Brett’s Reading List

This is an attempt to keep track of the books I’ve read for recreation over the last several years. This does not include technical (statistics) books of course. The dates mostly represent the date that I finished the book, sometime the time period in which I read it.

1 Books Read in Australia (August, 1996 through July, 1998)

We didn’t have a TV in Oz, so I did a lot of reading.

**Fatal Shore**  Robert Hughes () (nonfiction)
Australia’s convict history, with a bit of a skeptic’s angle (see “For the Term of His Natural Life” below).

**The Road from Coorain**  Jill Ker Conway () (nonfiction)
Autobiographical book about Conway’s growing up first on a sheep station in the Australian outback and then in Sydney.

**Stormy Weather**  Carl Hiassen () (fiction)
Very good Hiassen, good summer reading.

**Native Tongue**  Carl Hiassen () (fiction)
Also good.

**All the Pretty Horses**  Cormac McCarthy () (fiction)
Beautiful, a great book.

**The Eight**  Katherine Neville () (fiction)
Lightweight page turner (chess, the desert, and various mystical stuff).

**The Van**  Roddy Doyle () (fiction)
Very good, funny book. Doyle is one of present-day Ireland’s top authors (maybe he is Ireland’s top author), though I suspect that most Americans would only know him, if they know him at all, from the film version of his book “The Commitments.”

**Cold Comfort Farm**  Stella Gibbons () (fiction)

**For the Term of His Natural Life**  Marcus Clarke () (fiction)
Good book, much of it based on fact, though of course many of the events are as implausible as those in a Dickens story. Evidently this book played a large role in establishing the mythology of Australia’s convict history that Hughes is bent on dismantling in “The Fatal Shore.”

**Longitude**  Author () (nonfiction)
An interesting book about the clockmaker John Harrison.

**Culture of Complaint**  Robert Hughes () (nonfiction)

**Our Man in Havana**  Graham Greene () (fiction)
One of Greene’s humorous books. Excellent.
The Future Eaters  Tim Flannery () (nonfiction)
Interesting, but I’m skeptical about the conclusions drawn in many places. See my comments below on Guns, Germs, and Steel.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil  John Berendt () (fiction)
Pretty good murder mystery set in Savannah, Ga.

Bosnia: A Short History  Noel Malcolm () (nonfiction)
I think I remember struggling to get to the finish line on this one. No quizzes please.

Yangtse Incident: The Story of H.M.S. Amethyst  Lawrence Earl () (nonfiction)
The Amethyst was trapped up the Yangtse River by communist forces during the fight between the communists and the nationalists. An interesting true story.

The Tortilla Curtain  T. Coraghessan Boyle () (fiction)
A very good novel concerned with the situation of Mexican immigrants (illegal) and their wealthy Anglo neighbors in Southern California.

A History of Warfare  John Keegan () (nonfiction)
How men fight. I read at least one other of Keegan’s books, The Face of Battle before this list was started. It’s a fantastic book, the best I’ve ever read about the history of warfare.

The First Stone  Helen Garner () (nonfiction)
A older feminist’s look at “modern feminism” through the workings of a case of alleged sexual harassment in a Melbourne college.

I Claudius  Robert Graves () (fiction)
I really enjoyed this one and the next. Were things really this nasty in the Roman emperor’s family?

Claudius the God  Robert Graves () (fiction)

Enigma  Robert Harris (28 May 97) (fiction)
A novel built around the British code breaking effort in WWII.

The Language Instinct  Steven Pinker (27 June 97) (nonfiction)
An entertaining and interesting discussion of modern linguistics and universal grammar for the non-expert.

Why the Professor Can’t Teach: Mathematics and the Dilemma of University Education  Morris Kline (15 July 97) (nonfiction)
A scathing review of the state of mathematics teaching and research in U.S. universities, by a distinguished mathematician. Sort of work-related I suppose.

The Second World War  John Keegan (10 August 97) A fairly comprehensive look at the battles and generals of the war in all theaters.

Moo  Jane Smiley (16 August 97). A humorous look at life on a midwestern university (Iowa?) campus.

Miss Smilla’s Feeling for Snow  Peter Hoeg (23 August 97). Very good and unusual murder mystery set in Denmark and Greenland.
The Mask of Command  John Keegan (Sept 97). The historical progression of the nature of command through the general-ships of Alexander the Great, the Duke of Wellington, U. S. Grant, and A. Hitler.

The Price of Admiralty  John Keegan (10 Oct 97). The battles of Trafalgar (wooden ships), Jutland ( dreadnought battleships), Midway (carriers), and the Atlantic (submarines and their hunters).


The Rain Maker  John Grisham (22 Nov 97). Lawyers and insurance companies in Memphis. Another forgettable page turner.


Bonfire of the Vanities  Thomas Wolfe (20 Dec 97). I’m not a big Wolfe fan.

A Man Called Intrepid  William Stevenson. British and American intelligence operations during WWII.

Kings in Grass Castles  Mary Durack (15 Jan 98). Great book about the author’s pioneer Australian pastoralist family.


The Samurai  Shusaku Endo. 17th century samurai visit S.America and Europe. Nice book.

The Pleasures of Counting  T. W. Körner. A layman’s survey of mathematics and its applications. Very nice. There’s a lot of statistics in here, especially in the first part of the book but I’m still counting this a recreational reading.

Darwin  Adrian Desmond and James Moore (15 April 98). A wonderful biography of Darwin.

My Place  Sally Morgan (9 May 1998). The story of an Australian (1/8) aboriginal woman and her family. Also the stories of grandmother, great uncle, and mother. Interesting, and sad at times.

How We Know  Martin Goldstein and Inge F. Goldstein (30 June 1998). “An exploration of the scientific process.” The material about John Snow’s research on cholera outbreaks (essentially the founding of epidemiology) is good, but this book wasn’t really worth reading.


2 Since August, 1998

Unfortunately my rate has fallen off with the return to America.


Cities of the Plain  Cormac McCarthy (31 August 1998). Third volume in the Border Trilogy. Excellent, but not as good as the first two.

Timequake  Kurt Vonnegut (13 Sept 1998).

   Not bad, reminded me a bit of "The Future Eaters", which is referenced here in fact. This kind of science always seems highly speculative to me, with one theory being just about as plausible as the next and the authors generally having a political ax to grind. In this case I am sympathetic with the author’s politics, but skeptical about the science. Of course my qualifications in the field are nil, so I don’t mean to suggest that anyone should necessarily agree with my view of the book.

Bliss  Peter Carey (July 1999).
   Very entertaining book. An Aussie advertising executive somewhere in Northern Queensland (???) believes that he has died and gone to Hell.

The Great World  David Malouf (July 1999).
   A great book by another Aussie author. Mainly concerns the life and times of one man (Digger) or maybe two (what was the other fellow’s name?), but in some ways the author is aiming to sum up the entire Aussie experience in the twentieth century.

Underworld  Don Delillo (August 1999).
   Another really good book, this time by an American author. A long, strange trip through America in the second half of the twentieth century.

The Professor and the Madman  Simon Winchester (Fall 1999?)
   The writing of the Oxford dictionary. The book mostly concerns the true story of the involvement of a mad American who had served as a surgeon in the American Civil War and was later “institutionalized” for a murder committed in London. Interesting and entertaining.

A Man in Full  Tom Wolfe (I must have read this sometime in 1998-1999).
   Entertaining as usual with Wolfe. All the implausible connections remind me a bit of a modern Dickens story (or something like that).

Citizen Soldiers  Stephen Ambrose (I must have read this sometime in 1999-2000).
   I enjoyed this book because I enjoyed the subject, but it didn’t make a lasting impression on me.

Team Rodent  Carl Hiaasen (December 1999).
   Hiassen goes after Disney in this very short book. Not bad.

Noah’s Garden: Restoring the Ecology of Our Own Back Yards  Sara Stein (Spring 2000?).
   I read this while considering what to do about our yard, so its qualification as recreational reading is a bit shaky. BTW, doing nothing seems to be the right answer at the moment.

The Killer Angels  Michael Shaara (Spring 2000?)
   The Battle of Gettysburg through the eyes of the generals. A very good book.
Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West
Stephen Ambrose (June 2000)
I don’t care for Stephen Ambrose’s writing, but his choice of subjects makes up for it.

Killing Mister Watson Peter Matthiessen (July 2000).
Great novel of life in southwest Florida around the turn of the century. Mr. Watson is an enigma, a great farmer and businessman, and maybe a ruthless murderer too.

Cryptonomicon Neal Stephenson (July-August 2000)
Novel about the adventures of a group of cryptologists and computer geeks and others in WWII and the present. Fun to read if this sort of thing interests you at all. Apparently has been compared to Gravity’s Rainbow in some reviews, but I doubt that is justified. It has been many years since I read Gravity’s Rainbow, but I would rank this book as “lighter” reading (but easier going).

I promised not to include any “work-related” books in this list, but I really just read this one for pleasure. It’s basically a collection of 22 (?) of Stigler’s papers on the history of statistics. Pretty interesting, though probably less so to a non-statistician.

Lost Man’s River Peter Matthiessen (11 Oct, 2000). Turns out that Killing Mister Watson was just the first in a trilogy. This one is the story of Watson’s son and his search for the truth behind his father’s death and life. I really enjoyed this book as well, although there seem to be some inconsistencies with its setting in time. Many things point to a a time frame of mid-1970’s or later, and late 1960’s is a bare minimum. This would make the protagonist about 80, which just doesn’t jibe with other things in the story. A reviewer on Amazon has also pointed out that the name of one of the main families has changed from Hamilton to Harden. This may be because the real family objected, which itself is interesting.

