

Somers Library

Staff Picks 2021



All of the books on this list were read by members of the Somers Library Staff in 2020. Some were “hot off the press,” others have stood the test of time. All come with a personal recommendation.

Fiction:

Leave the World Behind, by Rumaan Alam. A magnetic novel about two families, strangers to each other, forced together on a long weekend gone terribly wrong; book explores how our closest bonds are reshaped—and unexpected new ones are forged—in moments of crisis.

The Push, by Ashley Audrain. A tense, page-turning psychological drama about the making and breaking of a family, about a woman whose experience of motherhood is nothing at all what she hoped for--and everything she feared.

Anxious People, by Frederick Backman. A poignant, charming novel about a crime that never took place, a would-be bank robber who disappears into thin air, and eight extremely anxious strangers who find they have more in common than they ever imagined.

Hot To Trot: An Agatha Raisin Mystery, by M.C. Beaton. Jealously investigating an ex's intended, Agatha Raisin crashes the wedding only to become implicated in the bride's murder, a situation that immerses Agatha in the cutthroat equestrian world.

The Vanishing Half, by Brit Bennett. The Vignes twin sisters will always be identical. But after growing up together in a small, southern black community and running away at age sixteen, one sister lives with her black daughter in the same southern town she once tried to escape. The other passes for white; her white husband knows nothing of her past. The fates of the twins remain intertwined. This is a riveting, emotional story and a brilliant exploration of the history of *passing*.

The Night Tiger, by Yangsze Choo. A sweeping historical novel about a dancehall girl and an orphan boy whose fates entangle over an old Chinese superstition about men who turn into tigers. It explores colonialism and independence, ancient superstition and modern ambition, sibling rivalry and first love.

Darkest Evening, by Ann Cleeves. On a wintry snowy night, Detective Inspector Vera Stanhope sets off for home, misses a turn, and soon becomes lost and disorientated. A car has skidded off the narrow road in front of her, its door open, and she stops to help. There is no driver to be seen, so Vera assumes that the owner has gone to find help. But a cry calls her back: a toddler is strapped in the back seat.

American Dirt, by Jeanine Cummins. Lydia Quixano Pérez lives in Acapulco, Mexico, runs a bookstore, has a son, Luca, the love of her life, and a wonderful journalist husband. One day a mysterious man, Javier, enters the shop and buys two of her favorite erudite books. She later discovers he is the newest drug cartel *el jefe*, who has taken over the city. When Lydia's husband's tell-all profile of Javier is published, most of her family is killed, and none of their lives will ever be the same. Forced to flee north to the United States, they become homeless migrants whose lives are forever changed.

Body on Baker Street, by Vicki Delaney. The Sherlock Holmes Bookshop and Emporium on Baker Street and adjoining Mrs. Hudson's Tea Room host a book signing with the illustrious Renalta Van Markoff. During the author Q&A session, dedicated Sherlockian Donald Morris verbally attacks Renalta and her series for disgracing Sherlock's legacy--- Renalta collapses on the table dead. Gemma and Jayne have no shortage of suspects among the Sherlock enthusiasts.

Washington Black, by Esi Edugyn. Eleven year old George Washington Black, a field slave on a Barbados sugar plantation, is initially terrified when he is chosen as the manservant of his master's brother. The eccentric Christopher Wilde turns out to be a naturalist, explorer, inventor, and abolitionist. This a story of self-invention and betrayal, love and redemption, and a world destroyed and made whole again.

Woman in the Window, by A.J. Finn. Anna Fox, a recluse in her New York City home, spends her day drinking wine, watching old movies, recalling happier times, and spying on her neighbors. The Russells move into the house across the way; Anna, gazing out her window one night, sees something she shouldn't, and her world begins to crumble and its shocking secrets are laid bare.

The Guest List, by Lucy Foley. On an island off the coast of Ireland, guests gather to celebrate two people joining their lives together. The groom: handsome and charming, a rising television star. The bride: smart and ambitious, a magazine publisher. Perfection is for plans; people are all too human. Someone turns up dead. Who didn't wish the happy couple well...perhaps more important, why?

