you on an exceptional journey.

Section by Hannah Depp
In his latest collection of essays, *I Wear the Black Hat: Grappling with Villains (Real and Imagined)* (Scribner, $16), the inimitable free-thinker Chuck Klosterman delivers an unconventional commentary on culturally relativist assumptions that define our lives. The book is about celebrity, adulation, abstraction, guilt, mockery, demonization, and how society’s worst impulses are safely played out in our villains (and heroes). His wide-ranging subjects include: NWA and Lars von Trier; O.J. Simpson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar; Charles Bronson and Bernhard Goetz; and, of course, Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Mao Tse-tung – and David Bowie. Don’t take things for granted! Think about what you believe! Grapple with Mr. Klosterman’s intellect and see if your opinions hold up. Andrew Getman

Aficionados of American culture and Anglophiles alike can rejoice: *Across the Pond* (W.W. Norton, $14.95) is more than “an Englishman’s view of America.” Terry Eagleton, one of the most influential literary critics of recent decades, is the ideal guide to everything idiosyncratic about our beloved country, especially those things the natives never bother to notice. What makes American-British relations so fascinating is just how close we are to each other—and yet how very far. Taking this distance as a starting point, Eagleton is a passionate observer, a wit, and a Brit who’s determined to get at the roots of the oddities, niceties, and just slightly off-ness of American life (at least, as his compatriots see it). Now, if only he could explain Benedict Cumberbatch…. Perhaps in his next book. Hannah Depp
Along with many other biological imperatives, *The Homing Instinct* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, $27) shapes the lives of nearly all animals. Noted biologist and author Bernd Heinrich looks at a range of birds, insects, and mammals, considering what home—as both noun and verb—means to each. "We have learned much,” he reports, and vividly describes how butterflies align their inner compass with the earth’s magnetic field—a field some birds can probably see—while night-fliers navigate by the North Star and seabirds map a kind of landscape in what to us is a watery monotony. Still, for all the observations of bees’ and cranes’ dances and the prodigious distances migratory species travel to return at the same time to the same pinpoint of ground every year, these glimpses have “left us with the mysterious, magical, and miraculous.” Heinrich preserves the magic even as he illuminates the experiments scientists have devised for investigating how living creatures, including Homo sapiens, find and make homes. In one of the greatest of these we “went to the moon but saw the Earth instead.” Laurie Greer

An award–winning writer even before publishing a book, Amy Leach has a fresh, vital approach to nonfiction in general and to the natural world in particular. Her debut collection of essays, *Things That Are* (Milkweed, $15), immediately evokes Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* in its wide-eyed ebullience and genre–pushing meditations on flora and fauna. Rife with humor, and treating scientific fact with a playful spirit, Leach infuses her poetic prose with a whimsical effervescence that lends buoyancy to her thoughts and conjectures. Leach’s essays range among pea plants and panda bears, sea cucumbers and lilies, to consider the expanses of the cosmos. You’ll find yourself snorting with delight, reaching for the dictionary, and seeing the wild world anew. Lila Stiff

Like the diversity it celebrates, Eric Dinerstein’s tour of *The Kingdom of Rarities* (Island Press, $24.99) is many wonderful things at once. Dinerstein, World Wildlife Fund chief scientist, visited regions “where rarity is common,” traveling from Michigan and the Andes to the Himalayas and Hawaii as part of the organization’s efforts to nurture vulnerable wildlife; together these reports have the trajectory of a spiritual quest as Dinerstein realizes that “the global conservation crisis is ultimately a spiritual crisis in disguise.” This account is also a double adventure story, following scientists’ harrowing treks into mountains and rainforests as well as the struggles of the plants and animals themselves to survive climate change, industry, poachers, introduced species, and other threats. Approaching these sites as a rigorous scientist but also as someone who simply revels in the looks, sounds, smells, and colors of nature, Dinerstein vividly describes species you’ve likely never encountered—the kouprey, the golden langur, the silversword—and he makes you want to. Whether rare because of dwindling populations or because their range is naturally narrow, these creatures contribute much to the “gross national happiness,” as Bhutan puts it, of the world at large. Laurie Greer
In his latest book, Michael Pollan, known for advocating eating well and reasonably, praises the act of cooking itself. *Cooked* (Penguin, $17) is not the first paean to cooking and its societal value, but Pollan’s description of transforming ingredients into meals makes the whole process feel sacred. Further, he describes the void in our frantic schedules when food becomes a chore to be outsourced to restaurants and frozen dinners. To solve this problem, Pollan argues, we should become familiar with the four ways of cooking food. Keyed to the elements, these are grilling (fire), boiling (water), baking (air) and fermentation (earth). Devoting a section to each mode, Pollan guides readers through its history and culture, with special attention to its culinary masters. Not a book of recipes (there is one recipe per element) *Cooked* is inspiration to get back into the kitchen. The satisfaction of turning the Earth’s bounty into something to be enjoyed and shared with loved ones is a uniquely human gift. What could be better? Jenny Clines