On the plus side, more of the story takes place in north central Florida, which is even more local for me. I also like Matthiessen’s references to flora and fauna of the region. I’m looking forward to reading the last book in the trilogy.

Bone by Bone Peter Matthiessen (5 Nov, 2000).
The last book in the Killing Mister Watson/Lost Man’s River trilogy. Here Mr. Watson’s tells his own story. I think I liked this one best of all. A fascinating, if horrific story, and a fantastic book.

Growing up in a junk yard in the longleaf pine country of south Georgia. I really liked this one: those of us of cracker descent need to learn to appreciate and preserve what little is left of the longleaf pine ecosystem before it’s completely gone.

The Moor’s Last Sigh Salman Rushdie (2 Jan, 2001).
I’m not sure how to summarize this book. The “Moor” is of “mixed descent” (his mother has Christian, perhaps Portuguese background and his father is Jewish and perhaps with perhaps a Spanish Moor thrown in), and grows up in Bombay, India. Besides having a somewhat dysfunctional family, he also has a deformed right arm/hand and worse, ages at twice the normal speed, so at 15 his body is 30, and so forth. Must of what happens revolves around the mother, who is a famous Indian artist, and the formative events of Indian history of the last half of the 20th century. Rushdie is pretty hard here on
religious zealots, particularly the Hindu nationalists in India. In fact the book was banned in India, which seems a great shame to me.

I’m sure I missed some things here because I don’t know enough about modern Indian history and culture, but nevertheless I really enjoyed this book.

**Monsignor Quixote**  Graham Greene (6 Jan, 2001).

This is a great little book. Greene explores Catholicism (as usual), Communism, and life through the conversations and adventures of the parish priest Quixote (somewhat accidentally promoted to Monsignor) and the communist former mayor of the village (nicknamed Sancho by Monsignor Quixote). Funny and touching, I really enjoyed this one.


I always wanted to read this and finally did.

**The Snow Leopard**  Peter Matthiessen (11 Feb, 2001).

The author’s journal of a trek into the Himalayas with a field biologist (studying the “blue sheep” of the region) and their troop of porters, cook, etc. I enjoyed this, but I wouldn’t say it’s one of my favorites. There’s a lot of focus on the Matthiessen’s Buddhist pursuits and his grief over the death of his (second) wife, but as a chronicle of a fairly extreme journey it’s pretty engrossing.


Years after being transported to Australia and making his fortune, Jack Maggs illegally returns to London to meet his “son.” In the process he falls in with the writer Tobias Oates who hypnotizes him in order to gather material for a novel. Oates apparently represents Dickens, and Maggs’s story and encounter with him can be viewed as fictionalized background to Dickens creation of “Great Expectations.” It’s been so long since I read Dickens in high school that my reading of this book was not burdened by all of this, but I greatly enjoyed “Jack Maggs” as a stand-alone piece. I have to admit that I never really liked Dickens when I was forced to read him as a teenager (his stories always seemed far too contrived), but perhaps I’ll go back and read “Great Expectations” again.

**The First World War**  John Keegan (8 April 2001).

Another good book by Keegan. I probably still prefer The Face of Battle and The Mask of Command over his other books, but they are all very good.

**In a Sunburned Country**  Bill Bryson (6 May 2001).

This is a very funny travel book about Australia.

**The Mismeasure of Man**  Stephen J. Gould (3 June 2001).

A history/explanation of (western) attempts to measure intelligence and the associated misconceptions, biases, and abuses. Written well before The Bell Curve, it nevertheless serves to place the latter in its proper historical/cultural context while anticipating and “responding” to its various arguments. As a bonus, Gould is really a pleasure to read.

**The March of Folly**  Barbara Tuchman (28 June 2001).

The Trojans bring the horse within their gates, the renaissance popes prompt the protestant reformation and the sacking of Rome, the British prompt the American revolution, and the Americans get entangled in Viet Nam. Most interesting to me were the chapters on the popes and Viet Nam. Not one of Tuchman’s best books, but pretty good anyway.
Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds  Scott Weidensaul (18 July 2001)
A very interesting book about bird migration in the Americas.

The God of Small Things  Arundhati Roy (4 August 2001)
The story of twin brother and sister in India (Kerala), their family and its history, love, politics, caste, and tragedy. Very good.

Name-Dropping: From FDR On  John Kenneth Galbraith (3 November 2001)
Not really up to Galbraith’s usual standards, but interesting anyway.

Made in America  Bill Bryson (13 January 2002).

Apples, tulips, marijuana, and potatoes. How we shaped them and vice versa. Interesting book, especially the parts on marijuana (things have apparently come a long way) and potatoes (scary).

The Waterworks  E. L. Doctorow (16 March 2002).
A different sort of mystery set in post Civil War New York City. Very good and a quick read.

A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius  Dave Eggers (14 April 2002).
Well, I don’t know about all that, but this was quite a good book. An autobiographical piece about a young man (a ‘20-something’) getting through his life while raising his younger brother, after their parents have both died young and at nearly the same time. That’s a lousy summary — read the book to find out what it’s really about.

I thought that I’d never finish this thing, which I’ve been reading part time for months now. I hoped to learn a bit about all these religions and their beliefs, but I think my main conclusion is that people all over the world are ready to believe just about anything in the guise of religion. I could hardly bear to read this book, partly because the author presents all of these bizarre tales almost as a believer would. Not what I was hoping for.

Benjamin Franklin, Politician: The Mask and the Man  Francis Jennings (24 May 2002).
Sort of a biography of Franklin, but more about his political development and the politics of Pennsylvania in the years before the American Revolution. The author tries to strip away some of the glorification of the American icon and show his flaws as well as his strengths. I haven’t read any other biographies of Franklin or histories of pre-revolutionary Pennsylvania politics, so I can’t say how well he succeeds. Jennings does seem to have some axes to grind with other historians, which takes away from his writing and is distracting at times. Nevertheless, on the whole I enjoyed reading this book and found the contents interesting and apparently well-researched.

Sick Puppy  Carl Hiaasen (8 June 2002).
Hiaasen goes after the developers and other trashers of the landscape here in Florida. Much of the action takes place around Cedar Key and Gainesville, so it’s pretty close to home. As usual with Hiaasen, lots of fun except when you remember that he bases his books on real stories taken from the news (you mean this isn’t fiction?).
A very well written history of the civil war era in the U.S. I enjoyed this so much that I’m thinking of re-reading it.

Single and Single  John le Carré (3 July 2002).
Light summer reading, but not particularly wonderful. In outline, son (Oliver Single) goes state’s evidence against corrupt financial house founded by father (Tiger Single), but goes back in to save father from Russian mobsters who plan to do him in.

A well written book on cryptography that manages to tell an interesting history and give some real insight without swamping the reader in technical difficulties. The same author has a book (Fermat’s Enigma) about the history of Fermat’s last theorem and its proof that is also supposed to be very good.

Saleem Sinai is born at midnight, August 15, 1947, simultaneous with the birth of Indian independence. A boy/man’s life as a nation’s life (two nations really, if you include Pakistan, or even three if you count Bangladesh too) as a boy/man’s life. Really a great book.

Lindbergh  A. Scott Berg (8 October 2002).
A very interesting biography of a somewhat enigmatic figure. Lindbergh’s family granted Berg full access to all his papers, journals, diaries, etc., and Lindbergh’s wife also offered access to her own diaries and journals. There’s a lot here that I didn’t know about Lindbergh, such as his deep involvement in medical research.

White Noise  Don Delillo (24 October 2002).
A satirical look at American life, and especially of an American academic’s life. Very good, although I preferred Underworld by the same author.

The Iliad  Homer (translated by W. H. D. Rouse) (1 December 2002).
Well, you know the story. I don’t think that I had ever read the whole thing before, so I decided to redress this shortcoming by reading a prose translation.

Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West  Wallace Earle Stegner (16 December 2002).
A collection of essays by Stegner, organized into autobiographical, land/place/environment, and his writings about other (western) writers. All concerning the American West of course. I enjoyed this, but wouldn’t recommend it that strongly unless you’re particularly interested in Stegner. I am looking forward to reading some of his novels.

Well, it’s exactly what it says that it is. Myers attacks four or five writers in particular, including Don Delillo and Cormac McCarthy. Though I really enjoyed Underworld, and I loved All the Pretty Horses, Myers’s criticisms do seem cogent and make me want to go back and look again. But there are too many other things to read, so I probably will never get around to it.

Again, a prose translation of Homer. If you don’t know the story you should probably read it yourself.

High and Mighty High and Mighty: SUVs–The World’s Most Dangerous Vehicles and How They Got That Way
Keith Bradsher (29 January 2003)

I wish I could call this a shocking exposé, but unfortunately it’s pretty much what we expect from business in collusion with government and supported by a selfish and self-centered buying public. Nevertheless, the revelations about the automakers’ marketing studies of SUV buyers alone make this book worth reading, to say nothing of its exploration of safety, environmental, and fuel efficiency issues.

Proof: A Play  David Auburn (1 February 2003).

This Pulitzer Prize winner was loaned to me by my colleague Bhramar Mukherjee. I suppose that I read it like a short story, but I certainly enjoyed it.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain  Wallace Earle Stegner (2 March 2003).

Stegner’s first novel, apparently largely autobiographical. Tells the story of his mother and father and his youth. The father is always looking for “the big rock candy mountain,” dragging his family around the west in pursuit of his next get-rich-quick scheme. Good book.