A Good Neighborhood, by Therese Ann Fowler. A gripping contemporary novel that examines the American dream through the lens of two families living side by side in an idyllic neighborhood; then, one summer changes their lives irrevocably.

The Kitchen House, by Kathleen Grissom. Orphaned during her passage from Ireland, young, white Lavinia arrives at the kitchen house and is placed, as an indentured servant, under the care of Belle, the master's illegitimate slave daughter. Through the unique eyes of Lavinia and Belle, this novel unfolds in a heartbreaking but hopeful story of class, race, dignity, deep-buried secrets, and familial bonds.

Cosmos, by Witold Gombrowicz; (Danuta Borhardt, Translator). A dark, quasi-detective novel, *Cosmos* explores the arbitrariness of language, the joke of human freedom, and man's attempt to bring order out of chaos in his psychological life. Published in 1965; recently translated.

Midnight Library, by Matt Haig. Between life and death there is a library; within that library, every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived. To see how things would be if you had made other choices, would you have done anything different? Would the other lives been better?

What the Wind Knows, by Amy Harmon. Anne Gallagher grew up enchanted by her grandfather's stories of Ireland. Heartbroken at his death, she travels to his childhood home to spread his ashes. There, overcome with memories of the man she adored and consumed by a history she never knew, she is pulled into another time.

Moonflower Murders, by Anthony Horowitz. Brilliantly clever, relentlessly suspenseful, full of twists that will keep readers guessing with each revelation and clue, *Moonflower Murders* is a deviously dark take on vintage English crime fiction.

Miss Benson's Beetle, by Rachel Joyce. In 1950, London is still reeling from World War II, and Margery Benson, a schoolteacher and spinster, is trying to get through life, surviving on scraps. One day, she reaches her breaking point, abandons her job and small existence to set out on an expedition to the other side of the world in search of her childhood obsession: an insect---the golden beetle of New Caledonia.

This Tender Land, by William Kent Krueger. In 1932, during one unforgettable summer, four orphan vagabonds journey into the unknown, crossing paths with others who are adrift, from struggling farmers and traveling faith healers to displaced families and lost souls of all kinds. This is a big-hearted epic that shows how the magnificent American landscape connects us all, haunts our dreams, and makes us whole.

Deacon King Kong by James McBride. In September 1969, a fumbling, cranky old church deacon shuffles into the courtyard of the housing project in south Brooklyn, pulls a .38 from his pocket, and in front of everybody shoots the project's drug dealer at point-blank range. It soon becomes clear that the lives of the characters overlap in unexpected ways. When the truth does emerge, the author shows us that not all secrets are meant to be hidden; the best way to grow is to face change without fear, and the seeds of love lie in hope and compassion.

Blight Way, by Patrick F. McManus. Bo Tully, sheriff of Blight County, Idaho, had been thinking about asking out Jan Whittle, his grade-school sweetheart. But, he's already promised to celebrate his dad's seventy-fifth birthday. When a dead body turns up on Batim Scragg's ranch, he is forced to put on his sleuthing hat and use his sheriff's investigative methods---legal or not.

Little Cruelties, Liz Nugent. Story follows three working-class Irish brothers from a deeply troubled childhood household, and explores ways families can wreak emotional damage across generations, yet provides stunning insights into the many forces that shape us from childhood.

Where the Crawdads Sing, by Delia Owens. An ode to the natural world against a profound coming of age story and haunting mystery. Story reminds us that we are forever shaped by the child within us,

while also subject to the beautiful and violent secrets that nature keeps.

Thursday Murder Club, by Richard Osman. In a peaceful retirement village, four unlikely friends meet weekly in the Jigsaw Room to discuss unsolved crimes; they may be pushing eighty but they still have a few tricks up their sleeves. When a local developer is found dead with a mysterious photograph left next to the body, the Thursday Murder Club suddenly find themselves in the middle of their first live case.

The Dutch House, by Ann Patchett. Set over five decades, this is a tale about a brother and sister who are so smart and successful, yet cannot overcome their past. Throughout their lives, they return to the well-worn story of what they've lost with humor and rage. When at last they're forced to confront the people who left them behind, the relationship between an indulged brother and his ever-protective sister is finally tested.

