Books for summer reading

June 1996

ROLL OUT those lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer, Nat Cole once crooned. The welcome aestival pause from the daily rigors of the school year brings with it that most treasured commodity in educators' lives: time. Time to relax and rethink the year past and time to recharge those mental batteries by catching up on reading. So, in what has become a tradition in the June issue, we've asked Roger Soder to poll his book-loving friends, and we present here their suggestions, old and new. We hope these suggestions will help you put those long summer days to good use. — *The Editors*

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Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* (Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1979), provocative when it first appeared in 1974, remains so in 1996. More than a motorcycle ride, *Zen and the Art* is a reconciliation with solitude. Reconciliation, not resignation. Isaiah Berlin tells us, "Solitude doesn't mean you live far from people. It means that people don't understand what you are saying." Our hero's questing takes him beyond the bounds of rational thought onto a tightrope strung between triumph and terror. The cost to him of seeking high-quality information and a voice for its expression is his own sanity. *Zen and the Art* is no picnic to read. If you feel like working, get with *Zen and the Art;* it will reward your effort. Otherwise, Thomas Cleary more gently offers means for finding, affirming, or recovering balance in *Zen Lessons: The Art of Leadership* (Shambhala, 1989), *The Essential Tao* (Harper, 1991), and *The Book of Leadership and Strategy: Lessons of the Chinese Masters* (Shambhala, 1992).

If you are simply ready for the pure pleasure of English prose well-wrought, pick up anything by Canadian writer Robertson Davies. *The Cunning Man* (Penguin, 1994) is Davies' last published book. He died at 82 in the fall of 1995. With the clarity of vision and authenticity of compassion that more than eight decades of attentive living bring to a man, Davies has made a murder mystery the occasion for expounding his insightful commentary on humanity tossed hand-to-hand between fate and free will. Davies' insight is no less clear, nor has the delightfulness of his elaboration diminished one whit since his earlier works, among them *The Cornish Trilogy*, which includes *The Rebel Angels* (Penguin, 1981), *What's Bred in the Bone* (Penguin, 1985), and *The Lyre of Orpheus* (Penguin, 1988).

Ever read French philosopher Simone Weil? Die-hard empiricists, beware. This is not for you. Gnostics, read on and rejoice! Here is what poets know, with an intellectual spin. *Simone Weil: An Anthology,* edited by Sian Miles (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), is insight and intuition honed to pierce to the center of human experience. If the pursuit of truth is a worthy effort and if the finding of it can be felt as much as thought, Weil must not be missed. — *Cathy Profilet*, math/science teacher, Eckstein Middle School, Seattle.

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I am very interested in diaries as ways of finding voice and recounting lore. In my courses, I read hundreds of journal entries by teachers, all of which are useful for documenting and reflecting on practice. Rarely do I find this kind of writing entertaining; it's hard enough work to write something useful.

As examples of excellence to aspire to, I recommend for summer reading three books of diaries. The first is by Alan Bennett, the author of *The Madness of King George.* He calls this collection of diaries *Writing Home* (Faber & Faber, 1994); they combine splendid documentation, acute reflection, and blessed wit. Another screen-writer/diarist is Emma Thompson, who has published *The Sense and Sensibility Screenplay and Dianes* (Newmarket Press, 1995). This book amplifies both the novel and the film, but it tells its own tale of professionals extracting something orderly from daily chaos — something, as every teacher knows, that is hard enough to accomplish without also writing about it.

Finally, a far different example of the genre that offers its own pleasures is David Gelemter's *1939*, *The Lost World of the Fair* (Free Press, 1995). The author offers his own observations of a time of technological optimism, making no mention of his own maiming by the Unabomber. During Gelemter's convalescence, he collected lore about the events that took place near the Trylon and the Perisphere. Throughout the book he presents reminiscences and extracts from the diaries of a woman who went to the fair when she was young and optimistic. Her rueful, older voice places a haunting story at the heart of the author's reportage. All three of these published diaries tell their interesting stories in strong voices. — *Henry St. Maurice*, assistant professor of education, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point.