Angle of Repose  Wallace Earle Stegner (5 April 2003).

This is an really fine book. A retired professor is writing a biography of his grandparents. Mostly this is the story of the grandparents, and their lives in the west. A fascinating look at life in mining camps in the west in the late 1800s, and at the personal relationship between the cultured grandmother and the plain, mining engineer grandfather, and their friends and acquaintances. I think that the book might have been better if it was just this story, unadorned by the story of the writer professor and his more modern concerns, but it is still very good.


Traces the development and importance of the notions of computability, completeness, etc. Visits with the usual suspects in this area, including Cantor, Gödel, Russell, and Turing, as well as Leibniz, Hilbert, Alonzo Church (who I didn’t know about but who was apparently the author’s PhD advisor), and others. Entertaining and enjoyable reading, not dry at all.

Mason & Dixon  Thomas Pynchon (17 August 2003)

I took too long to read this one, so I never got into it the way I should have. Kind of an interesting mix of humor (not of the “laugh-out-loud” variety) with a bit of melancholy (at least I found it so). But, as with other Pynchon books I’ve read, I got lost at times and was unable to follow things. Still, I have the feeling that this would make a great movie if the right director took it on.

Update: In the years since I read it, I find that I think of this book at least as often as any I have read, and I think of it very fondly. I may have to read it again (rare for me).

John Adams  David McCullough (4 October 2003)

Very good book. I didn’t know much about John Adams before reading it, but McCullough certainly portrays him as an admirable man who lived a very interesting life.
Closing Time  Joseph Heller (3 November 2003)  
Heller’s follow up to Catch 22, set in the 1990s. Things haven’t gotten any less strange, but somehow it’s all so close to reality that it’s more depressing and less funny. Maybe melancholy is the word. It’s a good book – I remember enjoying Catch 22 more, but that was so long ago that I can’t say how I would feel about it now.

A layman’s history of statistics that looks in on many of the important figures in the field and tries to explain their ideas and contributions without any technicalities. Not a great work of literature or history, but still enjoyable.

Unfortunately it’s all true, which makes it hard to laugh.

Good, but I preferred Franken’s book.

Eclipse  John Banfield (18 January 2004)  
Beautifully written, melancholy book, exploring the inner world of a stage actor who returns to his childhood home in a small seaside town to try to find himself. He falls into a rather strange relationship with a caretaker and the caretaker’s daughter; there are ghosts, and generally the story is somewhat hard to describe. Suffice it to say that Banville does not rely on a lot of “action” to move his stories along, but there is an interesting twist at the end that ties many things together. I’ll be looking for more by this (Irish) author. Our friend Robin Wilkinson has written a review/analysis of this book for the Irish Review (or possibly another Irish literary journal?).

Hegemony or Survival: America’s Quest for Global Dominance  Noam Chomsky (23 March 2004)  
The double standard of America’s state sponsored terrorism (no, we don’t call it that, it’s “freedom fighters” or a “police action” or it’s hidden altogether) versus the terrorism of anyone who opposes America’s government and cooperate interests. Chomsky challenges our conventional way of thinking about the world, and should be read whether you agree with him or not.

A House for Mr. Biswas  V.S. Naipaul (20 May 2004)  
This is a wonderful book. The bittersweet story of a poor Indian’s (as in Indian subcontinent) life in Trinidad, dominated by his in-laws and his own poverty. This is supposed to actually be a fictionalized biography of Naipaul’s father and the story of his own upbringing.

Against All Enemies  Richard Clarke (29 May 2004)  
An insiders look at the “war on terror.” Very interesting and a damning indictment of the Bush administration.

True History of the Kelly Gang  Peter Carey (13 June 2004)  
Great novel about the famous Australian bushranger (outlaw) Ned Kelly. Written as a pseudo-autobiography. Apparently very well researched and certainly written in a very interesting style (the outlaw’s own hand).
Great Expectations  Charles Dickens (20 July 2004)

I finally got around to this (see “Jack Maggs” above) and I really enjoyed it. The third part of the novel is filled with the implausible coincidences that so turned me off to Dickens when I was young, but somehow they don’t bother me so much anymore (perhaps I’ve become a doddering old fool). Now, I have to decide whether to reread “Jack Maggs.”

Jack Maggs  Peter Carey (3 August 2004).

So, yes, I decided to reread it. Indeed, the character Tobias Oates is based on Dickens, who apparently really was in love with his live-in sister-in-law, who actually died in his arms at age seventeen (not that I have read anything to indicate that she was pregnant by him at the time). I probably won’t take the time to look more deeply into this, but I imagine that Carey takes much or most of the Oates character directly from Dickens’s own character and experiences. Assuming that the details he provides are accurate, Carey seems to have also done a great deal of research into 19th century London, the city and life in it.

Of course the rest of the story must be imagined. The idea is that the encounter between Oates and Maggs, a transported criminal who has illegally returned from Australia, provided the background material for Oates’s novel “The Death of Jack Maggs” (or Dickens’s “Great Expectations”). Like Magwitch, Maggs has made his fortune in Australia, and has returned to meet the young man who as a boy did him a kindness, while Maggs was a prisoner, and who Maggs has since sponsored in the life of a gentleman. This would be Henry Phipps here, though this character actually has very few of the redeeming qualities of Dickens’s Pip. Similarly the character Sofia, long dead before the novel’s story commences, might be imagined to have inspired Dickens’s Estella, though the characters and the roles they play in the story could not be more different.

Anyway, this is an excellent book, fun to read, especially having recently read “Great Expectations.”

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?  Beverly Daniel Tatum (20 Sept 2004).

This was the first book in a “Faculty Reading Initiative” proposed by the new incoming president of the University of Florida. I had hoped to attend the faculty roundtable discussion and the lecture by the author that were to held as part of the inauguration activities, but between Hurricane Frances and work that had to be done, I was unable to make it.

My wife is rather expert on this literature, and in fact it is her copy of the book that I read. She told me from the outset that there were better books in this area, but I decided to go ahead with it anyway, mainly because of the proposed inaugural activities.

In any case, I found the book very disappointing. Mostly it consisted of an extended discussion of the increasing self awareness associated with growing up, and the increasing stress of peer and other relationships, as they apply to people of color. Moreover, all, or nearly all of the evidence offered to support the authors positions was anecdotal, often gathered from comments in students’ papers or in class discussions — and of course one might suspect that such comments are often intended to please the instructor. Nothing about any of this seemed very surprising or insightful to me, just a collection of rather trivial observations, sometimes wrapped in sociological/psychological jargon.

I am sympathetic to the author’s views and I wanted to like this book, but I didn’t find anything here that was very compelling or helpful to me as an educator or a citizen, just exhortations to “speak out,” “embrace cross-racial dialog,” and so forth.

A damning portrait of the Bushes and a warning about dynasties from the man who wrote The Emerging Republican Majority in 1969, the book that became the blueprint for Republicans’ “Southern strategy.” In other words, the author is not exactly a flaming liberal. It’s a bit of a tough slog at times, but well worth reading.

Intelligence Matters: the CIA, the FBI, Saudi Arabia, and the Failure of America’s War on Terror  Senator Bob Graham (3 Nov 2004).

Reminiscent of Richard Clarke’s Against All Enemies, this book reveals, among other things, the sponsorship of the 9/11 terrorists by the Saudi government, the many cover-up efforts of the Bush administration (many successful), and their lying about intelligence to lead us into a war in Iraq that predictably devastated our efforts to combat terrorism. A well written book, highly recommended.

A Mathematician Plays the Stock Market  John Allen Paulos (13 Nov 2004)

An amusing and interesting look at the stock market through the eyes of a mathematician (who lost big on WorldCom). Paulos gives a lively tour of fundamental market concepts, measures, and methods, and describes their shortcomings in a way that should be understandable to anyone. He also focuses heavily on the psychology of investing, which is probably the most interesting aspect of the book.

Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America  Barbara Ehrenreich (21 Nov 2004)

To understand the plight of the working poor, Ehrenreich leaves her comfortable, upper middle class life behind and joins the ranks of the working poor, first in Key West (Florida), then in Portland (Maine), and finally in Minneapolis (Minnesota). Even though she does not live for more than a month in each setting, and even though she has a car (and even though, unknown to her employers, she is highly educated), it is clear that she would not be able to “get by” in the kind of jobs that at least 30 percent of the workforce holds (making less than $8/hour). In fact, she was not able to make it while holding two full time jobs.

Cataclysm: the First World War as Political Tragedy  David Stevenson (14 March 2005)

Stevenson examines in depth the military, diplomatic, economic, and societal causes and effects of WWI. Why the sides fought, how they fought, and what enabled them to fight; the causes and consequences of the war; and so forth. At times I felt lost in some of the details, but overall I enjoyed this book. If you want to go beyond the usual platitudes about this war and it’s causes, this seems like a good place to start.

Eats, Shoots, & Leaves  Lynne Truss (29 March 2005)

In spite of all evidence to the contrary, I’m a stickler about punctuation, at least relative to today’s standards. So I enjoyed this short book. I had hoped for something funnier, but it is an amusing and informative look at English and American punctuation and its present-day decline.

The Kite Runner  Khaled Hosseini (2 April 2005)

Amir grows up as a privileged Afghanistan boy, coming of age just before the Russian invasion. The story turns around an act of cowardice by which he betrays his best and most loyal friend, the son of his father’s Hazara servant. This is a really fine novel that I enjoyed immensely.