All the Devils Are Here, by Louise Penny. On their first night in Paris, the Gamaches gather as a family for a bistro dinner. Walking home together after the meal, they watch in horror as Stephen is knocked down and critically injured in what is no accident, but a deliberate attempt on the elderly man's life. Soon the whole family is caught up in a web of lies and deceit. In order to find the truth, Gamache will have to decide whether he can trust his friends, his colleagues, his instincts, his own past, or his own family.

Gravity's Rainbow, Thomas Pynchon. A postmodern sprawling, encyclopedic narrative, and penetrating analysis of the impact of technology on society. Set primarily in Europe at the end of World War II, it centers on the design, production and dispatch of V-2 rockets by the German military.

Such a Fun Age, by Kiley Reid.. In the midst of a family crisis one late evening, white blogger Alix Chamberlain calls her African American babysitter, Emira, asking her to take toddler Briar to the local market for distraction. There, the security guard accuses Emira of kidnapping Briar, and Alix's efforts to right the situation turn out to be good intentions selfishly mismanaged.

Book Woman of Troublesome Creek, by Kim Richardson. In 1936, tucked deep into the woods of Troublesome Creek, KY, lives blue-skinned 19-year-old Cussy Carter, the last living female of the rare Blue People. She joins the historic Pack Horse Library Project of Kentucky and becomes a librarian, riding across slippery creek beds and up treacherous mountains on her faithful mule to deliver books and other reading material to the impoverished hill people. This story highlights the Packhorse Librarians, a story of fierce strength and one woman's belief that books can carry us anywhere---even back home.

My Dark Vanessa, by Kate Russell. Alternating between Vanessa's present and her past, this story explores the psychological dynamics of a relationship between a precocious, yet naïve, teenage girl and her magnetic and manipulative teacher. This is a masterful portrayal of troubled adolescence and its repercussions that raises vital questions about consent, complicity, and victimhood; and, brilliantly captures and reflects the shifting cultural mores transforming our relationships and society today.

Shooting at Chateau Rock, by Martin Walker. The heirs of a Périgordian sheep farmer learn that they have been disinherited, and their father's estate sold to an insurance company in return for a policy that will place him in a five-star retirement home for the rest of his life. But the farmer never gets his life of luxury---he dies before moving in. Was it a natural death or foul play? Bruno begins the investigation that leads him to shadowy insurance companies owned by a Russian oligarch with a Cypriot passport.

Nickel Boys, by Colson Whitehead. A story of two boys sentenced to a hellish reform school in Jim Crow-era Florida. Elwood Curtis, a black boy growing up in 1960s Tallahassee, is unfairly sentenced to a juvenile reformatory called the Nickel Academy; he finds himself trapped in a grotesque chamber of horrors. His only salvation is his friendship with fellow "delinquent" Turner. As life becomes ever more

perilous, the tension between Elwood's ideals and Turner's skepticism leads to a decision whose repercussions will echo down the decades.

Lost and Found Bookshop, by Susan Wiggs. Natalie Harper must sell the bookshop she's inherited to pay for her grandfather's care, but he refuses to acquiesce. Renovation of the store and its studio apartment push her life in a whole new direction. She moves into the small studio apartment above the shop and hires contractor Peach Gallagher to do the repairs. His young daughter, Dorothy, and Natalie begin reading together. To her surprise, her sorrow begins to dissipate as her life becomes an unexpected journey of new connections, discoveries and revelations, from unearthing artifacts hidden in the bookshop's walls, to discovering the truth about her family, her future, and her heart.

Shadow of the Wind, by Carlos Ruiz Zafon. Barcelona, 1945: A city slowly heals from its war wounds, and Daniel, an antiquarian book dealer's son who mourns the loss of his mother, finds solace in a mysterious book entitled *The Shadow of the Wind*. But when he sets out to find the author's other works, he discovers that someone has been systematically destroying every copy of every book he has written. Daniel's seemingly innocent quest opens a door into one of Barcelona's darkest secrets--an epic story of murder, madness, and doomed love.

