

WITF Radio Smart Talk Summer 2020 Books List

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Where to Get Books in a Pandemic

Bookshop.org. Bookshop launched right before the pandemic, and lucky for book lovers. From their website: “Bookshop is an online bookstore with a mission to financially support local, independent bookstores.” During the lockdown these previous months I’ve bought novels for myself and comics for my daughter from Bookshop.

Libro.fm. A similar business, but for audiobooks. (I got *The Age of Football* from Libro; see below.)

Reading for The Coronavirus Pandemic

Severance, by Ling Ma (2018). I was already reading Ling Ma’s debut novel, *Severance*, when the pandemic officially began and the United States moved into lockdown. The book quickly changed from fascinating and enjoyable to downright frightening in its apparent prescience and a story I couldn’t stop thinking about. *Severance* tells the story of Chinese-American Candace Chen suffering through a pandemic called Shen Fever that originated in Shenzhen, China and—thanks to globally-networked economies and nation-spanning supply chains—quickly ravaged the human population around the world. Sound familiar? The novel is also a heartfelt evocation of identity formation, immigrant experiences in the U.S., and learning how to connect, feel, and know oneself under the pressures of neoliberalism and late stage capitalism (or, in other words, how to have a career and make rent while still being open to others, fashioning community, and loving oneself). Highly recommended, during a pandemic or otherwise.

Station Eleven, by Emily St. John Mandel (2014; forthcoming HBO Max series). I loved this book when I read it years ago. The novel is one of the most lyrical and complex stories about the human need for art I’ve ever read. It’s also another pandemic novel, and so I’ve been thinking about it a lot recently, and a lot of friends have been reading it for the first time. The coronavirus and the forthcoming HBO Max series based on the book have made me return to it as well, and it’s just a magical upon rereading: “The king stood in a pool of blue light, unmoored...”

How to Do Nothing, by Jenny Odell (2019). San Francisco-born artist—now Orlando-based—and avid birdwatcher Jenny Odell’s 2019 book *How to Do Nothing* was my recent book group book back in April. I think it was the perfect book for critically assessing our now increased use of digital and social media due to the pandemic—to working from home online, to schools shutting down and students learning online from home, to every one of us desperately trying to stay informed online, to watching violence against black bodies online, to following and participating with protest online. Our lives, long interwoven with and dependent on the internet, have become increasingly so. Odell asks us to be vigilant in our use and adoption of

new technologies that demand our attention. Recently information became the number one commodity in the world: our attention is worth more than oil. How do I forge a life structured around my own values while surrounded by addictive, often necessary, technologies—while also in a health crisis that necessitates I and my family engage even more with such technologies? Through detailed analysis of art, revolution, and the natural world, Odell guides readers towards possible answers, towards what we might more healthfully give our attention to and how: “[A]ttention forms the ground not just for love, but for ethics.”

The Age of Football: The Global Game in the Twenty-first Century, by David Goldblatt (2020). David Goldblatt is widely regarded as the top soccer writer and historian on the planet. When soccer shut down around the world in March because of the coronavirus (and rightly so), I missed a sport that brought much beauty and joy to my life. Luckily, Goldblatt had just released a massive new book on the soccer experience around the world, noting how local politics and economies affect and are affected by the world’s most popular sport. I’ve been listening to a bit of the audiobook every day since late March and, thankfully, I’ve still got lots more to go.

War and Peace, by Leo Tolstoy (1869; translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, 2007). Chinese author Yiyun Li, who has lived and worked in the United States for decades, has already read Leo Tolstoy’s nineteenth-century masterpiece *War and Peace* many, many times—but the pandemic gave her the opportunity and time to read it again. So in March, in collaboration with *A Public Space* literary magazine, Li launched the #TolstoyTogether event, during which people around the world slowly read Tolstoy’s great novel together, commenting daily on Twitter and other social media platforms about the section Li set aside for each day. I fell behind early, but I still plan to finish. Li’s insight into the novel over the months (Li is the modern-day Chekhov of contemporary fiction in English), along with the motivation of the communal reading experience during a health crisis—a turning to art together—has been one of the most wonderful and necessary experiences of classic literature I’ve had in a long time.

Reading for George Floyd & for Black Lives Matter

Citizen: An American Lyric (2014) and **Just Us: An American Conversation** (Sept 2020), by Claudia Rankine. I have been teaching and admiring (and returning to again and again) the work of Claudia Rankine since the publication of her poetic masterpiece *Citizen: An American Lyric* in 2014. And I was late to her work, as Rankine had been publishing widely-regarded poetry since the 1990s (most particularly 2004’s **Don’t Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric**). *Citizen* is a prose poem, a mixed-media assault, a lyric of black, female life under a state built for whiteness. Told in the “you” second person, *Citizen* demands every reader confront their racial bias, across sport, art, business, and culture. Never hectoring, *Citizen* expresses our racialized world as a personal documentary that is almost too much to bear, but also too beautiful and compelling to ever turn away from. None of this is hyperbole. Rankine has a new book coming out this September, shifting from the position of the personal voice to an “American conversation.” It couldn’t have come at a better time. Not that books are what we need, justice is. And it’s 400+ years late in coming. But conversation of course is a necessary and powerful bridge to the future.

