

TO BE READ

Ready-made lists for the ambitious reader

*A guide for choosy readers
in a distracted world*

by

Laura Vanderkam

#TBR

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TO BE READ

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When I ask people what they'd like to spend more time doing, "reading" comes up a lot. For good reason! Scales of human happiness find that people enjoy reading more than watching TV (to say nothing of work or housework). The problem, of course, is that reading makes more demands of you than TV watching does. Consequently, it's always easier to turn on the TV (or start surfing the web) when leisure time appears. **To read in a distracted world, you need to make a conscious choice to read.**

The good news is that it is quite possible to do that. I believe that even busy people can find time to read. And I also believe that when busy people choose the right things to read, they magically start finding more time to dig into their books!

I know this is true in my life. I've been tracking my time continuously since April of 2015. During the first year I tracked, I spent 327 hours reading. That's quite a bit — almost an hour a day — but I was discouraged, at the end of the year, to realize how few good books that encompassed. Since I read at a rate of about 60 pages per hour, those 327 hours could have seen me through close to 20,000 pages, which is enough to have conquered *IQ84*, *War and Peace*, *Kristin Lavransdatter* and all the other books I keep saying I'm going to read at some point. Instead, I wound up reading a lot of fashion and gossip magazines.

So in 2017, I made some changes. First, I decided to expand the time available to read. I loaded the Kindle app on my phone, which offered the possibility of turning bits of waiting time (e.g. at karate practice) into reading time. Life naturally expanded my reading time as well, as my littlest child turned 2 years old. I know from my research that mothers of babies have significantly less leisure time than mothers of older children.

But the bigger change I made is this: Now, **I always have a good idea of what to read next.** **Good books make me want to read.** When I'm reading a good book, I turn what would have been magazine reading time into book reading time. When I'm reading a good book, I do less of other things (email checking, puttering around the house), and more reading. The key is just figuring out what I would really enjoy.

I think what had stopped me on this before is that figuring out what to read next takes time. If leisure time is already scarce, who wants to invest some of that leisure time in plotting out the rest of it? But one of my great discoveries in life is that fun sometimes takes effort. I decided to accept that, rather than fight it. Now I build in 30 minutes every 2 weeks or so to figure out what should go on my "To Be Read" (TBR) list. I look at suggestions from blogs (particularly *Modern Mrs. Darcy*), and from publications (*O* magazine runs many reviews, as does the *Wall Street Journal*). I started reading through lesser known works by authors I'd enjoyed in the past. Now, if I find a new author I like, I'll read through everything she's written. I'll look at Amazon's algorithms and see which other authors are suggested as being similar. If I'm reading one non-fiction book on a topic, I might read another book on the same topic to give me a different perspective. I'll also read through books mentioned in other books I'm reading!

Then there are these two keys: I have deliberately chosen to expand my book buying budget. I will err on

the side of buying a book, rather than not. Given that I make my own coffee and my own lunch every day, I think I'm still ahead in the grand scheme of spending. Also, if I decide a book is not for me, I stop reading it. No guilt. Even if everyone else says it's fantastic. Being willing to ditch books means I'm more willing to try books. And since I'm more willing to try books, I'm finding some that I really like.

This brings me to the goal of this little guide. I've spent a lot of time over the past year figuring out what to read next. I want to save you some of the effort! These seven ready-made TBR lists give suggestions of books to read in sequence on certain themes. Each of these lists should occupy you for at least two weeks (unless you read really fast!) and often closer to a month. They explore a concept from multiple different angles. They sometimes stick with an author for a while so you can get a sense of his or her style. Here are the seven lists, which themselves need not be read in sequence, though I'd suggest reading each individual TBR list in the order suggested:

- **Travel**
- **Place**
- **1925-1927**
- **American Originals**
- **Embracing or Escaping the Small Town**
- **Your Best Life**
- **Encounters with the Absurd**