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A successful book club depends on a steady supply of books that are more than "good reads"; they also have to challenge readers in some fundamental way that causes them to reexamine their view of the world. No book accomplished that objective better for our group than *Ishmael*, by Daniel Quinn (Bantam/Tumer, 1993). Ishmael is a gorilla who converses with his "master" telepathically. Their conversations are not the ordinary banter about the weather and the Super Bowl. No, these two creatures carry on Socratic dialogues (the gorilla has a gift for asking disarming and enlightening questions) about how humans can ensure their survival as a species. They get together as a result of an ad that appears in the newspaper: "Teacher seeks pupil. Must have strong desire to save the world. Apply in person." The message of the text is at times spiritual and at other times blatantly political. Still, even those of a conservative bent will find this work engaging. No book sparked as much heated debate in our group as did *Ishmael.*

Time and Again, by Jack Finney (Simon & Schuster, 1976), is a book about time travel that takes readers back to the late 1800s. It is written with meticulous attention to historical detail. The time traveler, Si Morley (an illustrator in New York City),

is not trying to alter history, just to understand it. But, of course, as researchers in many fields can attest, when one makes observations, the reality of the observed is almost always changed. In this book, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle becomes a marvelously clever basis for engaging readers. Finney creates a real adventure into the past and offers an intriguing look at how people's lives interconnect, even when they live in different centuries.

For the first time since our club was formed, we invited an author of a work of fiction to spend an evening discussing the writing process. The "lucky" author was Jim DeBrosse, who wrote *The Southern Cross* (St. Martin's Press, 1994). Debrosse's book is a murder mystery set in the Caribbean. Murder mysteries are not particularly good material for book clubs. Once the "who done it" is identified, it is difficult to generate arguments that challenge personal perspectives — unless the subject is the verisimilitude of the sex scenes. Our group members were a bit shy about attesting to the feasibility of the exotic carnal pleasures described aboard a ship at sea, but we enjoyed talking through how the author conducted research on the scintillating bedroom scene.

All three of the books above are fiction. But we did work through one nonfiction text, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, by Marvin Olasky (Regnery Gateway, 1992). This is a book that will truly warm the hearts of political conservatives, but its message transcends political inclination. In essence, Olasky asks, What do we want with America's poor? His answers will challenge some and anger others, but clearly all will want to offer their "two cents' worth" in reply. Olasky shows how welfare policy has inadvertently created social folly and personal apathy. Though not everyone will agree with his prescriptions, few will be unmoved by his arguments. — *Thomas J. Lasley*, professor, University of Dayton. Book club members include *Hal Berg*, *Robert Curry*, *Joe DeLuca*, *Jacob Dorn*, *Bill Franz*, *Ted Kissel*, *Jim Reed*, and *Frank Williams.*

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Five deceptively slim volumes sit on my desk — one, proudly offered by a principal in one of our schools; another, the gift of a dear friend; and, still others, volumes suggested by colleagues who also care about the preparation of teachers. I scan their titles and recall their stories — stories about communities that enhance or deny their children's access to knowledge.

In *The Giver* (Houghton Mifflin, 1993), winner of the John Newbery Medal, Lois Lowry tells the story of an ideal community, where there is no poverty, no divorce, and no inequality. Elders determine roles and lifelong responsibilities for everyone and provide only the knowledge needed by individuals to perform their daily work. Memories that might provide either solace or wisdom are deemed unnecessary, as there are no longer any problems to be solved. Only the Receiver of Memory knows all the memories and must give them, one by one, to his successor. In the novel it is 12-year-old Jonas who has been selected to receive the memories. Some, such as snow,

are very pleasant; others, such as war, are extremely painful. How Jonas chooses to deal with these memories and the responsibilities they bring with them suggests one alternative to living in a community in which access to knowledge is controlled by the few.

As we enter John Steinbeck's unidentified town in *The Moon Is Down* (Penguin Books, 1995), we come upon a community where the freedom of citizens has been suddenly and brutally usurped by their conquerors. The rights of individuals are limited, their daily activities are closely supervised, and their homes are visited by the harsh realities of war. However, the conquered devise a system for survival — for saving both individuals and the integrity of the greater community. While the mayor and his supporters have only begun to sense the success of their efforts in their final days, their story is also one of hope in times of oppression. Steinbeck wrote this tale at the height of World War II as "a celebration of the durability of democracy."

Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here* (Doubleday, 1991) and Sharon Quint's *Schooling Homeless Children* (Teachers College Press, 1994) tell the stories of young children growing up in the "other America." In the former, Lafeyette and Pharoah hid in the closets of their home in the Homer Projects of Chicago when random bullets flew; in the latter, the "shelter rats" of Seattle moved from place to place, sleeping in cars and temporary shelters and owning little more than they could carry or wear. Their broader communities did not care for them and had, in fact, carefully crafted procedures for maintaining the status quo. Yet these children went to school; it was their only refuge, the only system that seemed to care.

In Kotlowitz's book Pharoah's teacher seemed alone in her work, yet she persisted. She inspired him to study and to try again when he had failed. She gave this young black child with a disability his rightful opportunity to leam and provided one bright, successful moment in his otherwise bleak life.

In Quint's book Carole Williams was also alone when she became principal of B. F. Day School in Seattle and found herself in a place where students of diverse abilities and needs were separated from one another by entrenched physical and philosophical barriers. Some were encouraged to succeed; others were expected to fail. Teachers were defeated, and students were tired, hungry, hostile, and exceptionally fragile. The process by which all members of this school community acknowledged their situation, the effect it was having on the children of their community, and their individual and collective responsibility for reconceptualizing school provides a model for others in public education. B. F. Day is now a thriving community where students and their families, teachers, secretaries, social workers, the principal, local churches, businesses, and benefactors all belong. Everyone who enters its doors participates and learns.

And finally, there on my desk is *Billy* (Viking Penguin, 1993). Albert French really tells two stories: one, the story of love between a mother and her son; the other, the story of the devastating consequences of racism and exclusion in a southern community. Actually, there are two communities — Banes and the Patch — separated by institutionalized fear and hatred. Billy never attended school, and, aside from the few

words his mother taught him, Billy's only education or sense of belonging to a caring community came in the last fearful days when he met Preacher Man Sam and Sack Man. This is a deceptively easy book to read; the author draws you into the story and does not stop until you have shared the final injustice with Billy. And then, once finished, it is not easy to leave. Jill, one of my students, wrote that, as she goes through her day developing a family literacy program in an urban elementary school, she cannot forget Billy. He is there with her in the work she is doing. If so, then Billy's, too, is a story of hope. — *Pamela Campbell*, assistant professor of education, University of Connecticut, Storrs.

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Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River* (Poseidon Press, 1994) tells us of Trudi, a dwarf who is the child of a strange and haunted woman and a handsome librarian in a small German town. Hegi chronicles Trudi's life from infancy to young adulthood during the rise of the Third Reich; the writing is intense, beautifully crafted, and riveting.

Wait until the dark of winter so your focus is uncluttered and rediscover *Great Expectations* (New American Library, 1980). Many of the members of our group were charmed again by the ability of Dickens to weave a hard-to-put-down tale in and around vivid descriptions and sharp psychological insight.

Victor Villasenor's *Rain of Gold* (Arte Publico Press, 1994) is a true story that takes the members of a Mexican family from their small village in the mountains of Mexico to their eventual arrival in Los Angeles. It is full of romance, intrigue, complicated family dynamics, lyrical reflections, and humorous anecdotes — all told with a spirit that Villasenor clearly inherited from his ancestors.

Charms for an Easy Life (Putnam, 1993) is a story told from the perspective of a young woman living with both her mother and her grandmother in the South. The writing is light and moves us through the years of her growing up with grace and affection. Kaye Gibbons gives us a glimpse into a strange but wonderful family whose clear loyalty to one another is both touching and humorous.

