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Better Beach Books

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Editor's Introduction: Many colleges and universities are assigning a book to be read by incoming freshmen during the summer or outside of class as a common reading project. One book is usually chosen by committee or vote and promoted on college websites and elsewhere as an effort to foster community, create shared experiences, and encourage discussion. The National Association of Scholars study *Beach Books 2013–2014: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class?* surveys the books that are currently being assigned at over three hundred colleges and finds that the books chosen are, on the whole, less than the best, often of transient value, on trendy PC topics, and in easygoing, less demanding genres such as the first person memoir.[1] We asked a number of booklovers for their suggestions for better reads. We left it open as to fiction or nonfiction, classic or modern, although we did suggest 1990 as a cutoff date for the latter, since the study found that only five books before that date had been assigned in 2013–2014, with over half of the total selections published after 2000.

[1]Ashley Thorne, Marilee Turscak, and Peter Wood, *Beach Books: What Do Colleges and Universities Want Students to Read Outside Class? 2013–2014* (New York: National Association of Scholars, 2014), http://www.nas.org/images/documents/NAS-BeachBooks.pdf.

Go Down, Moses, by William Faulkner

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A common reading for incoming college freshmen should combine intellectual sinew with imaginative enchantment. As the NAS beach books studies have shown, most current selections are "safe" and "correct," twenty-first century, and carefully aligned with academia's canned left-wing orthodoxies. Instead, the common reading should offer a taste of writing that threatens to explode the Authorized Utopian Progressive version of the world, a book of high art by someone who, as Joseph Conrad described, "speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain." I nominate William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, particularly the section titled "The Bear." Here's why. Faulkner has been in academia's multicultural doghouse for years. His bad behavior includes treating race as complex rather than formulaic. He writes about guns, hunting, the South, and masculine characters. His pronoun use is confusing, and he shifts in time erratically, even in midsentence. He composes gargantuan sentences bristling with adjectives, and, as Stanley Fish notes, he "delays with getting on with the plot." Faulkner's human condition is tragic, ensnared by eternal, unsolvable dilemmas rather than "socially constructed" oppressions of victims *du jour*. And his writing lacks postmodern torpor and irony. In his Nobel Banquet Speech, Faulkner recalled writers to "the old verities and truths of the heart, the old universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed—love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." Elegiac and mythic, "The Bear" describes Old Ben, a huge, almost supernatural bear who embodies the wilderness. Readers encounter the men hunting Old Ben, Lion (the only dog who can face him), and the boy Isaac McCaslin, a gifted hunter, who decides that he will never shoot the bear. Even to begin discussing Isaac's choices requires a religious vocabulary that includes "renounce," "relinquish," "expiate," "redeem," "eternal," and "immortal." Students will struggle with Faulkner's vocabulary and syntax but their emotions will be aroused by the cadence and sweep of his language. I first read "The Bear" in elementary school, condensed in a weekly reader, but even then it engraved lifelong images in my memory:

> It was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive, and the

dogs and the bear and deer juxtaposed and reliefed against it, ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and unmitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter…

Civilization, by Kenneth Clark

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My ideal candidate for a beach book is Kenneth Clark's *Civilization*. Based on the thirteen-episode TV program of the same name, it sold over a million copies after the program was screened in 1969. Commendably brief, jargon-free, and beautifully written, it is an engrossing and pleasurable read that will hold the attention of most college students. Clark, who was the director of the National Gallery of England, wears his vast erudition lightly as he gracefully conducts his readers on a tour of Western civilization from the end of the ancient world to the twentieth century. His genial discussion of carefully chosen buildings, sculptures, and paintings is moving, instructive, and soul-nourishing. But there is much more: each work is used to elucidate an aspect of the philosophical, cultural, literary, musical, and spiritual legacy of the West. Clark is no relativist: he's not afraid to say that some things are better than others. Above all, he believes in the greatness of Western civilization, although he makes clear that its survival is no sure thing. Needless to say, Clark's not popular on campuses; so don't look for this brilliant paean to the West on the reading list of many college courses.