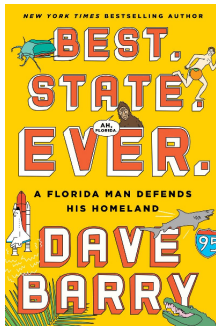
A few notes on these suggestions. First, I really, really enjoyed reading all of these books (and in two cases, writing them!). There are plenty of books out there that you might know are important, and accomplishing something exciting in a literary sense, and yet you still find yourself counting pages. Those books are like eating spinach. That is not the case here. I promise that all these books are highly readable. In some cases, I deliberately chose one book by an author, and not others, because the chosen book is more accessible and immediately pleasurable than some of the author's other titles. If you find you really like an author, please do go read his or her completed works! Likewise, feel free to supplement any of these TBR lists with other books (and drop me a line — lvanderkam@yahoo.com — because I welcome suggestions). But I know your time is limited. I want reading to be fun. I also know that when reading is fun, you will spend more time reading.

Here's to always knowing what to read next —

Laura

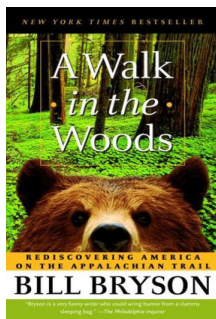
TBR List 1: Travel

Looking to get away? These narrative non-fiction books will transport your mind to fascinating places, even if your body is stuck in the dentist's waiting room.



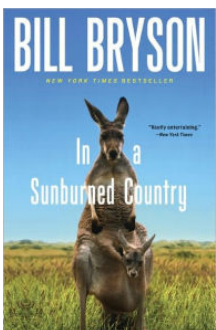
Dave Barry: Best. State. Ever

Florida is often in the news for weird reasons: escaped alligators, Vanilla Ice arrests, the 2000 election. But Pulitzer Prize-winning humor writer Dave Barry wants to put in a good word for his adopted state. In this ode to Florida, he travels to the Everglades, roadside attractions, Key West, a Miami night club, and even one of the world's largest retirement communities, where the residents have a thing for line dancing. This book manages to be both giggle-out-loud funny and a good reminder that there's more to Florida than Disney and crimes in Wal-mart parking lots.



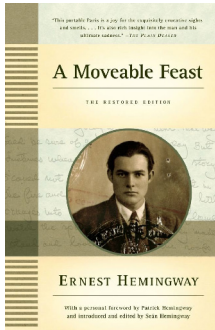
Bill Bryson: A Walk in the Woods

The Appalachian Trail runs for about 2100 miles from Maine to Georgia. Every year, a few hundred people manage to hike the whole thing. The irascible travel writer Bill Bryson sets out to be one of them, with a plot-thickener of a companion: an old buddy who served 18 months in prison for cocaine possession but now claims to be sober. What could possibly go wrong? Alas, they do not succeed in making it through to Maine, but despite their trials and escapades, Bryson still composes quite a love letter to what is left of the east coast American wilderness.



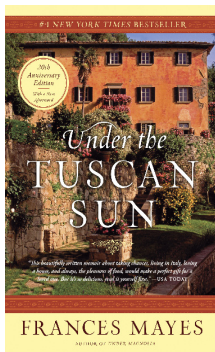
Bill Bryson: In a Sunburned Country

We'll stick with Bryson, but hop on a plane for this next book. Australia manages to be simultaneously familiar (they speak English!) and strange (there are a surprising number of animals that can kill you). Bryson writes in his curmudgeonly style about all the major hotspots — Sydney, Ayers Rock, Perth — and also manages to convey the vastness of the country. He composes songs to entertain himself through stretches of the out-back where he literally needs to stop at every gas station, because there isn't anything else coming until the tank will be empty. I lived in Melbourne for part of 2000, which is roughly when Bryson visited Australia, and I enjoyed this trip down memory lane. It made me want to start planning a repeat trip.



