

## TOPICS OFFERED FOR SUMMER 2024

*Classes start May 1<sup>st</sup> and end August 30<sup>th</sup>.*

*Each S/DG may choose to adjust its schedule to account for holidays.*

### 1. (BMB) BIOPICS: MOVIE BIOGRAPHIES

A biopic, or biographical film, is one that dramatizes the life, or important events in the life, of a real person, using the central character's real name. We are all familiar with movies that tell stories about other peoples' lives: movies such as *Amadeus*, *Elvis*, *Catch Me if You Can*, *Schindler's List*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Golda*, *Ferrari*, *Oppenheimer* and recently, *Maestro*. Sometimes these movies attempt to be scrupulously accurate in the telling. But biopics can be entirely factual, a mix of fact and fiction, or totally based on myth. Unknown details about historical figures and private lives often need to be created. Fictional events or characters are sometimes added to assist in telling the story or just for fun. Like most other movies, the primary purpose of a biopic is entertainment.

Examples of possible presentations include additional information about the subject's life or the lives of other people in the film, on the subject's field and/or work, on topics and issues raised in the film, on the director and other members of the film crew, on the actors and on any of the creative aspects of the film. The Common Reading lists some very good biopics but is not intended to be limiting; there are numerous biopics to choose from.

#### **Common Reading:**

IMBD List of *Top 50 Greatest Biopics of All Time (The Ultimate List)*, and

The Atlantic's *20 Biopics That Are Actually Worth Watching*, both available on the Internet.

### 2. (BRN) EVOLUTION, AI, AND THE FIVE BREAKTHROUGHS THAT MADE OUR BRAINS

Equal parts *Sapiens*, *Behave*, and *Superintelligence*, but wholly original in scope, *A Brief History of Intelligence* offers a paradigm shift for how we understand neuroscience and AI. Artificial intelligence entrepreneur Max Bennett chronicles the five "breakthroughs" in the evolution of human intelligence and reveals what brains of the past can tell us about the AI of tomorrow.

In the last decade, capabilities of artificial intelligence that had long been the realm of science fiction have, for the first time, become our reality. AI is now able to produce original art, identify tumors in pictures, and even steer our cars. And yet, large gaps remain in what modern AI systems can achieve—indeed, human brains still easily perform intellectual feats that we can't replicate in AI systems. How is it possible that AI can beat a grandmaster at chess but can't effectively load a dishwasher? As AI entrepreneur Max Bennett compellingly argues, finding the answer requires diving into the billion-year history of how the human brain evolved; a history filled with countless half-starts, calamities, and clever innovations. Not only do our brains have a story to tell—the future of AI may depend on it.

Bennett wraps the history of intelligence around his theory of the five breakthroughs: steering (approach/avoid), learning, simulating (mental models), mentalizing (understanding your own and others mental states) and language. He makes a compelling case but more importantly it is a great vehicle for describing the dozens of very specific

skills that we have evolved over the past 550 million years, since the first bilateral creatures evolved.

There are many possible topics: The development of language, animal language, impact of AI on society and law. Others might be imbedding computer interfaces in humans, Apple's new \$3,000 wearable glasses.

**Common Reading:** *A Brief History of Intelligence: Evolution, AI, and the Five Breakthroughs That Made Our Brains Hardcover*  
by Max Bennett (October 2023)

### 3. (CAL) DEAR CALIFORNIA: THE GOLDEN STATE IN DIARIES AND LETTERS

Dispatches from a land of extremes, by writers and movie stars, natives and visitors, activists and pioneers, and more.

Amazon write-up:

California has always been, literally, a place to write home about. Renowned figures and iconoclasts; politicians, actors, and artists; the world-famous and the not-so-much—all have contributed their voices to the patchwork of the state. With this book, cultural historian and California scholar David Kipen reveals this long-storied place through its diaries and letters, and gives readers a highly anticipated follow-up to his book *Dear Los Angeles*.

Running from January 1 through December 31, leaping across decades and centuries, *Dear California* reflects on the state's shifting landscapes and the notion of place.

Entries talk across the centuries, from indigenous stories told before the Spanish arrived on the Pacific coast through to present-day tweets, blogs, and other ephemera.

The collected voices show how far we've wandered—and how far we still have to go in chasing the elusive California dream.

This is a book for readers who love California—and for anyone who simply treasures flavorful writing. Weaving together the personal, the insightful, the impressionistic, the lewd, and the hysterically funny, *Dear California* presents collected writings essential to understanding the diversity, antagonisms, and abiding promise of the Golden State.

