

Have you Read?

THE DIVERSITY OF AMERICAN LIFE

Ken Scallon is from Nassau, New York.

Some books, once read, refuse to let us go. While my undergraduate degree in history makes me picky about facts, I have always appreciated writing that pays attention to facts—at least to some degree. The core element of my selections below is American storytelling—whether fiction or nonfiction. They add a richness to my own view of American life, which hopefully I have used for the better. I will pass down these books to my daughters and grandchildren for their consideration.

All God's Dangers

The Life of Nate Shaw

By Theodore Rosengarten

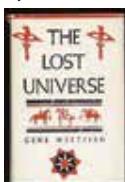


This book is one of the most powerful memoirs ever written—a memoir of a black sharecropper in Alabama in the early 1900s, which I read after working in the state as a VISTA Volunteer in the early 1970s. I could smell the cotton fields, feel the heat, and sense, again, just how dark the nights were.

The Lost Universe

Pawnee Life and Culture

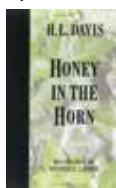
By Gene Weltfish



This in-depth study of a year in the lives of the Pawnees was like opening a door and stepping back into a totally different world. It gave me a sense of loss for what time and circumstances do. Weltfish was urged in 1928, while at the Department of Anthropology at Columbia University, to undertake a formal study of the Pawnee language, which led to the publication of his anthropological study.

Honey in the Horn

By Harold L. Davis



A “forgotten” Pulitzer Prize Fiction winner in 1935, this novel, with characters who come of age in southern Oregon in the early 20th century, evokes a time and a geography that, for most of us, is unknown. Davis masters telling a story about homesteaders, while immersing us in the details of what one had to know to live and work there.

WLT

A Radio Romance

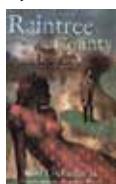
By Garrison Keillor



Keillor’s first actual novel, WLT, is nostalgic, laugh-out-loud funny as the author creates this radio station in 1930s Minneapolis. Much more earthy than we would find on his radio show, Keillor is one of our master story tellers who translates well to the printed page.

Raintree County

By Ross Lockridge, Jr.



Told in flashbacks from July 4, 1892, this is a panoramic novel about John Shawnessy, as he makes his way through the Civil War and onward to grow with the republic (the United States). The novel can be read at

different levels, and, at times, it is dense and filled with detail. The novel is also somewhat experimental in that Lockridge links his chapters with split sentences. It did become a star studded movie that can be intriguing to watch, but, of course, no movie could capture what the book evoked. Sadly, the author later took his life, purportedly as he struggled with the expectation of what he would write next.

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford

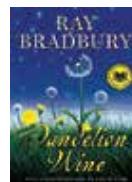
By Ron Hansen



Of all the stacks of books on James, both fiction and nonfiction, this novel captures him as the larger-than-life character in American culture that he has become. Don’t miss the stunning first three pages, which weave a word picture of him that pulls you into the story.

Dandelion Wine

By Ray Bradbury



This novel evokes the strange, nostalgic, eerie world of Green Town, Illinois, as seen through a 12-year-old’s eyes, with echoes of Bradbury’s childhood. A master writer who always takes us one step beyond, Bradbury often wrote across genres which defied classification.

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Rabbit, Run

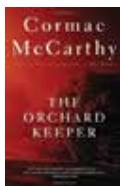
By John Updike



The Rabbit Angstrom novels, which take place over the last half of the twentieth century, reset the bar for American fiction. Someone once said that in order to understand that time period in America, Updike would likely be a primary source for years to come.

The Orchard Keeper

By Cormac McCarthy



A Faulkner Foundation Award winner from 1965, this novel takes place in Tennessee in the 1930s. Robert Penn Warren called McCarthy a “born narrator,” which has certainly been proven by his subsequent writings. After this novel, I began to watch for his later books, though one has to pace reading him because there is a dark, brooding vein that runs through his writing.

Hold Back the Night

By Pat Frank



This is a little-known novel of the First Marine Division's breakout from the Changjin (Frozen Chosin) Reservoir in Korea in 1950. That epic running fight in below-zero weather refuted the concern that American youth were getting soft. The characters, while somewhat stereotyped, are well constructed. I read this as a teen without interruption and long after midnight, and the novel partly contributed to my enlisting in the Marine Corps at age 18.

MANIFEST DESTINY IN MY CORNER OF THE WEST

Kay Emel-Powell is from Minneapolis, Minnesota.

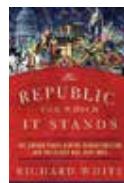
A few months ago, I pulled out to reread some oral histories written by settlers who

first came to my corner of northwestern Kansas in 1888. As I read about people surviving a horrific blizzard, watching herds of Texas cattle being moved to open ranges further north, collecting plentiful buffalo bones to sell for ready money, and fearing the occasional news of American Indians passing through the region, it made me want to read more deeply and share earlier reading about these people, this time, and this place.

The Republic for Which It Stands

The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865–1896

By Richard White



White's book covers all the bases—the economy, the politics, the social movements, industrialization, and changes in labor, personalities, and population not only of those who could now vote but also of those who continued to be disenfranchised. My own farm family's history as migrants and immigrants to Middle Border Kansas during this time provided motivation for me to read this history. Hefty book, lots to ponder, and not too scholarly.

The Legacy of Conquest

The Unbroken Past of the American West

By Patricia Nelson Limerick

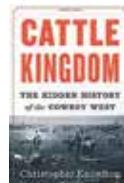


Limerick, an academic and a Colorado state historian, takes a fresh look at Manifest Destiny and the many players who contributed to it and who were sometimes pushed to the edges of the mainstream stories.