Before you hit the farmers’ markets, tuck a copy of *Eating on the Wild Side* (Little, Brown, $16) in that canvas bag. Food activist Jo Robinson has crunched thousands of scientific studies and nutrition lab analyses for this perspective-shifting and practical guide to fresh foods. Through some four-hundred farming generations (!), humans have developed crops on the basis of taste, appearance, and disease-resistance, paying little mind to their nutritional content. More recently, industrial processing and transportation have required that foods be durable, whether nutritional or not; spinach, for instance, “superfood” though it is, has eight times fewer antioxidants than the dandelion leaves blighting our yards. As we can’t—and won’t—all forage in Rock Creek, Robinson offers practical ways of tapping into the “wild side” of our groceries and markets, recommending specific varieties of produce along with tips on storing and preparing them for maximum nutritional value. And if you garden, better yet! Robinson has invaluable information on selecting seeds. Lila Stiff
Whether you are new to the nation’s capital or have lived here all your life, there’s much to learn from Howard Youth’s *Field Guide to the Natural World of Washington, D.C.* (Johns Hopkins Univ., $24.95). An ideal hostess or housewarming gift, this book deserves to be consulted year-round and city-wide; it’s everything the title promises. Starting with a natural history of the region, this information-packed volume proceeds to a comprehensive listing of park networks and forests, with maps and logistical details. Delightful, detailed watercolors by Mark Klingler (themselves complemented by the photographs of Robert Mumford) survey area birds, mammals, invertebrates, trees, flowers, mushrooms, and geological formations. The book particularly emphasizes the contribution of each species to the area’s ecosystem, guiding new and seasoned observers through the breadth of nature resplendent in our city. Lila Stiff

As a president of Standard Oil, Henry Folger made millions but borrowed constantly to buy rare books and relics related to Shakespeare. He and his wife Emily, whose Vassar Master’s thesis analyzed Shakespearean texts, lived frugally aside from the odd $50,000 or $35,000 shelled out for quartos or lutes. For the Folgers, *Collecting Shakespeare* (Johns Hopkins Univ., $29.95) was a passion. Henry began his collection in 1889 with a 1685 Fourth Folio; he spent $107.50. Eventually the couple behind D.C.’s Shakespeare Library acquired 92,000 books; eighty-two of these were First Folios, printed in 1623. But numbers tell only one story; Stephen H. Grant’s chronicle relates many others—as do those First Folios, each with its unique provenance and marginalia. In a plaint familiar to all bibliophiles, Folger lamented not having time to read his books; he pored over more auction catalogs than plays, and until the library was built in 1932, his acquisitions stayed in storage. But the Folgers always intended their collection to serve scholars, and if Henry died before he wrote his own book, his collection—“his gift to the nation”—has been invaluable for thousands of researchers. Laurie Greer

Celebrating the second volume of *District Lines*, an anthology of original work by established and emerging writers published by Politics & Prose on Opus, our book printing machine. Available in June. Join us for a reading from the new issue on June 21 at 3:30 p.m.
To go somewhere with **Brian Benson** is a downhill coast, albeit winding, complete with diesel exhaust and all the saddle cramps one can endure in a two-thousand-mile bike trek—all the while trying to find the meaning of place and the where, how, and why we fit in with it. **Going Somewhere** (Plume, $16) is part memoir, part American travelogue, part summer explosion of twenty-something love, and all soul-searching life-quest that propels us to move forward, to reassess, and to reclaim, our own ambitions. Pedal by pedal. In this ode to visceral storytelling, we journey with Brian and Rachel from Wisconsin to Portland on the seats of two Fuji road bikes. The couple’s exploration of path and place challenges the notion of what it means to be a cliché millennial—that restlessness and commitment, travel and aspiration, tenderness and love are perpetual and also unattainable. Rather, this embodiment is steady to the course. Their course, a millennial course, is all the reader to be made. **Nicholas Price**