Writings from Edward Abbey, Louis Armstrong, Ambrose Bierce, Octavia Butler, John Cage, Willa Cather, Cesar Chavez, Julia Child, Winston Churchill, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Einstein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jane Fonda, Allen Ginsberg, Dolores Huerta, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Steve Jobs, Billy Joel, Frida Kahlo, John F. Kennedy, Anne Lamott, John Lennon, Groucho Marx, Henri Matisse, Marshall McLuhan, Herman Melville, Charles Mingus, Marilyn Monroe, John Muir, Ronald Reagan, Sally Ride, Joan Rivers, Susan Sontag, Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Mark Zuckerberg, and many others.

Presentations would be on California history, based on the letters and diaries.

**Common Reading:** *Dear California: The Golden State in Diaries and Letters*  
edited by David Kipen (October 3, 2023)

### 4. (COM) AMERICAN COMEDY AND THE CHARACTERS WHO CREATED IT

Over the past one hundred years and counting, comedians have spoken out on the foibles and participants of politics, marriage, lifestyles of the rich and famous, and everyday events

in the lives of their audiences. Through their words, they have reflected, shaped, and changed American culture.

This S/DG will use the book *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy* by Kliph Nesteroff to examine how we've moved from vaudeville to late night television. The book introduces the first stand-up comedian at the turn of the last century, —an emcee who abandoned physical shtick for straight jokes. After the repeal of Prohibition, supper clubs replaced speakeasies and the world of Las Vegas evolved.

In the 1950s, the late-night talk show brought stand-up comedy to a wide public, while Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, and Jonathan Winters attacked conformity and staged a comedy rebellion in coffeehouses. From comedy's part in the civil rights movement and the social upheaval of the late 1960s, to the first comedy clubs of the 1970s and the cocaine-fueled comedy boom of the 1980s, *The Comedians* culminates with a new era of media-driven celebrity in the twenty-first century.

Even though the author based his book on over 200 interviews and archival research, possible presentations include: individuals not covered or additional information on those listed in the book; the local comedy scene; a look at how American comedians differ from those in other countries; sexism as presented in the Prime Video series "The Remarkable Mrs. Maisel" and even "Dad Jokes".

**Common Reading:** *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy*, by Kliph Nesteroff (November 2015; 567 pp)

## 5. (DOP) PLEASURE VS PAIN – BALANCING THE DOPAMINE

Dopamine is a compound that acts on areas of the brain to give you feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, and motivation. This is all good...except when that good feeling turns into pain and the urgent need for more pleasure. In this S/DG, participants will use the book *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* by Dr. Anna Lembke, psychiatrist and author, as she investigates how to balance the urges for a dopamine 'hit' and avoiding compulsion/addiction. The book looks at the various types of high-dopamine stimuli: drugs, food, news, gambling, shopping, gaming, texting, sexting, Facebooking, Instagramming, YouTubing, tweeting, etc. while acknowledging that the smartphone is an ever present modern-day hypodermic needle, delivering digital dopamine 24/7 for a wired generation. As such we've all become vulnerable to compulsive overconsumption.

The author condenses complex neuroscience into easy-to-understand metaphors and uses actual lived experiences of her patients under-going therapy that are the gripping fabric of her narrative. The topics in the book (some cover adult content material) will be the material used for class discussion questions.

This book is about pleasure. It's also about pain. Most important, it's about how to find the delicate balance between the two. Possible presentations include: therapies outside of intensive psychiatric sessions; other books on this topic; how this compares with 12-step programs; is this uniquely American.

**Common Reading:** *Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence* by Dr. Anna Lembke (August 24, 2021; 304 pp)

## 6. (DPS) THE DEATH OF PUBLIC SCHOOL

According to Cara Fitzpatrick, the war on public schools began in the 1950s when southern segregationists used private education as a way to evade integration. It then spread to the

North and has become a rallying cry of conservatives who fight to use public money to fund private institutions. In this process, education is poised to become a private commodity rather than a public good.

Our exploration of this threat to public education will be guided by Fitzpatrick's book: *The Death of Public School: How Conservatives Won the War Over Public Education*, September 2012, 384 pages. Fitzpatrick won a Pulitzer Prize for a series on school segregation and is an editor of Chalkbeat, a non-profit organization reporting on educational trends throughout the United States. Readers give this book 4.3 of 5 stars on Amazon. Critics call Fitzgerald's book a chilling account of the alarmingly successful movement to dismantle public education and essential reading for anyone who cares about communities and the nation as well as education.

Potential presentation topics could include: how parental control of schools has become a successful wedge issue in recent elections; the political and legal gyrations that allow public funds to be spent on private education; and the implications of the rise of publicly-funded private institutions on the separation of church and state as well as the growing influence of religion in elections, government, and democracy.