NON-FICTION

So, Anyway..., by John Cleese. Candid and brilliantly funny, this is the story of how a tall, shy youth from Weston-Super-Mare went on to become a self-confessed legend. Punctuated from time to time with John Cleese's thoughts on topics as diverse as the nature of comedy, the relative merits of cricket and waterskiing, and the importance of knowing the dates of all the kings and queens of England, this is a masterly performance by a former schoolmaster.

Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice At a Time, by Rich Hanson. "It's the *little* things that count." This guide offers simple things you can do routinely, mainly inside your mind, that will support and increase your sense of security and worth: resilience, effectiveness, well-being, insight, and inner peace. This is a groundbreaking combination of mindfulness meditation and neuroscience that can help you deepen your sense of well-being and unconditional happiness.

The Bastard Brigade: The True Story of the Renegade Scientists and Spies Who Sabotaged the Nazi Atomic Bomb. by Sean Kean. The gripping, untold story of a renegade group of scientists and spies determined to keep Adolf Hitler from obtaining the ultimate prize: a nuclear bomb. In the middle of building an atomic bomb, the leaders of the Manhattan Project were alarmed to learn that Nazi Germany was far outpacing the Allies in nuclear weapons research. So they assembled a rough and motley crew of geniuses - dubbed the Alsos Mission - and sent them careening into Axis territory to spy on, sabotage, and even assassinate members of Nazi Germany's feared Uranium Club.

Hidden Valley Road: Inside the Mind of an American Family, by Robert Kolker. This heart-rending unforgettable story of the Galvins, a midcentury American family with twelve children. By the mid-1970s, six of the ten Galvin boys, one after another, were diagnosed as schizophrenic. What took place inside the house on Hidden Valley Road was so extraordinary that the Galvins became one of the first families to be studied by the National Institute of Mental Health. This is a story of suffering, love, and hope.

Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America, by Erik Larson. The incredible events surrounding the 1893 Chicago World's Fair are told with such drama that readers may think the story is not, in fact, a highly imaginative novel. Author tells the stories of two men: Daniel H. Burnham, the architect responsible for the fair's construction, and H.H. Holmes, a serial killer masquerading as a charming doctor. Combining meticulous research with nail-biting storytelling, the author's narrative provides the wonder of newly discovered history with the thrills of the best fiction.

Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman, by Robert K. Massie. A masterpiece of narrative biography, this is the extraordinary story of an obscure German princess who became one of the most remarkable, powerful, and captivating women in history. For 34 years the government, foreign policy, cultural development and welfare of the Russian people were in her hands. Author provides: historical accuracy, deep understanding, felicity of style, mastery of detail, ability to shatter myth and a genius for finding and expressing a human drama.

Churchill: Walking With Destiny, by Robert Andrews. A landmark reconsideration of Churchill, the iconoclastic war leader, based on extensive new material, from private letters to war cabinet meetings; the full and definitive biography, as personally revealing as it is compulsively readable. Churchill has much to teach us about the challenges today and the fundamental values of courage, tenacity, leadership, and moral conviction.

Don't Sing at the Table: Life Lessons From My Grandmothers, by Adriana Trigiani. Author visits the past to seek answers to the essential questions that define the challenges women face today at work and at home. This is a primer, grandmother to granddaughter, filled with everyday wisdom and life lessons that are truly "tiramisu for the soul" (The Examiner), handed down with care and built to last.

Educated; by Tara Westover. Author was 17 the first time she set foot in a classroom. Born to survivalists in the mountains of Idaho, she prepared for the end of the world by stockpiling home-canned peaches and sleeping with her "head-for-the-hills bag. Lacking any formal education, Tara began to educate herself. Her quest for knowledge transformed her, taking her over oceans and across continents, to Harvard and Cambridge. An account of her struggle for self-invention, it is a universal coming-of-age story that gets to the heart of what education is and how it can change one's life.

Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration, by Isabel Wilkerson. In this epic, beautifully written masterwork, the author chronicles one of the great untold stories of American history: the decades-long migration of black citizens who fled the South for northern and western cities, in search of a better life. From 1915 to 1970, this exodus of almost six million people changed the face of America.

Compiled by Staff of the Somers Library.

Descriptions adapted from Goodreads.com