**Italian Ways** (W.W. Norton, $15.95) **Tim Parks** takes the Italian railroad region by region, telling the country’s history by that of its railway. His engaging and informative tour includes a look at nonsensical laws that are as frequently enforced as they are blatantly ignored, and the political and economic implications of the controversial form of transportation (yes, controversial!). From the tickets that state they require stamping but in fact don’t, to the Sicily-bound train that has to be dismantled, carriage by carriage (a twelve-hour process), and ferried to the island because there is no bridge, the reader sees what Parks means when he says that “Italy is not for beginners.” All this is riveting, and Parks makes the book unputdownable with his own personal accounts of traveling by Italian rail. Here are first-hand glimpses homecoming soldiers smothered in maternal kisses and the loud and boisterous soccer fans waving team flags from the windows—you will walk away from this book with a few laughs and a deeper understanding of Italy’s people and culture. **Janice Leadingham**

**The Sea Inside** (Melville House, $27.99) takes up Ishmael’s project of seeking out the meaning of “that marvelous painting,” the ocean. **Philip Hoare**, author of the definitive **The Whale**, has written a book shimmering with sea scenes, sea-faring legends, personal experiences, science, history—and even action shots of breaching whales and charming pen-and-ink drawings. Hoare explores oceans worldwide, starting with exuberant pre-dawn swims (in all seasons) in the industrial waters off his native Southampton, and moves on to dives close by the blue whales of Sri Lanka and amid pods of dolphins near New Zealand. His fascination with all things aquatic leads to dazzling essays on the largest of leviathans and the smallest of porpoises, as well as devastating accounts of the many creatures we’ve driven into extinction. There are also lively profiles of islands and islanders, particularly the Maori, who recognize “no demarcation between the life of the land and that of the ocean”; it’s all home, as it is also for Hoare. **Laurie Greer.**
PLAY SOCCER

Where did Ronaldo learn his signature shuffle? Who first developed the Brazilian style? And why are Italian fans called tifosi? Get ready for World Cup fever by reading *Who Invented the Bicycle Kick?: Soccer’s Greatest Legends and Lore* (Wm. Morrow, $14.99), by Paul Simpson and Uli Hesse. This compact book, packed with trivia, will regale you with everything you always wanted to know—and never knew you were missing—about the global history of soccer. Heroes and bad boys; personalities and hidden talents; unforgettable matches and unbelievable shots; original maneuvers and unusual nicknames; curses and streaks—it’s all in here. Andrew Getman

MOVIES...

Decades before the long-form internet podcast, Henry Jaglom taped his daily meals at Ma Maison with Orson Welles. Recorded over several years late in Welles’s life, the thousands of hours of conversation were transcribed as *My Lunches With Orson* (Picador, $16), edited by veteran film journalist Peter Biskind (Easy Riders, Raging Bulls). At their regular table the two directors discussed everything from gripes with and gossip about Hollywood, politics, art, and the correct temperature for chicken salad, to Orson’s latest projects and, of course, Welles himself. Sifting fact from fiction when it comes to the legendary Welles is a fool’s errand, but why would you ever want to? Someone once said “Give a man a mask and he’ll show you his true self,” and no one played the part of Orson Welles better than the man himself. Part charming hagiography, part politically-incorrect diatribe, and part crash course in the fine art of human conversation, *My Lunches with Orson* is more than a great book—it’s great company. Pat Brennan

WHAT, WORRY?

Not much good at the typical “beach read?” Here’s the ideal vacation compromise: *What Should We Be Worried About? Real Scenarios That Keep Scientists Up at Night* (Harper Perennial, $15.99). Edited by John Brockman of Edge.org, the anthology boasts a breezy format of short essays, perfect for the rhythms of sun and surf. In each entry, a prominent biologist, social scientist, physicist, or theoretician presents a concern his or her work has illuminated, but that perhaps isn’t yet on everyone’s radar. The impressive list of contributors includes Steven Pinker, Evgeny Morozov, Daniel Dennett, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and Ariana Huffington, and their comments cover everything from internet blackouts to internet drivel, a lack of research investment to a dearth of robots, children with iPhones and markets without growth—until at last we reach the pronouncement: “I worry about worry.” Because what is a vacation, if not a chance to put daily life in proper perspective? Lila Stiff

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U.S. HISTORY

THE PLACES

Thomas Dyja’s comprehensive history, The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream (Penguin, $18), demonstrates that as went the Windy City, so went the nation. Every fascinating chapter uses anecdotes, data, and colorful characters to illustrate Chicago’s leading role in America’s progress from circa 1938 to 1960. It was the time when Mies van der Rohe’s revolutionary and rigorous designs shaped the Illinois Institute of Technology while Lazlo Miholy’s preached free-spirited inspiration at the Institute of Design. Studs Terkel walked the streets collecting amazing stories and songs for his broadcasts. Gwendolyn Brooks and Nelson Algren chronicled the struggles of the nation’s marginalized while Mike Nichols and Elaine May laid the groundwork for five decades of comic brilliance. Mahalia Jackson sang transcendent Gospel and Muddy Waters’s electric blues reminded listeners that hell ain’t so far below. But this is just a sample—Dyja’s rich cultural tapestry has much, much more.  