Leisure: The Basis of Culture, by Josef Pieper

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This short book is a gem, and a perfect beach book for incoming university students. Pieper makes a case for the centrality of leisure to the Western philosophical tradition, but shows how (unfortunately) Western modernity no longer has an understanding of or time for this conception of life. We've all become immersed in the world of "total work," where even philosophical activity, and perhaps all of intellectual life, is now considered little different from the life of manual labor. We work at universities, doing research as if in a lab, just as others work in information technology or as investment bankers.

But *leisure*, according to Pieper, is not a rest from the world of total work; it is a categorically different kind of activity, freed from the considerations of work. It is a kind of play, in Huizinga's sense, an activity undertaken as an end in itself. This notion of leisure is the proper model for understanding the intellectual life as it was meant to be lived. While university students may not always feel that they live leisurely lives, it is worth exposing them to this conception, which will probably take root in at least some of them.

Battle Cry of Freedom, by James McPherson

Will Fitzhugh
Publisher, *The Concord Review*

The great majority of America's public high school graduates heading off to college have very likely never been asked to read a single complete nonfiction book in those four years. In addition, if their states are like Massachusetts, where I taught U.S. history in the 1980s, they may be required to take a year of U.S. history but they don't have to pass it. While proud of its academic achievements, Massachusetts recently eliminated funding that would have made possible a high school test in U.S. history.

My suggestion for summer reading, then, is *Battle Cry of Freedom*, by James McPherson. During the U.S. Civil War, the rebels, unlike James Dean, had a cause: they wanted to break up the country, making one great nation into two lesser ones. They failed, after more than 620,000 Americans were killed or died from sickness, and perhaps 1.5 million were wounded.

This fine book is well-written, and will introduce students to the sacrifice paid for "Liberty and Union, Now and Forever, One and Inseparable," in Daniel Webster's words, and will also give them the satisfaction of having read one serious history book before facing the other nonfiction books their professors hope they will be able to read in college.

A Farewell to Arms, by Ernest Hemingway, and *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather

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When I was chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, the agency spent an enormous amount of time and effort compiling all of the reliable data on literary reading. One of the key lessons we learned was the social power of reading. When people read the same book, the work acquires a social as well as

intellectual value—people become more eager to read it because they know other people are reading it, too. Hardcore intellectuals may dislike this notion, but it reflects human nature. We are social animals. This insight became the cornerstone of the NEA's Big Read program, which eventually featured over thirty works of fiction, most of them classic novels of wide appeal. The huge increase in American literary reading while the program was at its height suggests that the strategy worked.

If I were to choose one of those works to recommend for a college summer reading program, it would be Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. I suggest the novel because it is a superb literary work that concerns themes that touch directly on the lives of college-age students—love, loss, courage, and violence. Set in Italy during the First World War, the book also looks deeply into the nature of war in both a political and personal sense. The second half becomes a powerful love story—sexy, redemptive, and eventually tragic. It has been my experience that students respond deeply to the book. Of course, my ideal college reading program would assign a companion novel of a different sort, such as Willa Cather's *My Antonia*. Cather's great theme is the personal cost of success among people who chose to develop their talents beyond the ordinary—an issue of importance to college students. But the important thing is to bring students into a serious and ponderable book of enduring worth. Those who truly connect to the book will read another and then another.

The Death of Ivan Ilyich, by Leo Tolstoy
Nathan Harden

It's often said that an older man is a wiser man. But what if you could learn the great lessons of life while you are young? If you read *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, you just might. This novella is short enough to be read in an afternoon, but it packs a lifetime of wisdom in its pages. By all appearances the title character has lived a highly successful life. He has gained wealth and status. He has also lived it in a very typical way, always working for something a little better—a better job, a better apartment—without really questioning why. But a sudden terminal illness causes Ivan to reexamine his life. At death's door, he is struck by the emptiness of all he has gained. And he catches a glimpse of the kind of meaningful life he might have lived.