Right Hand, Left Hand: The Origins of Asymmetry in Brains, Bodies, Atoms, and Cultures  Chris McManus (8 May 2005)

The Known World  Edward P. Jones (22 May 2005)  
A very good historical novel concerning a bit of history that I knew nothing about: black *slave owners* in the antebellum South.

A Short History of Nearly Everything  Bill Bryson (21 July 2005)  
A wonderfully readable survey of the history of science and of the current state of scientific knowledge, ranging across physics, astronomy, geology, biology, and anthropology.

Prime Obsession: Bernhard Riemann and the Greatest Unsolved Problem in Mathematics  John Derbyshire (11 August 2005)  
A very good book about the Riemann conjecture, its history, and the various attempts to solve it. Derbyshire actually explains enough of the mathematics that one can understand the general ideas and introduces many of the most interesting mathematicians of the past century in the process. The chapters mostly alternate between history and mathematics, so one never gets the feeling of just reading a math text.

Gould argues for NOMA (nonoverlapping magisteria): separation of the domains of science and religion, with proper respect from each side for the role of the other. While discussing many of the violations of NOMA both from sides, Gould emphasizes that this principle has nevertheless been followed by the vast majority of both scientists and religious leaders and takes care to debunk some myths of supposed violations (e.g., no one seriously tried to argue that Columbus would sail off the edge of a flat earth; the only controversy was whether he had underestimated the distance west from Europe to the Orient, which indeed he had).

Star of the Sea  Joseph O’Connor (23 August 2005)  
Sort of a murder mystery set on a ship going from Ireland to America in the midst of the potato famine; but much more than that. An excellent book.

The Satanic Verses  Salman Rushdie (5 February 2006)  
After the passenger plane they’re on is blown up by a terrorist bomb, Gibreel Farista and Saladin Chamcha fall from the sky into the English Channel and survive, but with some strange side effects: Gibreel has a halo and other characteristics of the archangel (Gabriel) and Saladin grows goat’s horns, hoofs, tail, etc.

There’s really too much to tell here. The book contains a broad exploration and critique of religion (Islam in particular), ethnic/racial prejudice, and much else. And the usual fantastic Rushie storytelling, obvious from the paragraph above. Actually, it’s a lot of stories (many of them connected through Gibreel’s dreaming as the archangel), and it can be a bit hard to keep track of all the characters, particularly if, like me, you’re somewhat ignorant of Islam and the Koranic stories. I found it quite helpful to keep a copy of Paul Brians’s notes handy while reading (go to [http://www.wsu.edu/~brians](http://www.wsu.edu/~brians) and look under the “Course Materials” link).

I really enjoyed this book. I think *Midnight’s Children* is better, but Rushdie is really fun to read and this is a wonderful book.

Carter charts how far off course the we have been taken by the Bush administration and its fundamentalist allies. Torture, intolerance, an unjust war, the growing divide between rich and poor, violation
of the separation of church and state, and all rest. It’s a sad true story, but it is good to hear from a real
cchristian, instead of the usual crowd of noisy charlatans.

Crossing to Safety  Wallace Stegner (5 June 2006)

The intertwined lives of two couples from the 1930s through the present (1980s?). They meet as
the husbands join the faculty of the English Department at the University of Wisconsin during the
depression. The narrator (Stegner I suppose) is not retained after one year, but is successful as an
author of novels and short stories and as an editor/reviewer of books. The other husband sacrifices
writing poetry in order to write boring academic papers, but still fails to get tenure. Many summers
are shared at the “compound” of the latter couple, where the wife of the narrator develops polio early
on. Basically this is hard to sum up in just a few words, but it is a very good book (though not quite
as good as “Angle of Repose” by the same author).

Out  Natsuo Kirino (17 July 2006)

Engrossing story of murder in Japan. There’s a strong underlying theme of the oppression of women
in Japanese society, and the book is gory to say the least, but it’s all carried along by the engrossing
story and characters, particularly the main character. This probably falls into the category of a fun
summer read, but the quality is high for that category.

Absurdistan  Gary Shteyngart (7 August 2006)

Misha Vainberg (aka “Snack Daddy”) is a young and hugely fat Russian Jew, with a bachelors degree
from “Accidental College” in the midwest of the US, and an intense love for everything American (or
at least for American pop culture). His oligarch father having killed an Oklahoma businessman, the
INS refuses to allow him to return to America. Misha is deeply unhappy in Russia, and pines over
his Puerto Rican/Bronxian girlfriend, Rouenna, and relationship with his father, who has been killed
by a rival oligarch. His only friend in Russia seems to be his college buddy and American expatriate,
“Aloysha Bob”. Financed by his father’s killer, Misha travels to Absurdistan (and oil-rich republic
on the Caspian) to obtain a Belgian passport that will at least allow him to immigrate to Brussels.
He becomes embroiled in local politics, such as it is, and all sorts of insanity ensues. Funny and
enjoyable.

Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explains the Hidden Side of Everything  Steven D. Levitt and Stephen
J. Dubbner (1 Oct 2006)

Interesting, short, and very readable. Incentives, intended and otherwise, and their consequences.
How standardized testing encourages teachers to cheat, and how to catch them. Why the homes of
real estate agents houses stay on the market longer and sell for more. Why crack dealers live with
their moms. How obsessive “parenting” doesn’t help kids to succeed (though it does sell a lot of
books, carseats, and other gizmos). How Roe v. Wade caused the huge drop seen in the U.S. crime
rate during the 1990’s. And other interesting tidbits that may contradict the “conventional wisdom.”

American Pastoral  Philip Roth (11 Nov 2006)

Seymour “Swede” Levov is handsome, athletic, kind and considerate to all, and a successful business-
man with a beautiful wife and a home in the country. But his seemingly perfect American life flies
apart in 1968 when his radicalized teenage daughter sets off a bomb in the local general store. I’m not
sure that I would rate it as highly as do the critics who make it one of the two or three best American
books of the last twenty or fifty years, but it is very good and certainly worth reading.

Beloved  Toni Morrison (24 Dec 2006?)
Finished this while away on break, and I forgot to record it (and maybe another book as well?). Sethe, formerly an escaped slave (the setting is post civil war), lives in a house in Cincinnati along with her daughter Denver, the recently arrived Paul D, a recently arrived friend from the old days, and the ghost of another daughter. Before Paul D’s arrival, her mother-in-law has died and her young sons have left, having had enough of the ghost and everything else. After Paul D chases the ghost away in a fiery confrontation in the kitchen, she returns in physical form, as Beloved. This is a fascinating book, full of ghosts and many cruelties, and a few kindnesses.

Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid  Jimmy Carter (31 Dec 2006)
An insightful analysis of the problem of Palestine by our greatest ex-president. Very few punches are pulled here: reading this book will help you to understand the real nature of the problem.

The Spectator Bird  Wallace Stegner (4 Feb 2007)
Reminiscences of a retired literary agent about a sabbatical spent 20 years ago in Denmark with his wife, and particularly about unravelling the rather tragic story of their well-to-do (minor royalty) Danish hostess. Told through the device of reading his diaries from the period in the present, and hence also revealing the story of his own past and present, and the pain of growing old. Of course this is very similar to the device used in Angle of Repose. I enjoyed this book, but Angle of Repose still seems by far the best of Stegner’s work.

An Iranian woman, educated in Europe and America, Nafisi is a professor of English literature in Tehran. Frustrated with the omnipresent influence and oppression of the Islamic Republic, she resigns her position, and starts a private class or reading group of seven female students who meet in her apartment on Thursdays. For some reason I found this book, or at least my interest in reading it, to be pretty uneven (particularly the first quarter or so of the book), but this really is a fascinating story, and well worth reading. Much of the book is actually concerned with her time teaching in a university setting in Tehran, and this part is also very interesting.

Dream State  (Eight Generations of Swamp Lawyers, Conquistadors, Confederate Daughters, Banana Republicans, and Other Florida Wildlife) Diane Roberts (2 August 2007)
While I was in school at FSU, Diane (DK) Roberts wrote for the Florida Flambeau (the formerly independent student newspaper). She’s always had a very witty take on things, as is aptly demonstrated in this book. Much or most of the book is about her extended family’s history in North Florida and her own experiences in Florida (and as a Rhodes Scholar and PhD student at Oxford). I enjoyed this book a lot: “my people” come from the same part of the country (one of my cousins, former Speaker of the Florida House James Harold Thompson, rates a mention in the book), and DK and I had several friends and acquaintances in common from the Flambeau and elsewhere in the Tallahassee scene (though I don’t remember ever meeting her). I would recommend it to anyone seeking a humorous look at the “other Florida” (i.e., not South Florida).

Redemption Falls  Joseph O’Connor (9 August 2007)
From the same (Irish) author as Star of the Sea. Our friend Robin brought this over from Britain; it won’t be available in the U.S. until October, 2007. The characters are mostly either Irish or of immediate Irish descent, with action of the story taking place mostly in the “Mountain Territory” just after the Civil War. Almost by coincidence, Robin and then I read this book while on vacation in Montana, and on a visit to Virginia City we determined that the Mountain Territory is Montana and Redemption Falls is Virginia City. The central character, Con O’Keefe, a.k.a., the Irish General, is
based on “the” real Irish General, Thomas Francis Meagher, who really was a (well-educated) Irish
revolutionary who escaped from exile and imprisonment in Tasmania, became famous as a public
speaker in America for the Irish republican cause, organized and led the Irish Brigade for the Union
army in the American civil war, and later served as governor of the Montana territory. The vigilantes
in the text really existed as well and feature prominently in the folklore of Virginia City. Similarly for
the outlaws and other types.