**Common Reading:** *The Death of Public School: How Conservatives Won the War Over Public Education*, by Cara Fitzpatrick  
(September 2023; 384 pages)

## 7. (EAN) ENEMIES AND NEIGHBORS

Since October 7, 2023, the world has been transfixed by the brutal attacks by Hamas on Israeli citizens and the humanitarian crisis in Gaza brought on by Israel's response. Almost everyone has an opinion on what should be done, but few people understand the complex history of the area and why a solution is so elusive. In our common reading, British journalist Ian Black provides us with a comprehensive history of Palestine/Israel, from the end of World War I to 2017, complete with maps and illustrations.

Setting the scene at the end of the nineteenth century, when the first Zionist settlers arrived in the Ottoman-ruled Holy Land, Black draws on a wide range of sources - from declassified documents to oral testimonies to his own vivid-on-the-ground reporting - to illuminate the most polarizing conflict of modern times.

Beginning with the 1917 Balfour Declaration, in which the British government promised to favor the establishment of "a national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, Black proceeds for a century through the Arab Rebellion of the late 1930s, the Nazi Holocaust, Israel's independence and the Palestinian Nakba (catastrophe), the watershed of 1967 followed by the Palestinian re-awakening, Israel's settlement project, two Intifadas, the Oslo Accords, and continued negotiations and violence.

Combining engaging narrative with political analysis and social and cultural insights, *Enemies and Neighbors* is both an accessible overview and a fascinating investigation into the deeper truths of a furiously contested history. Presentations might address recent events (from different perspectives perhaps) or explore differences and similarities between the two cultures or examine the history of the area before World War I.

**Common Reading:** *Enemies and Neighbors: Arabs and Jews in Palestine and Israel 1917-2017*, by Ian Black (640 pages, October 2018, paperback)

**8. (ECN) THIS WEEK IN *THE ECONOMIST***

The British weekly publication *The Economist* is known for its informative and thought-provoking reporting on political and economic developments around the world. In this S/DG, we will discuss several articles selected from the current issue as catalysts for informed and lively discussion on the burning topics of our time. Leadership will rotate and all articles selected are easily accessed online. Given the many worldwide problems this course will help to give you a deeper look, then just a brief sound bite from somebody reading off a teleprompter.

**Common Reading:** Current issues of *The Economist*.

Subscription to *The Economist* is required for members. Note: Members can get reduced-cost subscriptions through CSUDH student membership.

**9. (ESY) THE DEADLINE: ESSAYS**

Few, if any, historians have brought such insight, wisdom, and empathy to public discourse as Jill Lepore. Arriving at *The New Yorker* in 2005, Lepore, with her panoptical range and razor-sharp style, brought a transporting freshness and a literary vivacity to everything from profiles of long-dead writers to urgent constitutional analysis to an unsparing scrutiny of the woeful affairs of the nation itself. The astonishing essays collected in *The Deadline* offer a prismatic portrait of Americans' techno-utopianism, frantic fractiousness, and unprecedented—but armed—aimlessness.

From lockdowns and race commissions to Bratz dolls and bicycles, to the losses that haunt Lepore's life, these essays again and again cross what she calls the deadline, the "river of time that divides the quick from the dead." Echoing Gore Vidal's United States in its massive intellectual erudition, *The Deadline*, with its remarkable juxtaposition of the political and the personal, challenges the very nature of the essay—and of history—itsself.

Presentations will include class members covering one or more of the essays, and may expand to add more detail or background on the subject matter. Other possibilities include introducing information about matters related to the essay topic, a critique of the essay, or sharing articles on the same subject written by other authors.

**Common Reading:** *The Deadline: Essays*, by Jill Lepore (August 2023)

**10. (FIH) FOOD IN HISTORY - In Classroom Only**

We all know that food is essential to survival and that what and how we eat has a lot to say about us as individuals.

What is far more difficult to fully grasp is the many ways in which food is connected to human history itself. In essence, food is so central to human life that what it means to our entire history as humans is obscured.

In our common book, *Food in History*, author Reay Tannahill helps remove that obscurity by providing a world history of food from pre-historic times to today and explaining how food has influenced the entire course of human development. Along the way, Tannahill covers the influence of the quest for food on such huge and broad topics as human population growth, economic and political theory, commerce, warfare, exploration, conquest and colonialism, religion, science, and technology.

At the same time, Tannahill provides a fascinating chronological survey of food throughout human history, including hunting and gathering, the beginnings of agriculture, the

domestication of animals, the origins of beer, the concepts of “clean” and “unclean” food in the ancient Middle East, Greek and Roman food and eating customs, eating in India, China, and the Arab world prior to the discovery of the New World, the effects of trade and colonization, famines, restaurants, the discovery of vitamins, the rise of additives, the science of fertilization and large scale farming.