This book was heavily influenced by a religious epiphany Tolstoy experienced late in life. And it serves as a great introduction to the writer's work. If you are a college student trying to figure out what to do with your life, it poses

timely questions, questions much better to answer now than on your deathbed. *What are you really living for? And why?*

They say youth is wasted on the young. Maybe it is also true that wisdom is wasted on the elderly. It is while you are young, after all, that you have the most time to benefit from wisdom.

The Present Age, by Søren Kierkegaard

David Lyle Jeffrey
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I would like to suggest a brief book—an essay really—from the mid-nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard's *The Present Age* (1846; cheaply available from Harper Torchback in Alexander Drû's translation). This text reads like a critique of our own culture, what Kierkegaard describes for his own time as a culture of "spectatorship" and "advertising." It will certainly raise a lot of discussion about the role of social media. Kierkegaard thought that obsessive "talkativeness" was a probable indicator of the sterility of one's intellectual and spiritual life, and that pseudo-intellectual talkativeness was a certain sign of it. He takes up the ways in which public opinion, shaped by the press, is inherently a fictive construct that has the effect of enervating real conversation and thwarting genuine intellectual seriousness, making meaningful thought and discourse nearly impossible, and crippling individual integrity and self-knowledge.

On Liberty, by John Stuart Mill

Alan Charles Kors
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John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* is a celebration of individuality, personal responsibility, freedom of speech and expression, and human diversity in belief and in ways of life. It makes one consider the most profound political, social, and moral questions, and it allows for informed disagreement among readers about the meaning, coherence, and value of his argument. Does it fail, or not, to address the problem of social order sufficiently? Does it give too much power, or not, to social judgment and the coercion of public obloquy? Does it give too much power to the state, or not, in the ability to tax rather than ban what the public deems vices? Mill establishes two poles: (1) an individual's freedom of choice about what is best for him in the domain of self-regarding beliefs and

activities; and (2) the coercion, even absent harm to others, of adult individuals, for their own good, by society itself. He believes it in our common interest to move, wherever possible, toward the former pole. Should we agree with him? Why? Why not?

Fahrenheit 451, by Ray Bradbury

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As I write, on December 18, 2014, free speech is being shut down from many different directions. A new Sony film, *The Interview*, satirizing the leader of North Korea, has led to threats of more cyberattacks, murder, and other violence that these days ensue when someone somewhere is offended. Recalling a bad rerun of the attacks on Salman Rushdie's publishers and translators, after the *fatwa* that sent him into hiding for years, Sony has canceled release of the film after scores of theaters declined to show it (no—not out of fellow feeling, but rather due to that wonderfully ubiquitous American fear of legal liability if violence were indeed to occur). And the lead actors are said to need bodyguards. (Update: Public outrage caused Sony and theater owners to backtrack in this instance, though the capitulation to public pressure rather than principle is itself worrisome.)

Meanwhile, within the so-called civilized world, law professors are afraid to teach about rape, according to a recent *New Yorker* piece by Harvard Law School's Jeannie Suk, who is concerned about the educational consequences of students' new hypersensitivity to "triggers" (metaphorical, to be sure) in their classrooms.

Still closer to home, here at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where I teach, the book selected for 2014–2015's "Common Read" (supplied to all incoming undergraduates, i.e., more than five thousand students a year) is that timeless classic *Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison* (2011). In the preceding three years since this program was initiated, the books so honored have been on similar trendy themes: *No Impact Man*, by Colin Beavan, on the rewards of living an eco-friendly life (2013–2014); *Ready Player One*, by Ernest Cline, a work of dystopian fiction (2012–2013); *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*, by Ron Suskind (2011–2012).

Apart from the dystopia, the other three books are all "true stories," the kind to which students seem to have little difficulty relating. Perhaps that would be a good reason for the university to choose something quite different, more

challenging. As for the dystopia, it's a Young Adult adventure involving a virtual reality world and gaming, in which the nerd hero battles against an evil corporation.