The story revolves around O’Keefe’s relationships with the territorials (including a good number
of ex-Confederates, some of Irish descent); his high-class wife from New York; his own past and
drinking problems; and with an Irish boy who has made his way to Redemption Falls, presumably on
his way to Canada after having served as a child for the Confederate forces. He is followed by his
older sister, who is his only living relation. To say that these kids encountered some hard times would
be a severe understatement, and the story of their individual struggles in America constitutes the other
main line of the story. I don’t know whether such a boy really did exist, but I may try reading The
Irish General: Thomas Francis Meagher by Paul R. Wylie to find out.

English, August: An Indian Story  Upamanyu Chatterjee (25 August 2007)

Agastya Sen (a.k.a., August), is leaving his privileged school life in Dehli (and Calcutta) for a year of
training as an IAS (Indian Administrative Service) district administrator in the remote town of Madna.
Agastya is a stoner, and as mentioned in the introduction (by Akhil Sharma) this is a sort of slacker
coming-of-age novel. Agastya spends most of his time avoiding meetings; getting stoned alone in his
room (or elsewhere with other young stoner bureaucrats that he meets in Madna); exercising, running,
or walking about; getting himself invited to lunch or dinner in order to avoid the horrible food at the
Rest House where he is staying; and lying needlessly about almost everything, just for fun. In spite of
himself, he learns something about administration as it is actually practiced, though he never becomes
reconciled to his fate.

I truly enjoyed this book, though not in the way that I expected. The comments on the back cover
suggest that this novel is laugh-out-loud funny, but I didn’t read it that way for the most part; it’s
funny, but mostly not in the way that makes me laugh out loud. In any case, I liked it at least as well
as anything that I have read in the last year or two.

Hawksmoor  Peter Ackroyd (9 September 2007)

Nicholas Dyer is an architect and assistant to Christopher Wren in early 18th century London, en-
trusted with the task of building seven (six?) new churches in the city. He is a satanist, and plans the
locations and other aspects of the churches accordingly. In particular there must be a human sacrifice
at each church, usually a child, and usually (always?) buried in or near the foundation. In modern
times, detective Nicholas Hawksmoor is investigating a series of murders occurring at these same
churches.

The rest of this deserves a SPOILER ALERT. I didn’t intend to go on so long, but I’m trying to better
understand this fascinating book myself.

Interestingly, the actual architect of these churches in London was named Nicholas Hawksmoor, and
in the novel, the detective Hawksmoor seems to be a sort of reincarnation of Dyer, or otherwise
connected to him in ways both concrete and mystical. Dyer throughout expresses his rejection of the
Age of Reason, and of the idea that all this can be understood through reason and experiment. Dyer’s
assistant, Walter Pyne, is troubled by his mentor’s ideas and apparent mental breakdown, and worried
about how these will reflect upon himself, and he tries surreptitiously to get Dyer to resign from his
position (Dyer mistakenly concludes that the surveyor Yorick Hayes is actually behind these efforts
and kills him at one of the churches; Walter Pyne suspects him of at least this killing, but goes insane because he feels at fault for the murder and even believes that he may have committed it himself.

Hawksmoor’s second is named Walter Payne. Payne believes that his mentor’s methods are “old fashioned” and (like Pyne) worries that his mentor’s failure to solve the case will reflect badly upon him. Dyer has a landlady named Best, Hawksmoor has a landlady named West, and I think that they live in the same location, in very similar circumstances. And on and on like this.

At some point a mysterious notebook is delivered to Hawksmoor. Meanwhile, in the 18th century, Dyer’s notebook disappears from a locked box in his room, and he worries that it could ruin him. In many ways, near the end of the novel in particular, the present is not only a reflection of the past, but the two seem to bleed into one another.

I was not sure exactly what to make of the end, although it seems that Dyer has died and reawakened in modern times, and I suppose that he is literally supposed to be the source of the murders, although this is not at all clear. Of course one might also conclude that Hawksmoor and Dyer are the same person, though I don’t think that there was anything to suggest that Hawksmoor has committed the murders. The last page or two suggests that Hawksmoor actually meets his double/opposite in one of the churches (after having been removed from the case and sent on vacation) “and who could say where one had ended and the other had begun?” The last paragraph suggests that Hawksmoor even becomes the next (and last) victim in the modern series of murders.

**Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod**  Gary Paulsen (27 December 2007)

This was a fun book to read as my last book of the year. I had no idea that the Iditarod was so insanely dangerous, and parts of the book are just hilarious too, particularly the descriptions of the author’s mishaps while “training” his dogs. At times he veers a bit too much into the mystical zen-dog stuff for my taste, but otherwise I really enjoyed this book.

**Rabbit Angstrom, The Four Novels: Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit Is Rich, Rabbit at Rest**  John Updike (14 August 2008)

Updike’s four Rabbit Angstrom novels collected into one volume chronicle the life and times of one Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom, born in the late 1930’s, at roughly 10-year increments, from young adulthood to a fairly early death. These are very good and deserve to be read together in spite of the length, though I don’t know if I would rank this opus as one of the best two or three novels of the last 25 years, as did a panel of experts convened by the New York Times (http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/21/books-fiction-25-years.html). The flavor here is reminiscent of another work on the same list by an author of the same generation, Phillip Roth’s American Pastoral.

Unfortunately I don’t have time right now for a summary (which means I may not ever get around to it).

**The Road**  Cormac McCarthy ()

Another one that I forgot to enter. I think that I read it sometime between 2004 and 2007? By now you’ve seen the movie.

**The Sea**  John Banville (2008)

Again, I forgot to enter this one at the time I finished it. In The Sea, which won the Booker prize in 2005, Banville gives us another melancholy return to a seaside town, this time by a grieving widower to the place where he spent childhood vacations with his (working class) family. The story interweaves memories of those visits (and his relationship with a vacationing family of better means), memories of his wife, and his current interactions with the proprietress of the house, the other resident, and his
daughter. Banville is in no hurry here: writing is an art, and the reader should enjoy every carefully chosen word along the way to the story’s resolution.

Recapitulation  Wallace Stegner (Nov 6, 2008)
Stegner comes back to his autobiographical character, Bruce Mason, from *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, later in life. Mostly remembering and coming to terms with first loves, old friendships, and his relationship with his wayward father. Good book, fairly typical of the mature Stegner.

Christine Falls  Benjamin Black (Nov 14, 2008)
Benjamin Black is John Banville’s pen name for his (three so far) mystery novels whose main character is pathologist Quirke (does he have a first name?). Here Quirke pursues the coverup of the death of a young woman in childbirth and the disappearance of her child, a coverup in which his own obstetrician stepbrother is evidently involved. I didn’t enjoy the book much in the beginning, but I did eventually get into it and stayed up half the night finishing it, even though I was able to guess the main culprit very early on. Still, I suppose “I stayed up half the night finishing it” is a pretty good recommendation.

The Omnivore's Dilemma  Michael Pollan (Dec 25, 2008)

The Uncommon Reader  Alan Bennett (Feb 14, 2009)
The Queen of England takes up reading. Very short and very entertaining.

Dust Bowl: the Southern Plains in the 1930s  Donald Worster (Feb 28, 2009)
Interesting history of the dust bowl and its cultural and economic causes and effects.

Lucky Jim  Kingsley Amis (Mar 2, 2009)
A young man is rescued (or rescues himself) from an academic life in 1950s England. Short, funny, and fun to read.

Don Quixote  Miguel De Cervantes, translated by Edith Grossman (Apr 10, 2009)
I came across this at Patt and Vic’s beach house and decided to give it a go, having only read excerpts in high school. Don Quixote is often deemed be the first true novel. There were actually two books, and this translations contains both. They’re long, and so far I have only read the first, and plan to return to the second.
The basic outline is familiar to all I suppose. Cervantes’s main intent seems to be to parody and poke fun at the chivalric books of the time, but Don Quixote is broadly humorous and full of subplots involving the various folks he and Pancho Sanchez encounter during their “adventures”. However, these stories within the story are somewhat repetetive and reading through them is a bit of a slog at times.

The White Tiger  Aravind Adiga (Apr 15, 2009)
An Indian “entrepreneur” tells his own story. Quick and interesting, gives yet another angle on modern India.

The Enchantress of Florence  Salman Rushdie (Apr 26, 2009)
A silver-tongued Florentine calling himself Mogor dell’Amore and wearing a magician’s multicolored coat arrives in the court of the Mughal emperor Akbar (the Great) with an elaborate tale that makes him the emporer’s uncle. Great story telling, woven through Indian, central Asian, middle Eastern,
and Italian/European history. Niccolò Machiavelli, Andrea Doria, the Medici’s, Vlad the Impaler (Dracula), and many others make appearances. Machiavelli is actually an important character in the story, as is Mogor dell’Amore (aka)

Akbar is the central and the most interesting character in the book. He gathers men of ideas and encourages debate among them, he practices religious tolerance while questioning the value of religion, considers various notions of self, modes of governance, fantasy versus reality, etc., but he is also a conqueror and a man of power and sometimes cruelty.

Rushdie continues to be one of my favorite authors. I’m sure I missed many underlying ideas and even themes in this book, but it succeeds even as straight entertainment.

