

# An escape hatch for the grounded traveler: Books

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

The open road calls, and I reply with silence.

After all, what's a road trip without ordering the local favorite at a restaurant, breaking bread with faraway friends, flirting with strangers in a saloon? Alas, in the time of corona, even touching a gas nozzle seems fraught.

Antsy for adventure, I consider other ways to transport myself. I settle on a tried-and-true escape hatch, accessible to anyone with an armchair: reading.

Last week, I spoke with Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden. "Try to catch up on the books you've been meaning to read," she said. "You can take a spring break, travel overseas, have empathy for people in other places, travel through time. Good writers can place you right there."

Reading about history, she said, can provide context and perspective during this time of uncertainty and fear: "When this nation started, they didn't know if it was going to work or not," she said. And mysteries are fun, she noted, because they take us to a world in which problems are always solved.

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# Visit new worlds from your armchair

## BOOKS FROM FI

It's also a good time for reading aloud or recording oral histories, said Hayden, who fondly remembers her grandmother reading her Hans Christian Andersen stories. "You may not be able to see your grandparents in person, but you can share stories virtually."

We all need a little "candy for the brain" during this stressful period, she added, and we mustn't feel obligated to finish any particular book. "No book shaming, no guilt," she said. "This is not the time to feel like you need to eat your broccoli. That's the beauty of having so many books around."

"Thank you for that," I said, laughing.

I decided to set aside two books that weren't grabbing me and — eager to embark on a journey — asked some notable readers for recommendations.

Dana Canedy, administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes, said we all need positive ways to relax, de-stress and distract ourselves. Among her suggestions was "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay" by Michael Chabon, an epic novel about comic books, escapism and love that I devoured earlier this month.

Washington Nationals pitcher Sean Doolittle, who recently tweeted that reading has always been his preferred method of social distancing, sent me a list of titles, including one of my favorites, "A Gentleman in Moscow" by Amor Towles.

"It feels like an appropriate book to read during a self-quarantine," Doolittle said. Count Rostov is sentenced to house arrest after the Russian Revolution and is forced to live out the rest of his life in the Metropol Hotel in Moscow, where he develops relationships with the hotel staff and other guests; high jinks and heartbreak ensue. "It's beautifully written, equal parts historical fiction and fairy tale," Doolittle said, "and I can't recommend it highly enough."

I look at the recommendations below and find serenity, for these books promise a world of places to explore, senses to enliven, and humans to understand and love.

From my own bookshelf, I pick up "Dakota: A Spiritual Geography" by Kathleen Norris and find myself in a place where the wind howls and the vast sky opens to long stretches of desolate highway. "Reading is a solitary act, one in keeping with the silence of the Plains," Norris writes, "but it's also paradoxically public, as it deepens my connections with the larger world." I reread that sentence perhaps a dozen times, understanding that today, when we long to connect in ways we cannot, reading feels like a calling.

With that, I bid thee farewell, dear readers, and bon voyage.

**Anthony Doerr**, author of the beautiful Pulitzer Prize-winning World War II novel "All the Light We Cannot See" (which is being adapted as a limited series by Netflix), is halfway through "Flights" by Nobel Prize-winning writer Olga Tokarczuk, which he said is the perfect book to pick up and read, a few pages at a time, when you realize you just spent an hour reading news on your phone. He describes the book as "gor-

geous, restless and totally original" and said he's doling it out to himself in small doses like a precious antiviral medicine. "If you love W.G. Sebald's work, you'll love this," he said. "It has that same nonlinear, accretive power."

Seeking a gentle and heartening destination? Doerr said his blood pressure drops every time he picks up Nobel Prize-winner Juan Ramón Jiménez's "Platero and I," which he calls "a glittering ticket to a glittering, redolent Andalusia of the past, full of church bells and pine nuts and wine harvests." In the century-old book about an adventure with a remarkable silver donkey named Platero, Jiménez's prose carries you back to a slower time, Doerr said, "when humans were more connected to the animals they lived beside, and the natural world pulsed with meaning."

Also on Doerr's proverbial nightstand is Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy. Before he allows himself the pleasure of reading Mantel's new "The Mirror & the Light," her final installment of the trilogy about Henry VIII's fixer, Thomas Cromwell, he's rereading the second of the series, "Bring Up the Bodies." "To me, Mantel is a world treasure," he said. "These are long, impeccably made historical novels that can lift you up out of whatever confinement you're feeling and airdrop you into the mud and smoke and slush of 16th-century England."

Finally, Doerr is reading physicist and mathematician Brian Greene's "Until the End of Time: Mind, Matter, and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe" — another book best taken in small doses. "Sentence by sentence, Greene is such a wonderful teacher," Doerr said. "When the current hour gets overwhelming, and you feel like lowering yourself into a bath of hand sanitizer, it's a joy to sweep back and forth through the eons: You remember how infinitesimal this moment actually is, and that every second we get to be alive on this planet is an utter gift."

**Dana Canedy**, administrator of the Pulitzer Prizes, said she can't think of a more appropriate book for this time than "Personal History" by Katharine Graham, winner of the 1998 Pulitzer for biography, "speaks to themes currently replaying in the country — the importance of American journalism, a defining moment in history and the evolution of women leaders," she said.

Canedy also recommended four Pulitzer fiction winners, including "Kavalier and Clay": "The Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck, "a masterpiece that, given our nation's current economic uncertainty, is likely to stir in readers an empathy for the Joad family and its struggles during the Great Depression"; "Beloved" by Toni Morrison, "a stunning and important work of literature that examines the barbaric legacy of slavery through the life of a former slave named Sethe"; and "Less" by Andrew Sean Greer, "a generous book, musical in its prose and expansive in its structure and range, about growing older and the essential nature of love."