If you are interested in having a much better appreciation of what we eat today, and how we got here, this is the course for you.

Given the topic and breadth of this course, possible presentation topics are nearly unlimited. Among the available topics would be: a more in-depth look at any of the dozens of topics addressed by the book; myths and/or religious teachings concerning food (from any one or more cultures); comparisons across time, geography, and/or ethnicity regarding food; relevant observations regarding the distribution of food across today’s globe, and related questions; and predictable issues and developments regarding food in the predictable future.

This S/DG should be greatly enhanced by the fact that it will be conducted in person at the Beach Cities classroom. It can be expected that class members will be unable to avoid sharing food with one another at our meetings, including in order to illustrate or respond to class presentations, making this class a particularly delicious one for you to join!

**Common Reading:** *Food in History*, by Reay Tannahill (Crown, May 10, 1995; 448 pp)

## 11. (FSS) TIME FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

### In Classroom only

We have a nice mix of styles from writers I know and love and many from those I haven't read before which is great. One of the reasons I like anthologies to introduce authors is the low investment in time and money to get a taste of whether you like their works or not.

The award-winning anthology, in trade paperback for the first time, features two-dozen SF&F short stories, including one of the last published works within Robert Jordan's bestselling Wheel of Time series!

If you enjoy SF&F written by some of the best storytellers working today, this third Unfettered collection from series editor Shawn Speakman is for you. Enter worlds beyond your wildest imagination, journey through a vast array of themes, and explore the complexities of humanity and the wonders of the universe in these enthralling stories that will leave you spellbound.

I picked out this book to get my fix of a few specific authors between book releases. All the stories are entertaining. A couple made me take note of series that I had not yet discovered but felt that I will enjoy in the future. Presenters will pick out a story and author for presentations.

**Common Reading:** *Unfettered: New Tales by Masters of Fantasy*  
edited by Shawn Speakman, et al (November 2016)

## 12. (GLD) THERE'S GOLD IN THEM HILLS

Written by two-time Pulitzer Prize contestant: H. W. Brands, who tells **THE** definitive account of the fast-paced California Gold Rush story.

Called the epic of the age, the saga of world history, and an adventure on the largest scale, the California Gold Rush keeps the reader captivated. The author claims “The

Gold Rush triggered the greatest mass movement of peoples since the Crusades, as fortune-seekers from all over the world flocked to California.”

Possible Presentations:

- 1) Brand tells his epic story from multiple perspectives: John and Jessie Fremont, Leland Stanford (of Stanford University) and Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain).  
-----Focus on one adventurer to research and present to class.
- 2) People swarmed to California—coming by ship and overland, braving Tierra del Fuego and the pestilences of Panama—all lured by the promise of gold.  
-----Research one mode of transportation to California and present to class.
- 3) People swarmed to California from China, Australia, England, Ireland and Chile, leaving behind their families and everything they owned in what is described as a mass movement of peoples not seen since the Crusades.  
----Share why population growth added more tension in south and north.

**Common Reading:** *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream*, by H. W. Brands (October 2003, paperback)

### 13. (GRW) GROWTH FOR GOOD

Economic growth is wrecking the planet. It’s the engine driving climate change, pollution, and the shrinking of natural spaces. To save the environment, will we have to shrink the economy? Might this even lead to a better society, especially in rich nations, helping us break free from a pointless obsession with material wealth that only benefits the few? In our common reading, which has been named a *Foreign Affairs* Best Book of the Year, Alessio Terzi takes these legitimate questions as a starting point for a riveting journey into the socioeconomic, evolutionary, and cultural origins of our need for growth. It’s an imperative, he argues, that we abandon at our own risk.

Terzi ranges across centuries and diverse civilizations to show that focus on economic expansion is deeply interwoven with the human quest for happiness, well-being, and self-determination. Growth, he argues, is underpinned by core principles and dynamics behind the West’s rise to affluence. These include the positivism of the Enlightenment, the acceleration of science and technology and, ultimately, progress itself. Today growth contributes to the stability of liberal democracy, the peaceful conduct of international relations, and the very way our society is organized through capitalism. Abandoning growth would not only prove impractical, but would also sow chaos, exacerbating conflict within and among societies.

This does not mean we have to choose between chaos and environmental destruction. *Growth for Good* presents a credible agenda to enroll capitalism in the fight against climate catastrophe. With the right policies and the help of engaged citizens, pioneering nations can set in motion a global decarbonization wave and in parallel create good jobs and a better, greener, healthier world.

Presentations can address the pros and cons of this argument, ideas of other economists, and problems with maximizing the interests of shareholders above those of other stakeholders.