The Postman is a charming movie, but don't miss the source by Antonio Skarmeta, *II Postino*, which appears in translation as *Burning Patience* (Pantheon, 1987) — a sweet, lovely story about a charming, innocent young man who falls madly in love with a barmaid, the help he receives from a famous poet in wooing her, and the life that blends all three of them together. It is sensual, amusing, touching, and melancholy, with innocence lost and insight gained. Don't read the egg scene while *alone. — Vashon Untidaled Book Club, a women's book club on Vashon Island, Wash. The members include Liz Brenneman, Pat Cummings, Hunter Davis, Aw? Donaldson, Donna Klemka, Linda Mather, Molly Purrington, Marie Stanislaw, Uhlman, and Jane Whetstone.*

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When I first started teaching Shakespeare, my students understood only that his plays were "stuff that students had to read." It seemed unimaginable to them that Shakespeare could actually be entertaining. We educators tend to forget to enjoy the bard, too. I recently picked up the newly reformatted Folger Library edition of *Julius Caesar* (Washington Square Press, 1993). This time I approached the play not as a teacher but as a lover of literature. The play is especially timely in this election year. From it, we learn more about the dangers of ambitious politicians than we could ever hope to learn from today's crop. One of the most moving — and shrewd — eulogies in literature is Mark Antony's. The power of this speech lies in its subtlety. Though he speaks of the late emperor as a too ambitious leader, he successfully moves the crowd to believe the opposite, thus beginning his vengeance on the treacherous lovers of Rome who betrayed his friend.

Lincoln at Gettysburg, by Gary Wills (Touchstone, 1992), appeals to me as both teacher and writer. In this nonfiction study of Lincoln's famous address, we eavesdrop on the writing of this eloquent and brief masterpiece. Through this unique and easy-to-follow study, we see that Lincoln's economy of words has everything to do with his understanding of the public, the power of language, and effective speech. I have learned more about myself as a writer through reading Wills' Pulitzer Prizewinning work.

It is also worth your while to dust off that old college copy of *The Scarlet Letter* (many editions are available), and, considering Hollywood's bastardization of Nathaniel Hawthorne's greatest work, rereading this classic is particularly timely. Roger Chillingworth, Hester Prynne's estranged husband, is *the* most terrifying, yet enthralling, villain I've ever encountered; he is easily the most interesting character in the novel. He communicates more with the crook of a finger than the pathetic, hypocritical Rev. Dimmesdale communicates in all his lengthy sermons. Pearl, the illegitimate child of Dimmesdale and Hester, is pure enigmatic evil. Her very existence tortures her parents, for she is the constant reminder of their sin.

Finally, Harper Lee's 1960 novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Warner Books, 1982), is the easiest novel to recommend and the most difficult to describe. Nearly everyone who passed sophomore English knows this novel, but I don't think we can sense its full significance until adulthood. In its simplicity, it reigns as the most powerful illustration of social conscience, personal integrity, and the human spirit. I laugh, cry, and learn more with each reading. Scout, the precocious 5-year-old narrator, innocently and poignantly observes life in her sleepy, segregated, southern town. She is witness to bigotry, sexism, corrupt criminal courts, and even murder. With the guidance of her family, Scout wisely sums up her experiences: "There's just one type of folks. Folks." — *Shana Matthews,* language arts teacher, Mill Valley Middle School, Mill Valley, Calif.

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Loose Woman, by Sandra Cisneros (Knopf, 1964), is a collection of brilliant, powerful, sexy, and seductive poetry, punctuated by passion, unbridled lust, rude and

ruthless defiance, anguish, and dejection. Cisneros' language and imagery are captivating. In her erotic "You bring out the Mexican in me," images of the love of the lust goddess mingle with tequila tears, the eagle and the serpent, a rainforest disaster, a Mexico City earthquake, dengue fever, copal, piñón, and mariachi trumpets. Her extraordinary voice spans cultures, continents, and centuries.