**Netherland**  Joseph O’Neill (July 3, 2009)

A really good and relatively short novel. Dutchman Hans van den Broek works as an oil-markets analyst in the financial industry in London and then New York, the latter during a period that includes 2009-09-11. The story chronicles the dissolution of his marriage and his subsequent reunion with his wife Rachel, and his association with “Chuck” Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian with dreams of opening a world-class cricket ground in New York. This novel is an ode to New York, particularly it’s broad acceptance or at least absorption of anyone and everyone, and a tale of our modern disaffection/disconnection from work, family, friends, and meaning.

**Night Soldiers**  Alan Furst (August 13, 2009)

Starting some vacation reading here. This novel is about Soviet spies (and German and Allied) spies in the era of the late 30’s (think Spanish revolution) through WWII. Good but not great.

**A Dirty Job: A Novel**  Christopher Moore (August 16, 2009)

Hilarious book. Guy somehow becomes a “death merchant”, i.e., someone who collects objects that hold the souls of the dead and passes them on (through his thrift shop) to the living folks to whom there are supposed to go. Ends up fighting the forces of evil in a climactic battle, but this is a comedy, so it’s all funny. Be ready to blow off a day or two, because you won’t want to put this down until you’ve finished it.

**Stick**  Elmore Leonard (August 23, 2009)

Light and enjoyable summer reading.

**The Ministry of Special Cases**  Nathan Englander (September 20, 2009)

Kaddish Poznan mother was a prostitute who belonged to the Society of the Benevolent Self, a circle of Jewish pimps and whores in Buenos Aires which reached its height in the 1920s and whose male members had colorful nicknames like Talmud Harry, Hezzi Two-Blades, Coconut Burstein, Hayim-Moshe One-Eye Weiss, and Shlomo the Pin. Not surprisingly, Kaddish was anonymously fathered, so his last name was made up by a Rabbi and adopted by his mother.

Kaddish grew up outside acceptable Jewish society and rejects it in adulthood. In fact, he makes his living by chiseling the names from the headstones of forebears of other descendants of the Benevolent Self who wish to erase their connections to this questionable past. His wife Lillian, herself “respectable” until she married Kaddish, works in an insurance office, and their son Pato is a university student who is often forced to accompany Kaddish on his nocturnal business. The action takes place in the mid-1970s, and eventually revolves around Pato’s “disappearance” by the government/police and Kaddish and Lillian’s attempts to retrieve him.
It’s a bit slow at first, but this is a very good book. Kaddish in some ways reminds me of Naipaul’s main character in “A House for Mr. Biswas”.

**The Great Gatsby**  F. Scott Fitzgerald (Sept 28, 2009)

I read this in high school, but that was a long time ago and I had forgotten the story for the most part. It’s a short and fairly engrossing story that could be taken as an indictment of the upper classes and the American class system in general. Perhaps it reflects Fitzgerald’s own disillusionment with the wealthy classes, but I wouldn’t know much about that.

**My Ántonia**  Willa Cather (Oct 11, 2009)

A story of growing up on the Nebraska plains in the early days of settlement and development. The story is told by “Jim Burden”, who like Cather herself, came to Nebraska from Virginia as a child. The story focuses more or less on Ántonia, a slightly older girl and daughter of a “Bohemian” family (i.e., from Bohemia, in what is now the Czech Republic), but more generally on the people and families in those early days and their trials and tribulations and joys. Like *The Great Gatsby*, this is a story of unrequited love, and has something to say about society, though in this case the target for approbation would be small-minded and conventional-thinking small town types. The book seems a bit “old fashioned”, for want of a better term, and until I got near the end, I found that enjoyed reading it more in small pieces rather than big chunks.

**The Devil in the White City**  Erik Larson (Oct 18, 2009)

The Chicago’s 1893 World’s Fair (officially the World’s Columbus Exposition, a celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus’s voyage to America) was meant to top the Paris exposition of 1889. This book interweaves the story of the design and construction of the fair and the story of a serial killer, Herman Webster Mudgett, alias H. H. Holmes, who carried out most of crimes in a building he owned adjacent to the fair. Both stories are fascinating. The design and construction of the fair was supervised by Chicago architect Daniel H. Burnham, leading a team of renowned architects from around the U.S., including the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of New York’s Central Park. The “White City” was constructed in an amazingly short period and in the midst of an economic crash, but the fair was nevertheless an enormous success. The giant Ferris wheel, designed by the steel engineer George Ferris, was a late addition, meant to rival Eiffel’s famous tower from the Paris exposition. Entertaining, interesting, and certainly worth reading.

**Shame: a Novel**  Salman Rushdie (Nov 29, 2009)

Salman Rushdie’s take on Pakistan’s Bhuttos and General Zia. I read for quite a while before it clicked that Iskander (Isky) Harappa was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Arjumand (the Virgin Ironpants) Harappa was Benazir Bhutto, and General Raza (Old Razor Guts) Hyder was Genera Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq. Of course Rushdie’s novel is a wildly fictionalized and fantastic account, not intended as a history. One theme of the book seems to be that terrible violence arises both from shamelessness (or at least that many men are shameless in committing violence) and from excessive shame.

Initially the novel focuses on the early life of Omar Khayyam Shakil, who is the illegitimate child of three sisters (two of whom seem to have sympathetic pregnancies at the same time as the true mother, so that no one is able to determine which is actually Omar’s mother). Later, the focus is on the lives and families of Isky Harappa, who enjoys the first half of his life as a debauched playboy (and Omar Khayyam Shakir’s companion and mentor in the same lifestyle) before getting religion and becoming leader of Pakistan, and of Raza Hyder, who is constantly outdone by Isky until he overthrows him and eventually has him executed. Abandoned by Isky Harappa’s “conversion”, Omar Khayyam Shakir, in his capacity as one of the nation’s leading physicians, is called to treat Sufiya Zinobia Hyder,
the unwanted and mentally disabled oldest child of Raza Hyder, after she has gone beserk and in
a fit of violence beheaded and gutted dozens of turkeys. Omar Khayyam becomes fascinated by,
and eventually marries Sufiya Zinobia, thus becoming a member of the devout Hyder’s household.
While either Omar Khayyam Shakil or Isky Harappa could plausibly represent shamelessness, Sufiya
Zinobia Hyder seems to represent excessive shame and the violence that can arise from it.

The women, particularly the wives and daughters of Harappa and Hyder, as well as Omar Khayyam’s
mothers, are central characters in the novel, with Rani Harappa, Isky’s wife, rendering a withering
judgment of his life at its end.

Not on a par with Rushdie’s best (e.g., *Midnight’s Children* or *The Moor’s Last Sigh*) but still a good
book and well worth reading.

**The March**  E. L. Doctorow (Dec 27, 2009)

Follows Sherman’s march through Georgia (post Atlanta), South Carolina, and North Carolina through
the eyes of a variety of characters, including Sherman and his officers, but mostly the displaced South-
erners (former slaves, slave holders, and others), the common soldiers on both sides, and the physician
Wrede Sartorius. (Except for the obvious generals and so forth, I do not know which, if any, of these
are real people and which are drawn completely from the authors imagination. I suspect that Sartorius
in particular was a real character, and I wonder about others, such as the photographers Josiah Culp
and Calvin Harper, the “nurse” Emily Thompson, the slave girl Pearl Wilkins Jameson, and the British
respondent Hugh Pryce. Also, is there any significance to the address, 12 Washington Square, NY,
NY, carried by Pearl in the letter from the Lieutenant (?) Clarke who first befriended her?)

I thought this was a very good (not great) book. Good history, very explicit about the various horrors
of war, and the interweaving of the stories of the disparate characters held together very well.

**Straight Man**  Richard Russo (Feb 13, 2010)

Very funny book about an English professor in a small state college (branch of Penn State) and his
dealings with his family, his students, and his fellow middle-aged, late-mid-life-crisis-suffering col-
leagues. This is definitely light reading, and I suppose writing a humorous book about academics is
like shooting fish in a barrel, but I really enjoyed it.

**The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle**  Haruki Murakami (Mar 15, 2010)

This is a great book; fascinating, lovely, and sometimes horrific. It’s quite surreal and yet the feeling
is down to earth and very human. The rest of this is kind of a spoiler, mainly recorded to help me
remember things.

The basic story line: Toru Okada has quit his ho-hum job in a law office while his wife Kumiko
continues to work. Their cat, named Noboru Wataya, after Kumiko’s brother, has disappeared, and
while looking for the cat, Toru begins receiving a series of strange phone calls and visits. Kumiko
eventually leaves Toru, apparently under the influence of her evil brother Noboru Wataya, whom she
has never liked and who has become more and more influential in Japan’s media and politics. It
becomes Toru’s mission to find Kumiko and get her back, and simultaneously to somehow turn back
the evil that is represented by Noboru Wataya.

The cast of characters is strange and fascinating. Early in the book Toru starts up a friendship with
16-year-old May Kasahara. May lives down an enclosed alley from Toru and Kumiko’s place, behind
the apparently cursed “hanging house”, where Toru is sent by Kumiko to look for the cat. May is
fascinated with death since the death of her boyfriend in a motorcycle accident in which she was a
passenger.
Toru is also contacted by Creta Kano and her sister Malta (yes, both have named themselves after Mediterranean islands), who have psychic powers and are supposed to help find the cat, but seem to have their own missions and a not-so-friendly connection to the brother, Noboru Wataya (always referred to by his full name).

There are also stories of an old veteran, Mr. Honda, a psychic himself, who had counseled Toru and Kumiko early in their marriage, and his comrade in arms from the 1930s and 40s, Mr. Mamiya, whose experiences in a dry well in Mongolia turn out to have a big influence on the story.