By contrast, where are the books that actually challenge students intellectually? Teaching Ray Bradbury's 1953 novel *Fahrenheit 451* this year, I was surprised to discover that my students weren't aware of the speech code in place at UMass, as at so many other universities, and that they can get into serious trouble for saying the wrong thing. They absorb the atmosphere, and do hesitate to speak out, but don't realize how this came about and is now implemented. Nor are they concerned about international politics (more of them, as I learned in class, worry about violence against transgendered people than about Islamic radicalism). But Bradbury's novel is of more relevance with each passing day, as this week's news reports should remind us. It depicts a society where books are prohibited and, if found, are burned by firemen unaware that once upon a time their task was to put out fires, not start them. Instead of reading, people sit glued to huge TV screens that replace their families, or engage in super-rapid car chases, or zonk out on tranquilizers.

How this came about is described in chilling detail in the novel, as Captain Beatty, the fire chief, explains to Montag, the protagonist:

> Bigger the population, the more minorities. Don't step on the toes of the dog lovers, the cat lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico….It didn't come from the Government down. There was no dictum, no declaration, no censorship to start with, no! Technology, mass exploitation, and minority pressure carried the trick, thank God. Today, thanks to them, you can stay happy all the time….
>
> …You must understand that our civilization is so vast that we can't have our minorities upset and stirred. Ask yourself, What do we want in this country, above all? People want to be happy, isn't that right? Haven't you heard it all your life?…Colored people don't like *Little Black Sambo*. Burn it. White people don't feel good about *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Burn it.

Bradbury got only one thing wrong: He couldn't have imagined how many more categories of victimhood people would divide themselves into, and that even American capitalism wouldn't dare resist threats from abroad!

Maybe a good summer read this year would be this novel, in conjunction with news reports on the continuing assault on free speech.

Leisure: The Basis of Culture, by Josef Pieper

R. R. Reno
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Immediately after her defeat in 1945, Germany went to work to rebuild. That was important. Food and shelter are necessities. But the anesthesia of vigorous practical effort was also a temptation, for considered reflection on the meaning of the German experience in the prior decades invited painful revelations. It was in that context that the German Catholic philosopher Josef Pieper wrote *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. His main thesis was quite traditional and quite simple: culture means the acknowledgment, transmission, and pursuit of truth, and this basic work must be done for its own sake rather than as a means to some other end. We rightly "use" truths when we design rockets or develop new medicines. But that "use" depends on knowing these truths in the first place, and to know is to relish. Truth invites enjoyment, and for this reason cultural "work" is best thought of as a celebration rather than a task.

Our universities in America have become meritocratic machines minting the next generation of high achievers. This encourages us to think, wrongly, that education is for the sake of some goal or ambition rather than an end-in-itself. Pieper's straightforward philosophical style and gift for concise formulation make this small book a powerful antidote to this false and ultimately stultifying view. He helps us see what it is that puts the "higher" into higher education.

Yes, talented young people today should prepare themselves for careers. But we cheat them of the greatest intellectual joys if we fail to help them see that a love of truth often requires us to tarry and wait, savor and contemplate.

Two Years before the Mast, by Richard Henry Dana Jr., and *The Twentieth Maine*, by John J. Pullen

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Pre-Civil War

Richard Henry Dana Jr.'s *Two Years before the Mast* (1840). While he was an undergraduate at Harvard, Dana's vision was affected by a case of the measles, a common childhood disease now all but eradicated. This prompted him to take a

leave of absence from Harvard and enlist as a common sailor on the wind-powered brig *Pilgrim* bound for California, then Mexican territory. The journey, which commenced in 1834, took two years and entailed harrowing trips around Cape Horn, the Panama Canal having not yet been built. Monterey was a backwater Mexican outpost; San Francisco was little more than a cow town. Even Boston was more town than city, as we experience firsthand when the *Alert* with Dana on it slowly makes its way into Boston Harbor at journey's end. All those church steeples are now obscured by tall office buildings. Their bells, so clearly audible as he disembarked, are now silent, or at least impossible to hear above the traffic. In 1869, Dana published an appendix, which recounts his visit to California in 1859 after the gold rush. By then, San Francisco had become a modern city. Little was as it had been. As to the fate of the *Alert*, she was a casualty of the Civil War, having been seized and destroyed in 1862 by the Confederate commerce raider *Alabama.* It is said that Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick*, had read *Two Years before the Mast* and was influenced by some of its more haunting passages.

