

TOPICS OFFERED FOR SUMMER 2017

*Please note that the books listed for each course are only possible candidates.
Do not buy any until the pre-meeting and a decision on the common reading is made.*

Classes start May 1st and end August 31st.

Holiday periods are adapted to by individual class voting.

1. (ARB) THE ARABS: A HISTORY

In this definitive history of the modern Arab world, award-winning historian Eugene Rogan draws extensively on Arab sources and texts to place the Arab experience in its crucial historical context for the first time. Tracing five centuries of Arab history, Rogan reveals that there was an age when the Arabs set the rules for the rest of the world. Today, however, the Arab world's sense of subjection to external powers carries vast consequences for both the region and Westerners who attempt to control it.

Updated with a new epilogue, *The Arabs* is an invaluable, groundbreaking work of history.

Possible presentation topics:

- Biography of an important military or political leader
- The current situation in one of the countries covered (Morocco, Yemen, Iraq etc.)
- The interplay of religions within the Arab world
- The oil industry
- Mistakes Western countries have made in dealing with Arab countries
- The House of Saud
- Five years after the Arab Spring
- How geography and climate have shaped Arab history

Common Reading: *The Arabs: a History*, by Eugene Rogan (April 2011)

2. (AUT) WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE AGE OF AUTOMATION

Nearly half of all working Americans could risk losing their jobs because of technology. It's not only blue-collar jobs at stake. Millions of educated knowledge workers—writers, paralegals, assistants, medical technicians—are threatened by accelerating advances in artificial intelligence. Smart computers are demonstrating they are capable of making better decisions than humans. Brilliant technologies can now decide, learn, predict, and even comprehend much faster and more accurately than the human brain, and their progress is accelerating. Where will this leave lawyers, engineers, teachers, and nurses? The author believes the key is augmentation, utilizing technology to help humans work better,

smarter, and faster. Should we view these machines as competitive interlopers or as partners and collaborators in creative problem solving? This S/DG will help you decide. Presentation topics might address early automation, where machines relieved humans of manually exhausting work, automation in agriculture and manufacturing as well as future advances and the processes and jobs they will affect. Another topic might be identifying those vocations safe from automation.

Common Reading: *Only Humans Need Apply: Winners and Losers in the Age of Smart Machines*, by Thomas H. Davenport (May 2016)

3. (CAN) CANADA, OH CANADA

Let's learn about our friendly neighbors to the North. We share much culture with them and economically they are our biggest trading partner. But the country is different from ours in many ways, eh. It is a federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy, has two official languages and a health care system that is a group of socialized health insurance plans. The new Prime Minister has attracted worldwide attention and is setting the country on a different track. Topics for presentations include Canadian history, the relationship of the French speakers to the English speakers, its role in the world, Canadian healthcare, the new political leadership, economic ties to the U. S., etc.

Canada's health care system is a group of socialized health insurance plans that provides coverage to all Canadian citizens.

Common Reading: *Canadian History for Dummies* (2nd edition), by Will Ferguson (a popular Canadian humorist; 2005)

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

The British 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 articles selected from five key areas (America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa) plus the occasional "Special Report" of the last two issues as catalysts for informed and lively discussions on the burning topics of our time. *The Economist* is available as a magazine subscription, a web site, or as Apps for your I Pad or smart phone. All Articles selected are easily accessed online at no cost at www.theeconomist.com.

Common Reading: Current issues of *The Economist*.

5. (EMM) ASTRAY - EMMA DONOGHUE SHORT STORIES

This is an opportunity to combine short stories with American history. Donoghue (author also of *Room*) "explores the theme of emigration through the use of historical documents and personal letters {she} had unearthed over the last decade and more." The New York Times book review (Nov. 4, 2012) continues,

“The characters Donoghue has chosen as subjects...are traveling ‘to, within, and occasionally from the United States and Canada,’ and with few exceptions were ‘real people who left traces in the historical record.’” Each story starts with one of the historical documents or letters which she then develops into an interesting story. Presentations could expand on the time or subject in American history.

Common Reading: *Astray*, by Emma Donoghue (paperback, October 2013)

6. (EUR) EUROPEAN HISTORY 1914-1949

It is impossible to understand Europe today without knowing its history. In this course we will look at not only war and politics, but also the emotional, cultural and religious effects. Covers artists and artistic movements. Picasso, Thomas Mann, Bertolt Brecht, etc. are shown in the new world of the twentieth century.