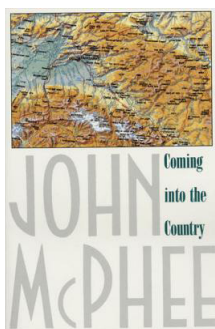
Ernest Hemingway: A Moveable Feast

Back on a plane, and back in time — this time to 1920s Paris for Ernest Hemingway's posthumously published memoir of his escapades there. Europe had been ripped apart by the Great War. All the old rules were changing, and ex-pats flocked to Paris for the freedom and artistic vibe. Hemingway was a young writer then, working on his first novel and marveling at everything around him. He name drops like crazy. His gossip about F. Scott Fitzgerald's neuroticism will have you reading his books in an entirely different light. His tales of the parties will make you want to book a hotel somewhere along the Seine, and then spend an afternoon writing witty dialogue in a cafe. No one could keep up the lifestyle for long, but that is somewhat the point of youthful travels. You enjoy being young and happy, knowing that nothing can last.



Frances Mayes: Under the Tuscan Sun

This entry on the travel list moves us forward again in time and in the southern direction through Europe, to modern Italy. After some glorious vacations, Mayes and her husband succumb to Tuscany's charms and buy a fixer-upper farmhouse. Thus they begin a multi-year saga of battling with contractors who celebrate a surprising number of holidays, and crossing their fingers when digging, knowing that any hole in the ground might turn up a 2000-year-old Etruscan structure. But the land and the food are so incredible and so lovingly described as to make such complaints seem irrelevant — nothing a glass of Tuscan wine can't solve.

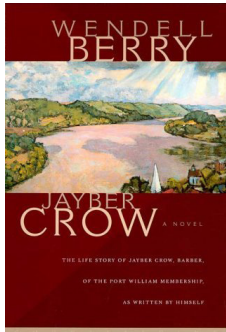


John McPhee: Coming into the Country

After the heat of Tuscany, it's time to move to the cold wilds of Alaska. John McPhee (another Pulitzer Prize winner) has a reporter's eye for facts and a novelist's sense of structure. His journey through the land of grizzly bears and grizzled characters will intrigue the adventurous traveler. Possibly not enough to go there (see the bears part) but at least to fantasize about it.

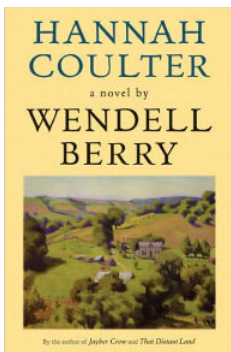
TBR List 2: Place

Some novelists create such richly detailed worlds in their books that the landscape itself becomes a character. Here are some of my favorite fiction books with a very strong sense of place.



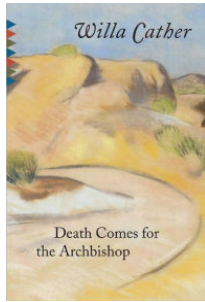
Wendell Berry: Jayber Crow

Wendell Berry has written over a dozen books set in Port William, Kentucky, a little farming community that is slowly dying as the young people leave. Still, it's a gorgeous and haunting place, lovingly described through characters that grow on you as you read through these novels. We'll start with Jayber Crow, since this novel can stand on its own, whether you read the rest of the Port William saga or not. Lonely Jayber tries to build a life outside of Port William, but eventually returns to take over the town barbershop. He provides an outlet for the men of town to chat, complain, console. He indulges in some wildness on weekends until he begins an unrequited infatuation with the tragic Mattie Keith Chatham. Her husband isn't faithful to her, so Jayber decides that he will be, even if the gesture is appreciated only in his own mind. Port William declines as Jayber grows older, and modern life seems not to have a place for a town or a man like him, but he still makes his way in the world as he can. Slow and sweeping, this book so deeply conjures up rural Kentucky that you'll be able to draw a map of this little place on earth after finishing this one.



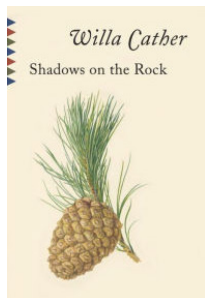
Wendell Berry: Hannah Coulter

We don't need to leave Port William just yet! Hannah Coulter tells the saga of Port William from a different angle, in this case, through the life of twice widowed Hannah (whose second husband is an acquaintance of Jayber Crow's). Hannah loses her first husband in World War II, then raises her daughter from that marriage and two sons that she has with her second husband on their hardscrabble farm. They make a good run of it, and educate the children, but then the educated children don't want to come back and take over the family business. Wendell Berry creates thick nostalgia for a life that can never be again, but without being overly sentimental about what that life required.