Finally, in the latter half of the book Toru is helped by “Nutmeg Akasaka” and her son “Cinnamon” (not their real names). Nutmeg has some sort of psychic healing powers, and Cinnamon runs her business affairs and seems to have some powers of his own (he also hasn’t spoken since he was 7 years old). It turns out that Toru has the same sort of powers as Nutmeg, and he takes care of that part of the business for a while.

Toru’s powers seem to have been acquired while spending several days at the bottom of a deep, dry well in the garden of the hanging house, where he somehow passed through to the “other side”, meeting a strange woman in a giant, maze-like hotel. In the process, Toru also acquires a large blue mark on his cheek which he carries through much of the book. Toru eventually realizes that to accomplish his mission he must go back again, and so spends many hours at the bottom of the well hoping to get through.

When reading the book, this all seems much less surreal and odd than it sounds here. The story has a lot of forward momentum and draws the reader along, and the main characters are very human and sympathetic. There are many people and stories from Japan’s misadventures in Manchuria prior to and during the Second World War, and these are connected in crucial ways to the events of Toru’s life.

**Hiroshima** John Hersey (May 12, 2010)

This book originally appeared as an article in *The New Yorker* in 1946. The bomb was dropped on August 6, 1945. Hersey’s interviews with survivors were conducted in May, 1946. The article appeared in the August 31, 1946 issue of the magazine, taking up almost the entire issue. It appeared as a book almost immediately afterwards.

The book focuses on the stories of 6 survivors, Miss Toshinki Sasaki (clerk), Dr. Masakazu Fujii (physician), Mrs. Hatsuyo Nakamura (a tailor’s widow), Father Wilhelm Kleinsorge (German priest), Dr. Terufumi Sasaki (surgeon), and Reverend Mr. Kiyoshi Tanimoto (Methodist pastor). It is wrenching and horrific, but also fascinating and inspiring in some ways, and well worth reading: what these people went through and what they did during the aftermath of the bomb is incredible. Of course it is also sobering to think that the Hiroshima bomb, which destroyed an entire city of 250,000 people, was probably about one-eighth as powerful as a single warhead on a 12-warhead Trident II submarine missile, and about 1/700 as powerful as the most powerful warhead still in the United States’ arsenal.

The original article/book takes up 90 pages of this book, and is followed by a 62 page afterward written in 1985, in which Hersey went back to follow up on his subjects.

**Bloodsucking Fiends: A Love Story** Christopher Moore (June 29, 2010) (Fiction)

A different vampire story. Quick and mildly entertaining, but not in the same league as *A Dirty Job*.

**Night** Elie Wiesel (July 6, 2010) (Nonfiction)

Wiesel’s memoir of his internment as a teenager in Hitler’s concentration camps. We need to be reminded every so often of what happened there.
Shadow Tag  Louise Erdrich (July 25, 2010) (Fiction)

Irene is at least half native American and lives in Minneapolis with her painter husband Gil and their three children Florian, Riel, and Stoney. Gil’s career is built entirely on portraits of Irene, but he is abusive to her and the kids. Irene is an alcoholic who can’t seem to finish her (history) PhD dissertation on the artist George Catlin, who painted native Americans in the early 1800s. Irene learns that Gil is secretly reading her diary and so begins to keep two diaries: the red diary, which Gil secretly reads and through which she manipulates him (she wants or thinks that she wants a divorce), and the blue, true diary, which is kept in a safety deposit box under her name. There is nothing happy going on here. The book is not bad, but I wouldn’t feel that I had missed much if I had never read it.

Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking  Malcolm Gladwell (August 3, 2010) (Nonfiction)

Explores the power of the subconscious mind to make good judgments, often better than that afforded by an extensive analysis, particularly in situations in which there is “too much” data. Cases where our instantaneous judgments are more likely to be wrong and the ways in which we mislead ourselves are also explored. The section about reading facial expressions was fascinating. Much of the book focuses on anecdotes, but these are mostly interesting. I am skeptical about some things: for example, in the new afterward, the author cites a study of shoppers in which the “thinkers” are less likely to be disappointed with their purchase than the “gut” shoppers when the purchase is simple and inexpensive, but more likely to be disappointed when the purchase is complex and expensive, but my guess is just that the thinkers are just more critical and there is a lot more to be unhappy with a complex and expensive purchase.

It is not easy to formulate a take home message from all of this. On the surface the idea is that snap judgments often work better than careful analysis based on overwhelming amounts of data. But there are many caveats that really water down this message: these “snap” judgments often work well only if supported by years of training, experience, and serious study (this comes up over and over again); one needs to be careful to filter out biases (the example of auditioning orchestra musicians is a good example of what can go wrong); there is a need for “white space”, i.e., enough time and space (physical and emotional) for the subconscious to work properly (snap judgments go wrong when the fight or flight response kicks in, as in the police shooting incidents discussed in the book); etc.

Zeitoun  Dave Eggers (October 5, 2010) (Fiction)

Distressing story of the abuse of a kind, hardworking, enterprising, and successful Arab-American during the Katrina debacle. Reveals on a personal level much of went wrong with America during the Bush administration. Told in a matter-of-fact way, with no sensationalizing, the Zeitouns’ story is still a shaming rebuke.

Notes from Lonely Man Ranch  Hal Padgett (December 15, 2010) (Fiction)

A collection of short, funny pieces, many of them hilarious. Fun to read. Not exactly fiction, but anyway.

Super Sad True Love Story  Gary Shteyngart (December 26, 2010) (Fiction)

Consumerist, immature, “Bipartisan” America on the skids. Think of it as an updating of Orwell’s 1982 to reflect current realities. I suppose that Shteyngart’s intent was to leaven this look into our future with humor, but it seems too plausible for me to laugh over it. I preferred his Absurdistan: perhaps it’s easier to laugh at someone else’s tragedy.

Privileged Information  Terry Lewis (June 14, 2011) (Fiction)
The author was a judge in some of the legal proceedings in Tallahassee surrounding the 2000 presidential election. This is his second novel. Here the protagonist/narrator, Paul Morganstein, is a Tallahassee lawyer who’s client is accused of murdering a lower level paper company executive in the nearby small towns where the narrator grew up. His own investigation uncovers a connection with the death of his brother 30 years ago and he begins to suspect that his client might be guilty of two murders. Not great literature, but nicely written, engrossing, and very entertaining. Good summer reading.

**Conflict of Interest**  Terry Lewis (June 25, 2011) (Fiction)

Decided to read Terry Lewis’s first novel. The main protagonist/narrator here is Ted Stevens, the legal partner of Paul Morganstein (see “Privileged Information” above). Ted has a serious alcohol problem that has broken up his marriage. He is appointed by the court to defend a man accused of murdering a female newspaper reporter who Ted recently represented in a divorce case. What Ted doesn’t admit is that he and the woman became lovers and that he was so drunk on the night that she was killed that he blanked out and cannot remember where he was nor what he did. Again, very entertaining summer reading.

**Where I’m Calling From**  Raymond Carver (July 13, 2011) (Fiction)

I almost never read short stories, much less a book of them, but my friend Jon Adams strongly recommended this one. It took a few stories for me to get into the form, particularly since most of the stories seemed to leave me hanging a bit, but I ended up enjoying it very much. Except for some of the last few stories, which involve a writer, the stories are sort of vignettes of ordinary, working or middle class people struggling with alcoholism, divorce, aging, death, and just the daily grind of existence. I really liked a lot of the stories, so I won’t bother to pick out any particular favorites. The story “So Much Water So Close to Home” was not one of my favorites, but it was familiar as the subject of a song by Australian singer-songwriter Paul Kelly and as part of a film *Short Cuts* by Robert Altman, which was actually a sort of mashup of a bunch of Carver’s stories.

**Dubliners**  James Joyce (August 1, 2011) (Fiction)

I read Norton’s critical edition, including all the commentary. I guess it goes without saying that there are a lot of great short stories here, and the parts form a fairly cohesive whole as well. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is now in the queue.

**Parrot & Olivier in America**  Peter Carey (August 14, 2011) (Fiction)

Olivier (Olivier-Hean-Baptiste de Clarel de Garmont) is a fictionalized version of Alexis de Tocqueville. To protect him from the guillotine, his mother arranges for him to be sent to America to study the penal system on behalf of the French government. Parrot (John Larrit), the servant (sort-of) of a confident and apparent lover of Olivier’s mother, is sent along to keep an eye on him. I don’t have time to write a full summary, but suffice it to say that Olivier and Parrot’s relationship grows and changes in America, as do their attitudes toward many things. This book reminds me more of Dickens in style than even Jack Maggs. I found it a bit slow going at the very beginning, but ended up enjoying it a great deal.

**The Sheltering Sky**  Paul Bowles (August 29, 2011) (Fiction)

Dark book describing the travels and travails of an American couple (Porter and Katherine Moresby) and a friend (Tunner) traveling in French North Africa in the postwar (WWII) years. Porter and Katherine both seem fairly neurotic, and Porter’s main goal seems to be to escape from anything resembling an ordinary life. He does manage to dump Tunner, who, outside of his friendship with the
Moresbys, seems fairly ordinary. (I suppose that Tunner could represent the American ordinariness that Porter is trying to escape.) Porter ends up dying from Typhoid in a desert backwater, at which point Katherine goes off the rails completely, runs away to the desert, is picked up by a camel train, raped, and married to one of the traders (who already has 4 wives), all with some degree of complicity on her own part.