Incisive, brilliantly written, and filled with penetrating insights, *To Hell and Back* offers an indispensable study of a period in European history whose effects are still being felt today.

The European catastrophe, the long continuous period from 1914 to 1949, was unprecedented in human history—an extraordinarily dramatic, often traumatic, and endlessly fascinating period of upheaval and transformation. This new volume in the Penguin History of Europe series offers comprehensive coverage of this tumultuous era. Beginning with the outbreak of World War I through the rise of Hitler and the aftermath of the Second World War, award-winning British historian Ian Kershaw combines his characteristic original scholarship and gripping prose as he profiles the key decision makers and the violent shocks of war as they affected the entire European continent and radically altered the course of European history. Kershaw identifies four major causes for this catastrophe: an explosion of ethnic-racist nationalism, bitter and irreconcilable demands for territorial revisionism, acute class conflict given concrete focus through the Bolshevik Revolution, and a protracted crisis of capitalism.

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Common Reading: *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949*, by Ian Kershaw (July 2016)

7. (GEN) THE GENE

Siddhartha Mukherjee (author of *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*, for which he won numerous awards including the Pulitzer Prize) has now written *The Gene: An Intimate History*.

Scientists have already found ways to alter the genetic makeup of children with harmful mutations, such as cystic fibrosis. Science will soon tackle more complex

disorders, such as cancer and heart disease, by altering or replacing entire groups of genes.

The question is: who will choose what procedures are acceptable? Who will receive them? And what might be the unintended consequences? Illness might progressively vanish, but so might identity.

In an attempt to find answers, Mukherjee takes us on a journey that begins with his own family.

By the time *The Gene* is over, the story has covered Mendel and his peas, Darwin and his finches, plus the quest of Watson, Crick and their many unsung compatriots to determine the stuff and structure of DNA. We learn about how genes were sequenced, cloned and variously altered, and about the race to map our complete set of DNA, or genome, which turns out to contain a stunning amount of filler material with no determined function.

Presentations could be about the historical work of others. Or about social engineering experiments done by governments empowered to determine genetic fitness, such as those done by the Nazis or eugenics experiments carried out in the U.S. One could also take on the ethical questions posed by altering genes. What are future possibilities with this research? How can it be used for evil purposes?

Common Reading: *The Gene: An Intimate History*, by Siddhartha Mukherjee
(May 2016)

8. (GOV) HOW BIG SHOULD OUR GOVERNMENT BE?

“The size of government is the most fundamental axis of political disagreement in the United States.” So starts chapter 1 of the proposed common reading. This book, a collaboration of four economists, attempts to shed light on the question and to provide an evidence-based argument. On the whole, they are for expanding the level of US government expenditures and in four specific areas: infrastructure; insurance against risk; improve and expand schooling; and to counter the “winner take all” aspects of our present condition. However, they find fault with some of the approaches pushed by many of America’s politicians (and dismiss alternative views as “grounded not in facts but rather in ideology and politics”). The book is “data-rich” with many illustrations and graphs. Topics for research/presentations might include performance of Nordic countries social welfare operations, fiscal soundness of existing U.S. programs, restructuring the financing of government, etc. This S/DG should provide many interesting areas for individual research leading to lively discussions. It might even change some minds. (Don’t hope for too much.)

Common Reading: *How Big Should Our Government Be?* By Jon Bakija, Lane Kenworthy, Peter Lindert, & Jeff Madrick (June 2016)

9. (GWG) GRACE WITHOUT GOD

How do you live a meaningful life without religion?

Meet the “Nones,” a rapidly growing group of the religiously unaffiliated in America (so-called because they check the box that reads, essentially, “none of the above” when asked about their faith). While many Americans are raised in a religious tradition, recent decades have seen large numbers of families drift from their churches and synagogues, temples and mosques, and abandon faith-based practices. But what is lost with this exodus from organized religion?

Studies show that religion gives us a moral grounding and a sense of identity by connecting us to our past and creating tight communal bonds. It also makes us happier, healthier, and more giving. But without the one-stop shop of religion, how do the nonreligious fill the need for ritual, story, community, and, above all, purpose and meaning? With a quarter of Americans identifying as religiously unaffiliated, these questions have never been more urgent.

Katherine Ozment—writer, journalist, and mother of three—comes face-to-face with the fundamental issue of the Nones when her son asks her the simplest of questions: “What are we?” Unsettled by the only reply she could summon—“Nothing”—she sets out on a journey across the changing landscape of America to find a better answer. Along the way she shares how her family finds purpose and connection without the organizing principle of religion.