Hannah Depp

Established in 1942 and by 1945 home to 75,000 people, the Clinton Engineer Works (CEW) in Tennessee was not on maps, and its mission was so highly classified that its nature was unknown even to its ever-expanding workforce. Today, the area once coded as “Site X” is known as Oak Ridge, and what happened there in the 1940s was part of the Manhattan Project.  With labor generally—and men especially—in short supply on the home front, the Project at CEW strenuously recruited women, especially young, poor, and poorly education women who would do what they were told and not ask questions. In The Girls of Atomic City (Touchstone, $16), Denise Kiernan’s social history of this unusual community, the nurses and statisticians, chemists and technicians, tell their stories at last. Kiernan interviewed each of her subjects at length, and her lively, often slangy narrative preserves their voices; this is history as it was lived, full of the normal experiences of love and ambition, but also rife with exploitation, intimidation, and unacknowledged experiments with radiation. Laurie Greer

Pat Brennan

Mason B. Williams shows us how two men of different temperaments and on opposite sides of the political spectrum united to build the infrastructure that changed the city of New York and directly influenced the nation as a whole. New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia crossed party lines to embrace President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal; these leaders fought each other’s opponents, listened to one another’s ideas, and worked tirelessly to push through the fear that dominated America during the Great Depression and construct a new world grounded in downright gumption.

Hannah Depp
The bloodiest clash of the Revolutionary War, the Battle of Bunker Hill was the culmination of a siege, a tea party, and a city’s conflicted loyalties. With his usual skillful storytelling and sharp analysis, Nathaniel Philbrick, also the author of Mayflower and Why Read Moby-Dick? plumbs those events as they transitioned an uprising into a war. The scholarship in Bunker Hill (Penguin, $18) is as sound as its prose is accessible, making history appealing on a summer reading list. As Philbrick dusts off (or strips the gilding from) the battle’s instigators and victims, he discovers a fresh sense of the importance of revolutionary Boston and its seminal battle.

A collection of interviews with some of America’s few surviving World War One veterans, Richard Rubin’s The Last of the Doughboys (Mariner, $15.95) offers fresh perspectives on what Rubin calls “the forgotten generation and their forgotten world war.” Supported by well-reported explorations of the social and cultural phenomena that shaped the lives of these soldiers, Rubin’s oral histories allow a more immediate and relatable access to a conflict than even the best political or military histories do. Humanizing both the battles and their participants, The Last of the Doughboys stands out among the books published to mark the war’s centennial. It is an essential supplement for understanding the First World War.

Section by Alan Balch

In Catastrophe 1914 (Vintage, $17.95), Max Hastings once again proves why he is such a lauded historian. In his latest military-political study, the author of Inferno, Winston’s War, and many others, looks at the opening events of the First World War through the strange dichotomy of great human folly coupled with noble intentions. Far from seeing the conflict as a waste, Hastings paints a picture of Europe struggling on the very edge of losing its identity and freedom; his vivid evocations of battle on both the Western and Eastern fronts follow the many generals, soldiers, and politicians maneuvering both on and behind the scenes. This book details just one year of the war and yet illuminates more about Europe in the first part of the twentieth century than tomes twice its size. Whether or not Hastings convinces you that the war was absolutely necessary, you can’t help but be engaged by his argument, his evidence, and his narrative; this stimulating book will broaden your understanding of the Great War. Hannah Depp
“Calling out around the world/ Are you ready
for a brand new beat?” The answer in 1964 was
a resounding "yes!" to Martha & the Vandellas’s
"Dancing in the Street," a song that both captured
an era and remains a timeless classic. Ready
for a Brand New Beat (Riverhead, $16) relives
the heady sixties while it documents how the
Motown hit rocketed up the charts with its sharp
4/4 beat and lyrics about taking it to the streets.
Like so many tracks recorded at the “Hitsville,
USA” studio in Detroit, this was a song targeted
at everyone and was as much at home in the
suburbs as it was at SNCC meetings or urban
riots. As he did with works like Salt and Cod,
Mark Kurlansky finds the perfect lens to put a
whole period into perspective, and his prose is as
vibrant as the song he analyzes and celebrates.
This book will fascinate music lovers and cultural
historians alike. Pat Brennan

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