White Flights: Race, Fiction, and the American Imagination, by Jess Row (2019). In moments of protest or responding to public violence, we often look for new books that will fix our imagination, that will tell us what to do and how to think. And this is I think a valid and important impulse; knowledge doesn't end with the publication of last year's memoir or last fall's scholarly article. But I want to take this moment, by which I mean the global protests in reaction to continued police violence against black bodies, to re-recommend a book I recommended on an earlier episode of Smart Talk, which is *White Flights*, Jess Row's critical analysis of white-voice, white-positioning, and white-education in contemporary American literature. Whiteness is so normalized in literary voice and education in the U.S. that it is difficult to discern, especially I feel for white readers and writers like myself. It can feel like air, or as natural as a doorway or a desk (which obviously to some bodies do not seem natural in the slightest). Through historical contextualization and close reading, *White Flights* deconstructs the anxiety and willed-invisibility of whiteness in contemporary literature. The book was revelatory to me, giving language to ideas I was wrestling with in my own writing and teaching. Also an award-winning fiction writer and ordained senior dharma teacher in the Kwan Um School of Zen, Row is scheduled to discuss and share from his work at York College on February 11, 2021, free and open to the public.

Felon: Poems, by Reginald Dwayne Betts (2019). I have been reading the nonfiction and poetry of Reginald Dwayne Betts since his powerful 2015 collection **Bastards of the Reagan Era**, which put Betts on the map as an important literary voice, and one with real insight into the carceral state. At age sixteen, Betts was sentenced to nine-years in prison; after he got out, he earned a Yale law degree. It matters that Betts is a black man to fully grasp the narrative of his life. I saw Betts's latest collection, *Felon*, at a bookstore last October when it came out, but didn't grab it. (I grabbed an Adrienne Rich collection on sale instead.) I should've picked *Felon* up; I've been thinking about it ever since. If you haven't checked out Betts's work, I highly recommend hopping online and reading one of the many compelling interviews with him, his New York Times essay about prison from a couple years back, or his poem "When I Think of Tamir Rice While Driving":

in the backseat of my car are my own sons,
still not yet Tamir's age...

All of James Baldwin (1924-1987). Especially: **Go Tell It on the Mountain**, **Another Country**, **Notes of a Native Son**, and **The Fire Next Time**. There are few if any writers that capture the experience of race and sex in America in such complexity and nuance, such violence and love as James Baldwin does in his fiction and nonfiction. His short story "Sonny's Blues" might be the most perfect story ever written in English. His writing voice has the persuasion of a sermon.

All of Toni Morrison (1931-2019). Especially: **The Bluest Eye**, **Song of Solomon**, **Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination**, **Beloved**, and **The Source of Self-Regard: Selected Essays, Speeches, and Meditations**. We had a Shakespeare. Her name was Toni Morrison.

Reading for Pride Month

The Normal Heart and The Destiny of Me, by Larry Kramer (2000). Playwright, novelist, and activist Larry Kramer passed away last month. When I discovered Kramer's blisteringly political and emotional plays as a high school student out in rural Oregon in the early 1990s, it felt like someone had opened up my skull and poured reality into it. An activist all his life, most notably as the loud founder of the Gay Men's Health Crisis and Act Up—two leading groups pushing for change and awareness during the 1980s AIDS crisis—Kramer's plays *The Normal Heart* and *The Destiny of Me* were public dramatizations of his own battles as an activist. The plays wrestled with the same issues all activism and crises reckon with, from Stonewall to the George Floyd, from protest to revolution. Questions like, what is enough when people are dying? And, how does one accept the flaws of humanity when people are stripping your humanity from you? Dr. Anthony Fauci has said that through his unrelenting activism Kramer changed U.S. health care, in relation to how much voice those suffering from illness have in the pharmaceutical studies around that illness. "Nobody listens to you unless you're loud," Kramer told Atlantic writer Matt Thompson. "I learned that early on." Kramer's plays and writing have helped change the way we see politics in relation to how loud its voice must be in art, in the face of such suffering.

Reading for Everything

No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference, by Greta Thunberg (2018). My older daughter, 20, bought Greta Thunberg's book *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference* for my youngest daughter, 10, for her birthday back in February, writing on its title page, "You make the world so much better!" My daughters are wild feminists and both angry as hell about climate change. I couldn't be more proud. It is inspiring seeing so many young people marching on the streets these days demanding change. I've gone out there with them. Of course, I would much rather that they were at home or in school or playing a pick-up game in some park. I wish that none of this was necessary. But change takes all of us. And we are capable. Over recent years, Thunberg has demonstrated this around the world. After a long time not speaking and hardly eating due to her not being able to rationalize how humans wouldn't act in the face of climate change, Thunberg finally found her voice through activism. At age 15, Thunberg quickly became a leading voice for action in response to what is inarguably the most pressing concern for our species. This collection of Thunberg's speeches (which she writes herself) is heartwarming and heartbreaking, and in the end moving and motivating. She agrees that she is too young to do this. But she is, in the face of no change happening, doing it. And we all can, and we all must.