Grace Without God is both a personal and critical exploration of the many ways nonreligious Americans create their own traditions and communities in an increasingly secular age. Presentations might recount personal experiences, explore the differences between religiosity and spirituality, or consider the age-old question of whether it is possible to be moral without being religious.

Common Reading: *Grace Without God: The Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Belonging in a Secular Age*, by Katherine Ozment (June 2016)

10. (HOT) UP IN THE OLD HOTEL

Joseph Mitchell was New York’s first true biographer; he paired a reporter’s precision with a novelist’s sense of narrative to create a series of intricate and revelatory profiles of the city in *The New Yorker*. “An excavator of lost souls and eccentric visionaries, his genius lay partly in a natural ability to connect with those living on the margins of society.” (*The New Yorker*)

He was employed by *The New Yorker* from 1938 until his death in 1996. Interestingly, the stories are all from his first 30 years with the magazine, as he suffered from writers block the last 30 years.

Amazon: “Saloon-keepers and street preachers, gypsies and steel-walking Mohawks, a bearded lady and a 93-year-old “seafoodetarian” who believes his specialized diet will keep him alive for another two decades. These are among the people that Joseph Mitchell immortalized in his reportage for *The New Yorker* and in four books—*McSorley’s Wonderful Saloon*, *Old Mr. Flood*, *The Bottom of the Harbor*, and *Joe Gould’s Secret*—that are still renowned for their precise,

respectful observation, their graveyard humor, and their offhand perfection of style.

There are 36 profiles, all about very different personalities. Presentations/discussions could tie a story to the history of New York, or just be discussed for their rich content.

Common Reading: *Up in the Old Hotel*, by Joseph Mitchell (June 1993)

11. (JKP) JAMES K. POLK AND THE CONQUEST OF THE AMERICAN CONTINENT

James K. Polk is often overlooked in the consideration of the accomplishments of American Presidents but in his biography of Polk, Robert Merry points out that Polk completed the story of America's Manifest Destiny – extending its territory across the continent by threatening England with war and manufacturing a controversial and unpopular two-year war with Mexico.

This S/DG will look at Polk, the man and the President, as well as assess his accomplishments as the latter. He had four major goals as President and managed to achieve all of them.

1. To lower tariffs
2. To institute an independent and working banking system
3. To obtain California.
4. To win the Oregon Territory for the United States, which was in dispute with Great Britain when Polk assumed office.

Presentations could elaborate on any of these topics, as well as the war with Mexico, how the idea of Manifest Destiny came about, or other contemporaneous events.

Common Reading: *A Country of Vast Designs*, by Robert Merry (2010)

12. (JMA) INTERNET, ON-LINE SHOPPING AND JACK MA

Not since John D. Rockefeller has a businessman defined a country's transformation as well as Jack Ma does. Alibaba, which Ma and a handful of collaborators started in a cramped apartment, is now one of the world's biggest Internet companies with the biggest initial public stock offering ever. How did a poor boy who barely scraped into a teacher's college manage this? Does the key lie in the martial-arts atmosphere at their headquarters or perhaps the company's "six-vein spirit sword" philosophy? The class can study this unique Chinese company and compare it to American successes like Amazon and Goggle. Presentation topics could include other Internet successes as well as the Chinese capitalist environment.

Common Reading: *Alibaba: The House That Jack Ma Built*, by Duncan Clark (April 2016)

13. (KOR) MODERN KOREA

History of modern Korea explores the social, economic, and political issues it has faced since being catapulted into the wider world at the end of the 19th century and presents the radically different and historically unprecedented trajectories of the two Koreas. Seth assesses the insights they offer for understanding not only modern Korea but the broader perspective of world history.

Presentation topics can include: compare and contrast Korea and Vietnam, Korea and Germany, the differences between NK and SK in Women's rights, foreign policy, religion, government, economics, etc. Other topics can include M.A.S.H (movie and or TV series), Art, Poetry, the legacy of 35 years of Japanese colonialism, the American influence, the famine in NK, etc.

Common Reading: *A Concise History of Modern Korea: From the Late 19th Century to the Present*, Volume 2, second edition, by Michael J. Seth (March 2016)

14. (MYS) THE BEST AMERICAN MYSTERY STORIES 2016

Elizabeth George, Guest Editor of *The Best American Mystery Stories*, describes the 2016 edition: “What you’ll find in this volume are stories that demonstrate a mastery of plotting; stories that compel you to keep turning the pages because of plot and because of setting; stories that wield suspense like a sword; stories of people getting their comeuppance; stories that utilize superb point of view; stories that plumb one particular and unfortunate attribute of a character.”