Cattle Kingdom

The Hidden History of the Cowboy West

By Christopher Knowlton



Knowlton writes about the young men and the financing that underpinned the huge herds of Texas longhorns moved to open ranges in Wyoming and Montana. He also explores the cowboys, many young jobless veterans of Confederate cavalry units, and the cattle trails and

trailheads that made towns like Dodge City and Abilene in Kansas famous. The history will interest readers with connections in the West or baby boomers who grew up watching Gunsmoke!

The Worst Hard Time

The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl

By Timothy Egan

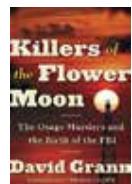


Egan writes an account of the 1930s Dust Bowl on the Great Plains, zeroing in on a group of families. The settlers of the 1880s arrived in years of high rainfall, sometimes believing promoters' assertions that “rain follows the plow.” So, while not an account of 1880s, it's a cautionary tale in the Manifest Destiny story.

Killers of the Flower Moon

The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI

By David Grann



The Burkhart sisters were among the Osage families with headrights to fabulous wealth in oil-rich Osage County, Oklahoma, in the 1920s. They were also targets of unscrupulous behavior by their non-Indian neighbors and by local, state, and federal government entities. The deaths were a dark, dark conspiracy. A 2017 Top Ten read for me.

And Still the Waters Run

The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes

By Angie Debo



A book cited as a classic in understanding Indian policies affecting tribes in Indian Territory, particularly after the territory was absorbed into the state of Oklahoma. It's hard to believe the greed. This is tough, but important, reading.

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of increasingly impressive inventions, usually introduced by a journalistic 'hook' to engage readers—e.g., an account of an explosion aboard the world's largest commercial airliner in 2010 precedes his history of the jet engine. ... Less a work of scholarship than an enthusiastic popular-science tour of technological marvels, and readers will love the ride."

Publishers Weekly ★★★★

"Winchester ... smoothly mixes history, science, and biographical sketches to pay homage to the work of precision engineers, whom he credits with the creation of everything from unpickable locks to gravity wave detectors and the Hubble Telescope. ... Winchester's latest is a rollicking work of pop science that entertains and informs."

Christian Science Monitor ★★★★

"Winchester is a champion humanizer; it's the foremost of his many writing skills. He sifts through the historical record, builds impressive bibliographies, and then crafts it all into three-dimensional characters. ... The story Winchester tells is one of steady, almost inexorably increasing complexity, and this can make the book's later sections heavier going for the lay reader." STEVE DONOGHUE

NY Times Book Review ★★★★

"It might be difficult to accept the notion that there was such a 'precise' turning point in our history, but Winchester makes a convincing case. ... Interestingly, Winchester also discusses the social implications of precision on assembly lines." ROMA AGRAWAL

Critical Summary

Winchester's latest is a typically "entertaining narrative" based on an "ingenious argument" (*Kirkus*)—that steam power enabled precision engineering and led to the Industrial Revolution, thus paving the way for modern technology. Although the author does regret that the work of individual craftsmen has become less prominent in the automation age, he believes there is a certain beauty to precision engineering. For instance, when he considers Japan's Seiko Watch Company in one of the later chapters,

he sees how "craft and precision [can] work side by side" (*BookPage*). The critics applauded the "narrative skill" that makes "even the most arcane of technical specifics smoothly comprehensible in context" (*Christian Science Monitor*). Winchester writes accessible and diverting nonfiction that draws laypeople in. ■

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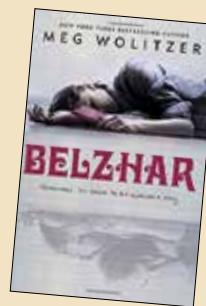
mental dexterity and linguistic ballet" (*New York Times Book Review*).

Belzhar (2014)

When Jamaica (Jam) Gallahue's boyfriend dies, she is sent to a rustic Vermont boarding school for "emotionally fragile, highly intelligent students."

Handpicked to attend a legendary class called "Special Topics in English," she meets the handsome Griffin; Sierra, an African American dancer; Marc, a natural-born leader; and Casey, new to a wheelchair—each with his or her own tragic story. Soon, the class is reading Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and writing in journals. But as their journal writing takes them to surprising alternate realities (dubbed "Belzhar"), Jam and her friends must grow emotionally by learning to leave the past behind. "Wolitzer melds the power of confessional writing, Plath's legacy, and the internal worlds of teenagers in this unusual gem of a novel" (*Entertainment Weekly*). (★★★★)

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Pioneer Girl

The Annotated Autobiography

By Laura Ingalls Wilder and Pamela Smith-Hill, Editor



Wilder's memoir forms the basis for her Little House books. The stories are familiar, but the annotation is remarkable and certainly adds to Laura's story.

The Children's Blizzard

By David Laskin



Laskin tells the story of a monstrous blizzard on January 12, 1888, which caught the settlers of the Great Plains utterly by surprise, with warm temperatures in the morning and the raging chaos of horizontal snow and hurricane-force winds in the afternoon.

The Long Winter

By Laura Ingalls Wilder

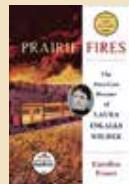


Although this Little House book takes place in Dakota Territory, not Kansas, the blizzards and survival strategies were the same. A childhood favorite.

Prairie Fires

The American Dreams of Laura Ingalls Wilder

By Caroline Fraser



What Kansas-born girl doesn't read all there is to know about the writer of the iconic Little House books? Fraser adds 19th-century historical context to the stories, making this a good inclusion in my list. It won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize. ■