**Common Reading:** *Growth for Good: Reshaping Capitalism to Save Humanity from Climate Catastrophe*, by Alessio Terzi (347 pages; May 2022)

#### 14. (ISR) GENIUS OF ISRAEL

Why have so many people turned against Israel? One conjecture is that Middle East countries have “bought” university faculties with donations leading to “brainwashing” of students to consider Israel as an “evil colonizer.” What holds Israel together in the face of all the attacks? There are widely different social, political, and religious views held by Israelis, yet the country holds together. This S/DG will explore what makes Israel function so well in spite of its internal disagreements.

Of all peoples on earth, who more routinely contribute more positively to the social order than the Jews? By any standard-- gentility, peacefulness, productivity, learnedness, lawfulness, prudence creativity, warmth, kindness, generosity (we need a great book on Jewish philanthropy)—who excels the Jews?

Possible research/presentation topics might include; Does having a compulsory community service bind a country together?; Does having subgroups with special privileges increase discord?; How can one argue and yet come together for the greater good?

**Common Reading:** *The Genius of Israel – The Surprising Resilience of a Divided Nation in a Turbulent World*, by Dan Senor and Saul Singer  
(Avid Reader Press, November 2023; 262 pages)

#### 15. (KND) OF HUMAN KINDNESS

The ability to empathize – per the dictionary, “the power of entering into the experience of or understanding objects or emotions outside ourselves” – can be considered humanity’s foundation. Our author finds empathy central to the manifold power of Shakespeare’s work, the element which has enabled it to last over 400 years. She examines Shakespeare’s expanding “kindness” over the course of several plays and also how it is missing in some. She concentrates on “The Merchant of Venice” and “Othello” which revolve around characters whom we are “superficially unable to identify with or feel for.” She writes: “When we address one another with empathy, disagreements don’t go away, but compromise and unity are easier to reach.” We need more of that today.

This S/DG will examine the importance and impact and evolution of empathy over the course of Shakespeare’s plays. Topics for research and presentation might include how various personality traits show up in different characters in different plays. How we are lacking in empathy today and how more attention to this aspect of human interaction might ease the tensions and polarization that hamper us today.

**Common Reading:** *Of Human Kindness: What Shakespeare Teaches Us About Empathy*, by Paula Marantz Cohen (Yale Univ. Press, February 2021; 159 pp)

#### 16. (KPG) THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY

For millions of conservative Christians, America is their kingdom - a land set apart, a nation uniquely blessed, a people in special covenant with God. However, in the eyes of some, this love of country has given way to right-wing nationalist fervor and a reckless blood-and-soil idolatry that trivializes the kingdom of Jesus Christ.

In our common reading, journalist Tim Alberta, himself a practicing Christian and the son of an evangelical pastor, paints an expansive and profoundly troubling portrait of the American evangelical movement. Through the eyes of televangelists and small-town preachers, celebrity revivalists and everyday churchgoers, Alberta tells the story of a faith



cheaped by ephemeral fear, a promise corrupted by partisan subterfuge, and a reputation stained by perpetual scandal.

Alberta retraces the arc of the modern evangelical movement, placing political and cultural inflection points in the context of church teachings and traditions, explaining how Donald Trump's presidency and the COVID-19 pandemic only accelerated historical trends that long pointed toward disaster. Reporting from half-empty sanctuaries and standing-room-only convention halls across the country, the author documents a growing fracture inside American Christianity and journeys with readers through this strange new environment in which loving your enemies is "woke" and owning the libs is the answer to WWJD.

Sifting through the wreckage--pastors broken, congregations battered, believers losing their religion because of sex scandals and political schemes--Alberta asks: If the American evangelical movement has ceased to glorify God, what *is* its purpose?

Presentation topics might include: evangelicals' influence in political parties and elections; the separation of church and state; famous/infamous evangelical leaders; evangelical perceptions of religious persecution; how to explain the rise of evangelicals in a time when many churches are closing for lack of parishioners and surveys indicate a majority of people are turning away from religion; and Christian Nationalism and its impact in other countries such as Russia and Hungary.

**Common Reading:** *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism*, by Tim Alberta, 506 pages; December 2023)

## 17. (MAI) MANAGING ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO BENEFIT EVERYONE

Artificial intelligence is increasingly performing many jobs formerly done by humans. Some people worry about whether workers replaced by robots will find new employment and, if not, what will happen to our economy and geo-political stability. Others tell us not to worry because humanity has gone through several transitions (hunter/gatherer, agriculture, industrial, service, information economies) and enough jobs have materialized to keep everyone gainfully employed even as the total population grows exponentially. However, according to a new book, the transitions have not always been beneficial to everyone. In fact, the comforting thought that it will all work out might be revisionist history written, as usual, by the winners.