This was an interesting book to read, but not one of my favorites. Bowles certainly led an interesting life however. Besides writing, he studied music with Aaron Copeland and was a fairly accomplished composer in his own right. He move to Tangier, Morocco, in 1947, and began to concentrate on writing books and short stories and doing translations of others’ work, including some native Moroccan storyteller. He lived in Tangiers until he died in 1999 at age 88.

The Long Day Wanes Anthony Burgess (October 23, 2011) (Fiction)

This book was originally published as three separate novels (Time for a Tiger; The Enemy in the Blanket; and Beds in the East), all set in Malaya during the winding down of British “administration” in late 1940s and the 1950s. The central character, Vitor Crabbe, is a school teacher in the first novel, and a school administrator in the second two. His (2nd) wife Fenella is a poet who is not especially happy living in Malaya. The novels mostly revolve around the foibles of an extensive cast of British expatriates, “native” Malays, Chinese shopkeepers, and Indians (e.g., Tamils, Sikhs), that changes from one novel to the next. Burgess served as a teacher and education officer in Malay, and clearly draws widely on his own experiences in these novels, which I found entertaining and a pleasure to read.

Moneyball Michael Lewis (October 29, 2011) (Nonfiction)

Billy Beane’s Oakland A’s, and how to exploit market inefficiencies and win with no money. The amazing thing is how bad everyone else in baseball was at evaluating player performance. This is a wonderful book: fascinating, entertaining, and funny.

Disgrace J. M. Coetzee (November 6, 2011) (Fiction)

Professor David Lurie has a brief affair with a student, leading to his dismissal and a long stay at his daughter Lucy’s smallholding in rural South Africa. He has no regrets about forfeiting his professional position, but is challenged by a future with few if any amorous adventures and little romantic fire, running down towards oblivion. Uncharacteristically he agrees to help out at a nearby animal clinic, while also doing chores at Lucy’s “farm”, and he develops a surprising sympathy with the doomed animals at the clinic. Then, in an incident at the farm, he is beaten and burned and Lucy is raped. Both David and Lucy must face some harsh realities of changing racial politics in South Africa as they adjust to this incident and its ramifications. Excellent.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man James Joyce (August 10, 2012) (Fiction)

As with Dubliners, I read the Norton critical edition, including all the commentary. And I had the pleasure of discussing some of it with our friend Robin Wilkinson and reading his close reading of a passage from the book. I wouldn’t say that Joyce is my favorite author, but I’m planning to read the text again, in light of having read it and the commentary once. Maybe I’ll have more to say then, although I’m sure that I still won’t get most of what Joyce was trying to accomplish. After that, I’ll add Ulysses to the queue.

The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One that Isn’t Robert I. Sutton

A useful book by a Stanford professor of Management Science and Engineering on the importance of keeping the workplace free of assholes and on how to deal with the assholes that you can’t get rid of.
Assholes: a Theory  Aaron James

A philosophers attempt to give a precise definition of the term asshole and to examine the various moral and practical dilemmas posed by assholes. I didn’t find it as useful as The No Asshole Rule, but it is somewhat helpful in delineating exactly what might be going on in the asshole’s mind.

The Signal and the Noise  Nate Silver

I like Silver’s 538 blog on the NY Times, and this book was entertaining. However, the constant, ill-informed, and basically content-free Bayesian cheerleading was annoying. I really object to the current trend of identifying all uses of Bayes’s rule with Bayesian inference, which seems to be much in evidence here. The frequentist-Bayesian “debate” was always mostly about formal scientific inference: the notion that someone who prefers a frequentist approach to formal inference must not believe in Bayes rule is crazy — it is a theorem after all, and a very useful one at that. More to the point, I’ve don’t think that I’ve ever met a statistician who would object to the use of Bayes rule in prediction. Moreover, there are some “criticisms” in here of frequentist methods that apply equally well to Bayesian methods.

I’ve known a lot of frequentists and a lot of Bayesians, and at least as many whatever-is-appropriate-and-works-ists. The frequentists and the whatever-works types never struck me as any less intelligent on average than the Bayesians, but I think all of them deserve more credit than the current crop of fad-followers who hype Bayes and laugh at frequentists without a deep understanding of either side of the argument.

The Big Short  Michael Lewis

Fun to read, personality-based look at some of the investors who were right about the market for subprime mortgages and their derivatives before the market crashed. But if you don’t know what a CDO or a CDS is before you read this, don’t expect to understand it afterwards: Lewis doesn’t explain any of these financial instruments very well.

The Theory That Wouldn’t Die  Sharon Bertsch McGrayne

In spite of the hype and the usual confusing of Bayes’s rule with Bayesian inference, this was surprisingly good for a popular science history. Most of the Bayesian “victories” cited have come in the area of prediction, and I really don’t believe that even the most ardent frequentists of the past would have argued too hard against the use of Bayes’s rule in prediction. My feeling is that the real controversy was about scientific inference, but the author is good about pointing out that statisticians tend to be more pragmatic and less dogmatic these days: whatever I can do that works.

I was disappointed that my great teacher, and R.A. Fisher’s Bayesian foil, Dev Basu, was not even mentioned once. This seems like a glaring omission. I know personally of at least two well known academic statisticians who told me that attending Basu’s lectures back in the 1970s converted them to Bayesians.

Use of Weapons  Iain M. Banks

I think that this is the first science fiction that I’ve read since my undergraduate days. I’m not sure where I came across it, but I read some good reviews and decided to try it. It was ok, decent summer reading material, but nothing special.

Our Lady of the Lost and Found  Diane Schoemperlen (2013-07-06)

Picked this up the previous summer at a bookstore in Belfast, Maine. Basic idea is a the author receives a week-long visit from Mary (Mother of Christ), who needs a brief vacation. It has it’s
moments, but most of the book reads like a recitation of various visions/sightings/miracles attributed to Mary through the centuries, and I just found it tedious. Had to force myself to finish it.

**Shakespeare**  Bill Bryson (2013-07-11)

Brief, entertaining summary of what is known and not known about Shakespeare the man and his work. The last chapter nicely discredits the notion that anyone other than William Shakespeare of Stratford-Upon-Avon was the author of most or all of the works attributed to him.

**Oscar & Lucinda**  Peter Carey (2013-08-07)

Oscar is born in 1841, the shy, nerdy(?) son of a Baptist minister/biologist in England. His mother died while he was still young, and life with his strict, fundamentalist father was difficult. Eventually, Oscar converts to the Anglican church and studies to be an Anglican minister at Oxford, where he is introduced to gambling. Lucinda is born in the Australian outback. Her father dies while she is still young, and her strong-willed, progressive mother raises her to be the same. Her mother dies when Lucinda is 17 or so, and Lucinda inherits a large estate, half of which she invests in a glassworks after moving to Sydney, where she too becomes addicted to gambling. Eventually these two misfits end up together in Sydney and hatch the idea of transporting a glass church to Boat Harbor. Oscar’s fear of the water dictates that the church be transported overland and assembled in Boat Harbor. Things do not end well. I really like Peter Carey’s work, including this book, which won him his first Booker Prize, but I still think that Jack Maggs is my favorite. That said, I hurried a bit through this long (520 pages) book, and it probably deserves a more careful reading.

**Galileo’s Daughter**  Dava Sobel (2014-02-23)

Apparently Galileo’s three children were born to a Venetian women that he would not or could not marry because of class differences. His two daughters were placed in a convent near Florence while still quite young. The older of the two, Virginia, became Suor Maria Celeste, and was apparently a very talented and capable woman. She kept up a life long correspondence with her father, who visited her regularly at the convent and who eventually moved to a house in a neighboring village. Only Suor Celeste’s letters have been preserved from their correspondence, and they are used here to broaden the telling of Galileo’s story, including the conflict with the Roman Catholic Church over his support of Copernicus’s heliocentric theory of the universe. Enjoyable reading, but *Longitude* by the same author was probably more interesting.

**Breaking the Line**  Samuel G. Freedman (2014-03-03)

The story of Jake Gaither and Eddie Robinson, longtime (American) football coaches of Florida A&M University and Grambling University, respectively, and the events of the tumultuous 1967 season. This book works well as history, biography, and as sports writing. I suspect that I knew more than most about Jake Gaither and FAMU, but reading this book revealed how very little that was. I really enjoyed it.

**The Checklist Manifesto**  Atul Gawande (2014-07-02)

The power of checklists and a bit of their history. The author is a surgeon who led (?) a World Health Organization (WHO) effort to implement a checklist to improve surgical outcomes. Short, interesting, enjoyable, and possibly useful.

**Norwegian Wood**  Haruki Murakami (2014-08-06)

Youth, love, suicide. There is something strange and appealing about the point of view that I have found in the Japanese novels that I have read. I didn’t like this as much as Murakami’s *The Wind-Up*
Bird Chronicle, but it was still very good and easier to read, and I suspect that most readers would prefer it.

The Language of Literature: a Stylistic Introduction to the Study of Literature  Michael Cummings and Robert Simmons

Analysis of literary style using the tools of linguistics, roughly speaking. This was among my wife’s many work-related books. Lots of examples of analysis of passages and poems from many fine authors. I was too lazy to do the exercises, so I didn’t profit as much as I might have, but I enjoyed reading it.

The Norman Conquest: The Battle of Hastings and the Fall of Anglo-Saxon England  Marc Morris

This was written in a accessible style, and it tied into a recent trip to England, so I enjoyed it.

Hamlet  William Shakespeare (2015-09-30)

What can I say, it’s Hamlet? Not sure that this should be listed here, except that I’ve actually read so little Shakespeare and it was all so long ago.