Civil War

John J. Pullen's *The Twentieth Maine* (1957). The Twentieth Maine Regiment was constituted in 1862 and commanded during the Civil War by Joshua L. Chamberlain, a college professor who would go on to be president of Bowdoin and governor of Maine. His acts of personal heroism during the Battle of Gettysburg won him the Medal of Honor and helped turn the tide of the war in the North's favor. Pullen, a journalist by trade, served as an artillery officer during World War II. That he lets the facts speak for themselves, as any good journalist should, makes his writing so powerful and so informative and, yes, so haunting. Not only are we given a front row seat at the Civil War's critical battles, we also come away with a sense of the Civil War's social context, albeit from the narrow perspective of those living in the rural North. Pullen's writing is refreshingly free of the jargon and disconnected theorizing of the "enbubbled" academic.

***Losing My Cool: How a Father's Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture*, by Thomas Chatterton Williams**

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Students arrive at college with no experience of liberal education. Even the serious students approach learning with a utilitarian spirit—it's about grades and

careers. To counter this tendency, and begin the arduous process of leading students out of themselves into an engagement with the wider world and deeper questions, I would always pick some sort of *bildungsroman*.

There is a very fine contemporary work I find pitch-perfect for today's students: a 2010 memoir by Thomas Chatterton Williams entitled *Losing My Cool: How a Father's Love and 15,000 Books Beat Hip-Hop Culture*. The paperback version came out the following year with a new subtitle: *Losing My Cool: Love, Literature, and a Black Man's Escape from the Crowd*. Williams tells a story of the saving power of genuine inquiry, along the way documenting just how debasing and enslaving much of our current culture is.

The book is short enough to be accompanied by a couple of readings that would nicely complement Williams's reflections on the meaning of true freedom. I would include the chapters from *My Bondage and My Freedom* in which Frederick Douglass describes his spiritual emancipation, freeing himself from ignorance by learning to read and freeing himself from the fear of death through the act of physical resistance (chapters 10–11 and 15–17 or, at a minimum, 10 and 17). To help students think further about the formative (and potentially destructive) power of music, I would include just a bit from Plato's *Republic*: 376e1-377c4 and 395c1-d3 (total of one page), or maybe Allan Bloom's notorious chapter, simply titled "Music," from *The Closing of the American Mind*, which still has the ability to irritate and awaken undergraduates. For something more ambitious, one could add the famous paragraphs describing the master-slave dialectic from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially since Williams spends some pages wrestling with and being upended by Hegel.

Losing My Cool was the book I insisted my own son read this past summer as he got ready to enter college. He still talks about the "baguette incident" (pp. 97–100), which I hope means that he saw how the painful awareness of one's ignorance presents a moment of choice: to retreat into the self-protective cocoon of dismissive aloofness or take a risk and begin to free oneself from the bondage of a "perfunctory mind."

The Apology of Socrates, by Plato

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The first book every freshman should read is the *Apology*, Plato's reconstruction of Socrates's defense speech during his trial in 399 BC. In Plato's telling, Socrates puts the Athenian democracy on trial, exposing its shaky foundations that assume any random citizen has enough

knowledge of virtue and the good to govern the state. Along the way Socrates articulates some of the fundamental ideas of later Western philosophy, particularly the notion that virtue is knowledge, that if we know the good, we will do the good. Equally important is Socrates's idea of the "dialectic," the critical examination of opinions about virtue and the good in order to expose their weaknesses and incoherence. He explains how we pick up these opinions from various authorities in our childhood, and then assume they are true without being able to explain coherently *why* they are true. Socrates thinks that it is better to know you know nothing than to think you know something. Moreover, to Socrates this process of examination and the critical consciousness it develops is the essence of our humanity, the activity that fulfills our rational souls. Finally, Socrates is the first example of "speaking truth to power," the intellectual hero who sticks to his principles even at the risk of death. All these Socratic qualities are exactly what freshmen need to arm themselves against the received progressive opinions and unexamined ideas they will encounter in most of their courses.