In this S/DG, we explore these arguments with help from our text *Power & Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity*, (May 2023), by Daron Acemoglu (author of *Why Nations Fail*), and Simon Johnson (author of *13 Bankers*), 560 pages. Acemoglu, a professor of economics at MIT, has spent 25 years studying the effects of new technologies on employment, growth, and inequality. Johnson, also an economics professor at MIT, was chief economist at the International Monetary Fund. Amazon readers give this book a 4.3 rating out of five.

One reviewer writes: "Getting the regulation of artificial intelligence right is one of the most urgent problems facing our species, and also one of the most delicate." Another writes: "...the long story of humanity's technological development confirms 'there is nothing automatic about new technologies bringing widespread prosperity. Whether they do or not is an economic, social, and political choice.'" And a third writes: "Anyone who claims that the rise of A.I. will be good for anyone but those who own (and profit from) large tech companies should read *Power and Progress*. A new economy undergirded by artificial

intelligence could easily serve as an engine of further wealth concentration. Thinking about where we have been and where we are going in higher education, the clear lesson from *Power and Progress* is that we should not expect new technologies to result in a more equitable and resilient postsecondary ecosystem.” Fortunately, a fourth reviewer adds: “The direction of technology is not, like the direction of the wind, a force of nature beyond human control. It’s up to us. This humane and hopeful book shows how we can steer technology to promote the public good. Required reading for everyone who cares about the fate of democracy in a digital age.”

Presentation topics could include: deep dives into any of humanity’s previous economic transitions; profiles of the AI advocates who are asking us to trust them or the skeptics who question whether the future should be exclusively determined by tech entrepreneurs with a battle cry of “move fast and break things”; and the likely success of guiding the AI revolution to a beneficial outcome using recommendations from our authors and/or others.

**Common Reading:** *Power & Progress: Our Thousand-Year Struggle Over Technology and Prosperity*, by Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson  
(May 2023; 560 pages)

## 18. (MAT) MATERIAL WORLD: THE SIX RAW MATERIALS THAT SHAPE MODERN CIVILIZATION

The fiber-optic cables that weave the World Wide Web, the copper veins of our electric grids, the silicon chips and lithium batteries that power our phones and cars: though it can feel like we now live in a weightless world of information—what Ed Conway calls “the ethereal world”—our twenty-first-century lives are still very much rooted in the material.

In fact, we dug more stuff out of the earth in 2017 than in all of human history before 1950! For every ton of fossil fuels, we extract six tons of other materials, from sand to stone to wood to metal. And in *Material World*, our author embarks on an epic journey across continents, cultures, and epochs to reveal the underpinnings of modern life on Earth—traveling from the sweltering depths of the deepest mine in Europe to spotless silicon chip factories in Taiwan to the eerie green pools where lithium originates. It’s a compelling story full of colorful characters.

*Material World* is a celebration of the humans and the human networks, the miraculous processes and the little-known companies, that combine to turn raw materials into things of wonder. This is the story of human civilization from an entirely new perspective: the ground up.

Presentation topics can include:

- Further background on any of the scientists, businesses, cultures or physical processes described in the text;
- The environmental consequences of mining or manufacturing the materials mentioned;
- The political jockeying among nations to dominate certain of the named industries;
- Predictions about the silicon chip industry;
- Treatment of labor in any of the named industries.

**Common Reading:** *Material World: The Six Raw Materials That Shape Modern Civilization*, by Ed Conway (November 2023)

## 19. (OHN) O. HENRY PRIZE WINNING SHORT STORIES

The editor, novelist and short story writer Lauren Groff outlines in her introduction the criteria for choosing twenty prizewinning stories from the hundreds of submissions for this book: do they thrill or take risks, do they challenge expectations, and do they have staying power? They represent the greatest hits from some of the best contemporary short story writers, including: Ling Ma's "Office Hours", about a film professor who finds refuge in a fantastical outdoor setting accessed from her office closet; Jamil Jon Kochai's "The Haunting of Hajji Hotak", in which the narrator puts together the story of his Afghan American family as if he's a spy performing surveillance; and Catherine Lacey's "Man Mountain", about a woman's ambivalence concerning men with a brief piece of fabulism about a mountain of men she sets out to climb. Each story is accompanied by an introduction by Groff and observations by the winning writers on what inspired them. Each member of the class will do a presentation based on a story.

**Common Reading:** *The Best Short Stories 2023: The O. Henry Prize Winners*  
edited by Lauren Groff (September 2023)

## 20. (PUZ) PUZZLES - In Classroom only

Is part of your morning routine doing *The New York Times* crossword puzzle or the daily Wordle? Is there a partially completed jigsaw puzzle on your dining room table? Have you solved the Rubik's Cube? If so, this S/DG is for you.