The Best American Mystery Stories 2016 is a feast of both literary crime and hard-boiled detection, featuring a seemingly innocent murderer, a drug dealer in love, a drunken prank gone terribly wrong, and plenty of other surprising twists and turns.

Common Reading: *The Best American Mystery Stories 2016* Edited by Elizabeth George and Otto Penzler (October 2016)

15. (NUT) HOW NUTRIENTS CHANGED CIVILIZATION

A scientific and cultural exploration of nutrients that fuel the brain and their consequences on civilization: This is a new theory of human development. It provides the key to understanding major advancements in civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Ancient Greece, the Renaissance, the Elizabethan Era, and the Enlightenment. Historical and scientific evidence is presented that links the flourishing of civilizations to specific foods in citizens’ diets— foods that are high in nutrients essential for the brain to function well. These nutrients include the familiar omega-3s and various vitamins but also lesser-known ones like tryptophan and choline. Revealing the fundamental role of the nutrients responsible for creating the societies that fostered art, philosophy, literature, and the rest of the humanities lays the foundation for a better understanding of how

this knowledge can be applied today to achieve better mental and physical performance and live a long, healthy, productive, and creative life.

Possible presentation topics:

- Cover a particular nutrient in more detail
- Effects of different foods on animal behavior
- Use of “medicinal foods” by different cultures (China, American Indians)
- Food superstitions in history

Common Reading: *Brain Fuel Evolution: The Nutrients of Change*, by Guy Beretich (ISBN: 9780996209502; June 2016)

16. (OBS) ATLAS OBSCURA

This is a class for those ready get off the beaten path. Inspiring equal parts wonder and wanderlust, the class will explore some of the over 700 strangest and most curious places in the world. Included are natural wonders, architectural marvels and mind-boggling events. The text includes compelling descriptions, hundreds of photographs, surprising charts, and maps for every region of the world allowing readers to consider the weird, the unexpected, the overlooked, the hidden and the mysterious - expanding our sense of how strange and marvelous the world really is. Presentation topics could expand on any of the 700 subjects. Because of the length of the text the class will choose a limited number of topics to discuss.

Common Reading: *Atlas Obscura: An Explorer's Guide to the World's Hidden Wonders* by Joshua Foer (September 2016)

17. (PCT) A HISTORY OF PICTURES: FROM CAVE TO COMPUTER

This S/DG would use the suggested book to look at how art has moved from the past to the present. The format of the book is a conversation between the authors – one a renowned artist, David Hockney and the other a well-known art critic, Martin Gayford - that suggests pictures are how we communicate what we see. They explore the history of painting and how it is entwined with history. Their conversation goes through forgotten knowledge on ancient caves then moves into the future of image making all the while using pictures to explain their ideas in the way a lecture might be accompanied by slides.

Possible presentations include: additional information about the artists discussed; other works by the artists; works by David Hockney; background on Martin Gayford.

Common Reading: *A History of Pictures: From the Cave to the Computer Screen* by David Hockney and Martin Gayford (October 2016)

18. (POP) THE POPULISM EXPLOSION

Populism has already upended the politics of the West gaining ground here in the U.S., as demonstrated in the recent election, as well as in France, Sweden, Spain and other European states. Populists are united in pitting the people against the powerful and populism comes in a wide variety of flavors, left wing and right wing, and smiley-faced as well as snarling. American populists include Huey Long, Ross Perot, George Wallace, and Donald Trump. The proposed text is an informed analysis of contemporary voter discontent on both sides of the Atlantic. Presentations could include historical populists as well as those involved in this year's European elections.

Common Reading: *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics*, by John B. Judis (October 2016)

19. (PTH) THE PATH

The Path – What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us about the Good Life. For the first time an award-winning Harvard professor shares his wildly popular course on classical Chinese philosophy, showing you how these ancient ideas can guide you on the path to a good life today. It challenges all our modern assumptions about what it takes to flourish. This NY Times bestseller and international bestseller opens our eyes to the philosophy of ancient China and why it is important in the 21st century.

Presentation topics can include the life and legacy of one of the various philosophers touched on in the book, such as Zhuangzi, Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Xunzi, etc.

Other topics may come from the free ebook of relevant passages from the original works of Chinese philosophy, *Confucius, Mencius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi: Selected Passages*, available on Kindle, Nook, and the iBook Store and at Books.SimonandSchuster.com.