Nationals pitcher **Sean Doolittle** said "The Overstory" by Richard Powers,

which won a Pulitzer for fiction last year, is one of his favorite books of all time. He also recommended "The Other Americans" by Laila Lalami, which he called an important book that examines our shared humanity as the characters come to grips with a suspicious crime committed in their California town.

If you're itching to travel across the pond to London (actually, four parallel Londons), Doolittle said, consider V.E. Schwab's Shades of Magic trilogy, which opened up the genre of fantasy fiction to him and remains a favorite. If you don't want to commit to a trilogy, he recommended "Magic for Liars" by Sarah Gailey. And if you prefer a murder-mystery thriller without the magic, he suggested "The Silent Patient" by Alex Michaelides, also set in London.

Doolittle said "Reincarnation Blues" by Michael Poore was one of the most fun books he's read in a while: Milo has lived 9,995 lives and has yet to achieve "Perfection"; he keeps being reincarnated in different worlds as different people or other living things. "For all the talk about death in the book," he said, "it's darkly funny as it explores the meaning of the human experience."

Arena Stage Artistic Director **Molly Smith**, an Alaska Native who founded and ran Juneau's Perseverance Theatre for nearly two decades, said Chabon upended her ideas of what "might have been" in his novel "The Yiddish Policemen's Union," a detective story based on the fictional idea that thousands of Jewish people settled in tiny Sitka, Alaska, after World War II. "It's sci fi and contains some of the most unusual language I've ever read," Smith said. "Riveting stuff."

For a total escape that Smith said she ate up "like a box of candy," she suggested "The Lost Girls of Paris" by Pam Jenoff, a mystery and spy novel about the women who helped win World War II. Smith has also recently read and loved the Pulitzer-winning "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom" by David W. Blight; and "Catch and Kill," Ronan Farrow's chilling read about the uncovering of powerful men in the entertainment industry who preyed on women, and the people who helped them cover it up.

**Samuel Freedman**, a professor at Columbia Journalism School who teaches a nonfiction book writing seminar and has written eight books, said he appreciates travel narratives that not only take him to a foreign or different place, but that also use the journey as part of a larger story. "My all-time favorite in this genre is 'Destinations' by Jan Morris," Freedman said. "It's a collection of elegantly written and politically alert essays that Morris wrote primarily for Rolling Stone in the '70s."

He also recommended "Searching for Zion" by Emily Raboteau, the African American author's saga of trying to find her own promised land, a search that takes her to Israel, Jamaica, Ethiopia, Ghana and ultimately the American South; "Bad Land: An American Romance" by Jonathan Raban, about the Anglo settlement of the Great Plains a century ago, specifically a remote part of eastern Montana; and "The Last Fine

Time" by Verlyn Klinkenborg, which Freedman described as "a gorgeous ode to a grueling place — the portion of blue-collar Buffalo centered on a particular bar."

Although his work and above recommendations are nonfiction, Freedman said his pleasure reading is 90 percent fiction. At the top of that list: "Hiroshima Joe" by Martin Booth. "It's a war novel, a novel of illicit gay love, a novel of addiction," he said, "and a stirring portrait of Hong Kong a year before and a decade after Japanese conquest and occupation."

**Richard Garriott de Cayeux**, a video-game developer and entrepreneur who traveled to the International Space Station in 2008 as a space tourist, said he is inspired by literature that explores the past, present and future of humanity's great adventure beyond Earth. He recommended "Apollo 13" by Jim Lovell and Jeffrey Kluger (previously published as "Lost Moon"), which tells the story of the mission that showcased the best of what NASA was and aspired to be. "America was daring great adventures at great expense and great risk, backed up by tens of thousands of people back on Earth who all worked with skill and dedication in ways that show what a unified people can do."

Garriott de Cayeux, the son of NASA astronaut Owen Garriott, also suggested "My Dream of Stars" by Anousheh Ansari, with Homer Hickam, which tells the story of Ansari's family's unlikely escape from Iran, her funding of the Ansari X Prize and her own flight to the International Space Station; and "The Case for Space" by Robert Zubrin, which shows how access to space is radically changing. "New commercial launch vehicles are already 10 times cheaper than just a decade ago and likely will become 10 times cheaper again in the next decade," Garriott de Cayeux said. "When access to space is 100 times cheaper, it's a lot easier to think of good reasons to go explore and exploit the vast universe beyond our atmosphere."

At Capitol Hill Books in Washington, co-owner **Kyle Burk** selected The Bayou trilogy by Daniel Woodrell, composed of three crime novels set in the fictional town of St. Bruno, La., and featuring an ex-boxer who works for the St. Bruno police department. "Most readers know Woodrell for 'Winter's Bone,' but these early works of his are especially literary hard-boiled detective fiction set in the heat and humidity of the Bayou," Burk said. "We get to experience the world of St. Bruno while enjoying Woodrell's innovative and imaginative use of the language, which has won him wide acclaim."

Co-owner **Aaron Beckwith** picked "Garlic, Mint, & Sweet Basil: Essays on Marseilles, Mediterranean Cuisine, and Noir Fiction" by Jean-Claude Izzo. "Seems like as good a time as any," he said, "to be transported to Marseilles and get enveloped by the fine wine, food and corruption of the Mediterranean."

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