What makes puzzles - jigsaws, mazes, riddles, sudokus - so satisfying? Be it the formation of new cerebral pathways, their close link to insight and humor, or their community-building properties, they're among the fundamental elements that make us human. Convinced that puzzles have made him a better person, the author of our common reading, A.J. Jacobs, set out to determine their myriad benefits. And maybe, in the process, solve the puzzle of our very existence. Well, almost.

In our common reading, Jacobs meets the most zealous devotees, enters (sometimes with his family in tow) any puzzle competition that will have him, unpacks the history of the most popular puzzles, and aims to solve the most impossible head-scratchers, from a mutant Rubik's Cube, to the hardest corn maze in America, to the most sadistic jigsaw. Chock-full of unforgettable adventures and original examples from around the world - including new work by Greg Pliska, one of America's top puzzle-makers, and a hidden, super-challenging but solvable puzzle that will earn the first reader to crack it a \$10,000 prize - *The Puzzler* will open readers' eyes to the power of flexible thinking and concentration. Whether you're puzzle obsessed or puzzle hesitant, you'll walk away with real problem-solving strategies and pathways toward becoming a better thinker and decision maker—for these are certainly puzzling times.

Class members can choose to present on their favorite puzzle type – its history, how it works, what's so special about it – or about the role of games in our culture, or anything else having to do with puzzles.

**Common Reading:** *The Puzzler: One Man's Quest to Solve the Most Baffling Puzzles Ever, from Crosswords to Jigsaws to the Meaning of Life*  
by A. J. Jacobs (359 pages, April 2022)

## 21. (QCR) QUANTUM SUPREMACY: HOW THE QUANTUM COMPUTER REVOLUTION WILL CHANGE EVERYTHING

The runaway success of the microchip may finally be reaching its end. As shrinking transistors approach the size of atoms, the phenomenal growth of computational power inevitably collapses. But this change heralds the birth of a revolutionary new type of computer, one that calculates on atoms themselves.

Quantum computers promise unprecedented gains in computing power, enabling advancements that could overturn every aspect of our daily lives. While the media has mainly focused on their startling potential to crack any known encryption method, the race is already on to exploit their incredible power to revolutionize industry. Automotive makers, medical researchers, and consulting firms are all betting on quantum computing to design more efficient vehicles, create life-saving new drugs, and streamline businesses. But this is only the beginning. Quantum computing could be used to decode the complex chemical processes needed to produce cheap fertilizers and unleash a second Green Revolution; create a super battery that will enable the Solar Age; or design nuclear fusion reactors to generate clean, safe, renewable energy. It may even unravel the fiendishly difficult protein folding that lies at the heart of as-yet-incurable diseases like Alzheimer's, ALS, and Parkinson's. Already, quantum computers are being put to work to help solve the greatest mystery in science—the origin of the universe.

There is no single problem humanity faces that might not be addressed by quantum computers. With his signature clarity and enthusiasm, Dr. Michio Kaku, who has spent his entire professional life working on the quantum theory, tells the thrilling story of this exciting scientific frontier and the race to claim humanity's future.

**Common Reading:** *Quantum Supremacy: How the Quantum Computer Revolution Will Change Everything*, by Michio Kaku (May 2023)

## 22. (THK) GREAT THINKERS

Through fiction, science, and philosophy, the work of these three thinkers (Borges, Heisenberg and Kant) coalesced around the powerful, haunting fact that there is an irreconcilable difference between reality “out there” and reality as we experience it. Out of this profound truth comes a multitude of galvanizing ideas: the notion of selfhood, free will, and purpose in human life; the roots of morality, aesthetics, and reason; and the origins and nature of the cosmos itself.

This is a mind-expanding book that is elegantly written.

A remarkable synthesis of the thoughts, ideas, and discoveries of three of the greatest minds that our species has produced.

We are stranded in a gulf of vast extremes, between the astronomical and the quantum, an abyss of freedom and absolute determinism, and it is in that center where we must make our home.

Since it covers literature, science and philosophy the opportunities for presentations are nearly endless. E.g., presentations could cover great works of literature, the nature and findings of science, or the vast range of philosophical thinking. The biographies of contributors to each of these fields is another possibility.

**Common Reading:** *The Rigor of Angels: Borges, Heisenberg, Kant, and the Ultimate Nature of Reality*, by William Egginton (August 2023)

### 23. (TYM) TYRANNY OF THE MINORITY

America is moving, in fits and starts, toward a multiracial democracy, something few societies have ever done. But some people believe that the prospect of change has sparked an authoritarian backlash that threatens the very foundations of our political system.

In our common reading, Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, authors of the *New York Times* bestseller *How Democracies Die*, attempt to answer the question of why democracy is under assault here, and not in other wealthy diversifying nations. And, if it is, what can we do to save it?