Common Reading: *The Path: What Chinese Philosophers Can Teach Us about the Good Life*, by Michael Puett and Christine Gross-Loh (April 2016)

20. (PUT) PUTIN COUNTRY: A JOURNEY INTO THE REAL RUSSIA

Russia is regularly in the news...Are they our ally? Or our adversary? What do we really know about this country that has almost twice the land area of the U.S? This S/DG will look at the Russia of today. The suggested reading is written by a former NPR foreign correspondent, Anne Garrels. Over a 20-year period, she has repeatedly visited Chelyabinsk in a region of Russia that lies in the southern center of the country – miles from major cities. The book and discussion will look

at the timely portraits she writes of the modern Russian people who work and live there.

Possible presentations that would supplement the book include: information about the current leadership of Russia; conditions for education and healthcare; how activism and political dissent are dealt with; impact of oil and the economic situation; military activities; agricultural and environmental issues; corruption and cronyism; tolerance for minorities, LBGT, and immigrants; historical point resulting in attitudes of today's modern Russian; and any current headline or breaking news report.

Common Reading: *Putin Country: A Journey into the Real Russia*, by Anne Garrels (March 2016; 242 pp)

21. (TAK) A FRIENDSHIP THAT CHANGED OUR MINDS

The lives and ideas of Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman have changed all our lives for the better, even if only through the better actions of others. These two psychologists worked together for years on the thought processes of all humans, and particularly on how we make decisions and the errors to which we are all prone. In the six years since publication of Kahneman's book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, many people have benefited from improvement in their thinking and decision making processes.

This S/DG will examine the thought, lives, and relationship of Tversky and Kahneman (T&K) and how these have and may affect our lives. Presentation topics might include such issues as how we have personally applied T&K's results, how we need to regularly pay attention to the ways in which we think, examples of errors in the world around us, how the results of T&K might be introduced to younger minds, and other intellectual romances. Presentations could focus on any aspect of our individual decision making as well as to more global issues and to behavioral economics, such as investing, gambling, and big data. Many of the presentations given in prior trimesters for *Thinking Fast and Slow* S/DGs are accessible via the S/DG Folders tab on the Omnilore website.

Michael Lewis has written this S/DG's common reading about how T&K went about their studies, how intense their relationship was, and about their ideas in a very valuable book. This book explores the workings of the human mind through the personalities of the two men so fundamentally different from each other that they seem unlikely friends or colleagues.

Common Reading: *The Undoing Project – A Friendship That Changed Our Minds* by Michael Lewis (December 2016)

22. (THS) CALLING ALL THESPIANS

In amateur circles throughout the country, opportunities to participate in Readers' Theatre have become extremely popular. This class will focus on *One Act Plays* written by well-known playwrights such as: Tennessee Williams, Anton Chekov,

Thorton Wilder, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Oscar Wilde and others. The presentations will include bios of the scriptwriters, discussions regarding the characters, settings, plots, themes, etc, of each play. The main activity will be the reading of the plays, choosing a character to portray, bringing appropriate props and simple costuming. Can't say that we will be Broadway bound, but we'll definitely have an enjoyable Readers' Theatre experience.

Common Reading: *24 Favorite One Act Plays*, edited by Bennett Cerf and Van H. Cartmell (1958)

23. (WWC) AMERICA'S WHITE WORKING CLASS: A CULTURE IN CRISIS

During this tumultuous election year, much attention has been focused on how Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, in different ways, have tapped into the anger of white working-class men. At the same time, little attention has been devoted to examining WHY there is so much anger among this group. Is it the loss of manufacturing jobs to other countries and automation or the loss of privileged status to minorities and women or something more amorphous? This S/DG will investigate the reasons for this anger, which has been growing for several decades, as well as effects of the anger, and potential solutions. Presentations could include the impacts of immigration and automation on the decline of manufacturing jobs, the opioid crisis, or why cities such as Pittsburgh have reinvented themselves while other cities continue to struggle.

As our guide, we will read the acclaimed memoir *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, by J. D. Vance. Vance is a former marine and Yale Law School graduate who has written a passionate and personal analysis of a culture in crisis—that of white working-class Americans. The decline of this group, a demographic of our country that has been slowly disintegrating over forty years, has been reported on with growing frequency and alarm, but has never before been written about in such a searing manner from the inside. Vance tells the true story of what a social, regional, and class decline feels like when you were born with it hung around your neck.

Common Reading: *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J. D. Vance (June 2016)