Alicia Borinsky's *Mean Woman* (University of Nebraska Press, 1993) is a translation of *Mina Cruel*, a novel written in Spanish about sex and politics in an unidentified country. The protagonists are Francisco, a general reminiscent of the dictatorial patriarchs of Latin American politics, and Rosario, a powerful and erotic woman whose sexual allure intertwines with political power. The tale comes across as political allegory The greats of Latin American literature — Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Gabriel Garcia Marquez — peer through the disturbing chapters and fragments of chapters. The disappearances and tortures call to mind the "Dirty War" in Argentina, especially vivid in the recent confessions by Argentine military officers of dropping naked, drugged young people into shark-infested waters. Characters move through underground shopping malls populated by deposed dictators in exile. The final chapter, "The Return," calls up a line from Borges, "Fate takes pleasure in repetitions, variants, symmetries."

Face of an Angel, by Denise Chávez (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), is a family saga set in southern New Mexico. Sovieda Dosamantes looks back through her family tree to understand how the men and women in it have interacted across the generations, bridging the commingled worlds and identities of Mexico and the United States. The characters struggle to find meaning in ordinary life: in hard work, in service, in working for 30 years as a waitress in a Mexican restaurant. The family tree of the Dosamantes (which means "two lovers") links grandmother's voice (it was a whisper) with mother's voice (she cried out with rage and pain) and Sovieda's (it is new and strong). The role of women within the culture makes us wonder whether any of these voices have been heard by anyone. — *Maria López*, associate dean of arts and sciences, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley.

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The First Man (Knopf, 1995) is Albert Camus' autobiographical novel about growing up in Algeria. Camus writes in the third person about his childhood experiences (many of them painful): about a father long dead, about a mother in many respects dead to the world, and about a tyrannical grandmother given to punishment. In many respects, Camus stands alone (and thus, perhaps, the title), but he has friends, including a memorable and dedicated teacher, Louis Germain, who helps his young pupil get into the lycée. Worth as much as the entire book is the letter Camus wrote to his teacher after receiving the Nobel Prize and the last letter his teacher wrote to him.

Our multicultural world — much like that of Camus and French/Arab Algeria — is addressed in a comprehensive and carefully selected collection of essays in *Handbook of*

Research on Multicultural Education (Macmillan, 1995), edited by James Banks and Cherry Banks. Sustained attention (though not at one sitting) to the 47 chapters of this reference volume will yield valuable insights into the historical development of multicultural education, research issues, fundamental ethical issues, immigration policy and education of immigrants, education of ethnic groups, language issues, international perspectives, and so on. The scholars represented here reflect a variety of perspectives, both domestic and international, and provide solid grounding for argument and understanding.

Russia Under the Bolshevik Regime (Knopf, 1993) is the last volume of a masterly trilogy documenting the fall of Czarist Russia and the rise of the Bolsheviks. Richard Pipes limns a frightening portrait of terror and brutality in the service of an ideology distanced from justice and humanity; it is a portrait framed by the early Communist slogan "We will drive mankind to happiness by force." Just as frightening is his portrait of the Western liberal apologists who, for one reason or another, seemed to be taken in. And along these lines, it's useful to review *The Great Terror: A Reassessment,* by Robert Conquest (Oxford University Press, 1990). During the purges of the late 1930s, some of Stalin's henchmen expressed concern about negative public opinion in the West. Stalin's contemptuous reply was, "Never mind, they'll swallow it." As Conquest says, "A State prepared flatly to deny its own malpractices, and to prevent open access to the facts, could successfully persuade many people abroad, even in spite of a large and growing body of first-hand evidence from those who had actually experienced the Terror." This is a lesson that has clearly been learned by similar regimes in other parts of the world and is still the basic principle of much of the misinformation that appears in the West.

In his *Collected Stories* (New American Library, 1974), Isaac Babel tells us of Russia, World War I, growing up, and being a Jewish member of a Cossack regiment. Little of Babel's work was published: after he was arrested and shot by the secret police, dozens of his manuscripts were burned. What remains are tough, laconic, and ironic pictures of a world in which just about the only person Babel can regard with unalloyed gratitude is a decent and wise old man who teaches him to swim. Reading one of the young boy's stories and seeing in him "a spark of the divine fire," the old man tells him he lacks one thing: "a feeling for nature." A good man, a good teacher. No wonder Isaac Babel took to him. — *Roger Soder,* co-director, Center for Educational Renewal, University of Washington, Seattle.

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