Levitsky and Ziblatt offer a framework for understanding these volatile times. They draw on a wealth of examples—from 1930s France to present-day Thailand—to explain why and how political parties turn against democracy. They then show how our Constitution makes us uniquely vulnerable to attacks from within. In their view, the Constitution is a pernicious enabler of minority rule, allowing partisan minorities to consistently thwart and even rule over popular majorities. Most modern democracies—from Germany and Sweden to Argentina and New Zealand—have eliminated outdated institutions like elite upper chambers, indirect elections, and lifetime tenure for judges. The United States lags dangerously behind.

In this revelatory book, Levitsky and Ziblatt issue an urgent call to reform our politics. It's a daunting task, but we have remade our country before—most notably, after the Civil War and during the Progressive Era. And now we are at a crossroads: America will either become a multiracial democracy or cease to be a democracy at all.

Some topics for presentation are the electoral college, the filibuster, or gerrymandering, as well as evidence that counter that of the authors.

**Common Reading:** *Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point*, by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt  
(September 2023)

### 24. (WRW) HOW THE WORLD REALLY WORKS

“A new masterpiece from one of my favorite authors... [*How The World Really Works*] is a compelling and highly readable book that leaves readers with the fundamental grounding needed to help solve the world's toughest challenges.”—Bill Gates

An essential analysis of the modern science and technology that makes our twenty-first century lives possible—a scientist's investigation into what science really does, and does not, accomplish.

We have never had so much information at our fingertips and yet most of us don't know how the world really works. This book explains seven of the most fundamental realities governing our survival and prosperity. From energy and food production, through our material world and its globalization, to risks, our environment and its future, *How the World Really Works* offers a much-needed reality check—because before we can tackle problems effectively, we must understand the facts.

In this ambitious and thought-provoking book we see, for example, that globalization isn't inevitable—the foolishness of allowing 70 percent of the world's rubber gloves to be made in just one factory became glaringly obvious in 2020—and that our societies have been steadily increasing their dependence on fossil fuels, such that any promises of decarbonization by 2050 are a fairy tale. For example, each greenhouse-grown supermarket-bought tomato has the equivalent of five tablespoons of diesel embedded in its production,

and we have no way of producing steel, cement or plastics at required scales without huge carbon emissions.

Ultimately, Vaclav Smil answers the most profound question of our age: are we irrevocably doomed or is a brighter utopia ahead? Compelling, data-rich and revisionist, this wonderfully broad, interdisciplinary guide finds faults with both extremes. Looking at the world through this quantitative lens reveals hidden truths that change the way we see our past, present and uncertain future.

There are many possible topics: such as nuclear power, alternative decarbonization methods, how countries/ideologies deal with environmental problems, the future of globalization, and immigration's impact on culture change.

**Common Reading:** *How the World Really Works: The Science Behind How We Got Here and Where We're Going*, by Vaclav Smil (May 2022)

## 25. (WSC) THE WAR ON SCIENCE

In the U.S. and around the world, anti-science has become part of the populist playbook on both the left and the right, from Robert Kennedy, Jr. to the Surgeon General of the State of Florida. These forces have used the echo chamber of media and social networks to drag formerly-rational people down a rabbit hole of disinformation, confusion, and chaos. As a result, contrary to the scientific consensus, many people believe that vaccinations do not provide increased protection for people who are exposed to COVID-19 and that action on the climate is unnecessary.

In our common reading, Dr. Peter Hotez hypothesizes that these developments have become a tremendously threatening force in the United States and the world. Dr. Hotez is an American scientist, a pediatrician, and an advocate in the fields of global health, vaccinology, and neglected tropical disease control. During the pandemic, Dr. Hotez presented relevant scientific findings about COVID-19 on various news outlets including NPR, MSNBC, and the BBC. In response, he was the target of anti-science rhetoric. His book is a first-hand account of how anti-vaccine propaganda has grown into a dangerous science-denial element in American politics. Although this eyewitness chronicle focuses on vaccine disinformation, Dr. Hotez argues that anti-science tactics can be, and have been, deployed to sow division and deadly misunderstandings about any facts that can be twisted or dismissed to drive a wedge into our nation's politics.

Potential topics for presentations include: milestones in the history of anti-science; the geographic connection of science denial and extremism; profiles of other scientists who were persecuted for defending their work; examples of how the anti-vax playbook is being used to derail our response to the climate crisis and other significant challenges to humanity and the planet; as well as scientific theories that run counter to those presented by Dr. Hotez.

**Common Reading:** *The Deadly Rise of Anti-Science: A Scientist's Warning*  
by Dr. Peter J. Hotez (September 2023; 240 pages)