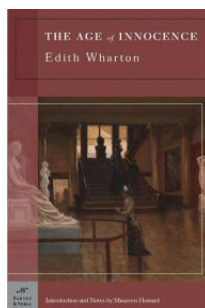
Willa Cather: Death Comes for the Archbishop

Our exploration of place now travels westward. Willa Cather became famous for her sweeping tales of the American west, often featuring strong women. Her best-known novel, though, is one of the few that centers around a man. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* recounts the life of bishop Jean Marie Latour, a French priest sent to the southwestern United States in the mid 19th century. His mandate: strengthen a church that, in its isolation, had fallen into recklessness and heresies. Each town brings a new crisis, and new souls changed in some way by the brave but gentle priest who travels by mule through a landscape that comes alive in Cather's descriptions.



Willa Cather: Shadows on the Rock

Cather writes with a deep sense of place, but this book provides evidence that her descriptive skills could be transferred out of the American west and into any location she chose. Young Cecile Auclair lives with her widowed father, the town apothecary, in colonial Quebec, right at the end of the 17th century. The colonists are bold and ultimately self-reliant, as cold Quebec is so isolated that the ships can't come in from Europe between October and July each year. Well-researched and beautifully conjured up, Cecile's Quebec is a magical place of hardships, but hardships seen through the eyes of a child, who is inclined to see them as possibilities. We see a complete year, and why Cecile and her father ultimately decide to stay and help build what will become Canada.

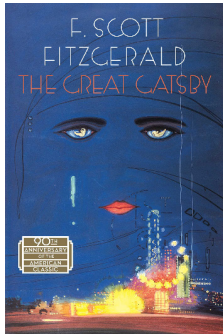


Edith Wharton: Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton and Willa Cather were contemporaries, and while their styles are quite different, both had a remarkable ability to create complete worlds in their books. Wharton's most famous book, *The Age of Innocence*, is known for many things — particularly its stunning ending — but perhaps its most under-appreciated attribute is how well it describes New York in the late 1800s. You can see the lavish parlors, hear the carriages trotting through Central Park, see the clothes. The world that young Newland Archer tries to navigate is suffocating and hypocritical, but it is lovely and polished, at least on its glittery surface.

TBR List 3: 1925-1927

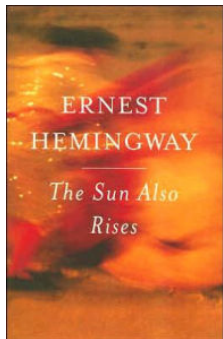
It seems unlikely that, 90 years from now, people will look upon 2015-2017 as a golden age of literature, but I think that's a perfectly defensible claim about 1925-1927. Some of the 20th century's best known writers were at their peak during those two years, publishing books that are of their time, but somehow timeless too. You may have been assigned to read some (or all!) of these books in school, but even so, they're worth a reread now without the pressure of needing to produce a term paper. These classics can (should!) be read for pure pleasure.



F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

Rich and mysterious Jay Gatsby wants the beautiful Daisy, and he wants to change the past, but ultimately he can have neither. If all you remember from *The Great Gatsby* is how it ends, then it's time to pick it up again. The second time reader can appreciate how Fitzgerald moves the action from party to party in a compact tale that can be read in a few hours. *Gatsby* is still an enigma from start to finish, yet while it's hard to truly like any of these characters, their tragic arc is more understandable and somehow sympathetic than in some of Fitzgerald's other works (I had a lot of trouble with *Tender is the Night*, and *This Side of Paradise*, precisely because of the lack of

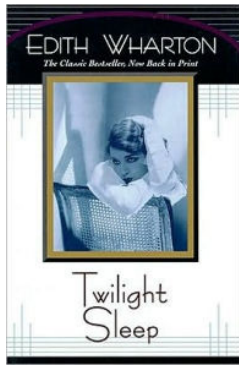
likable characters, but I've re-read *The Great Gatsby* several times).



Ernest Hemingway: *The Sun Also Rises*

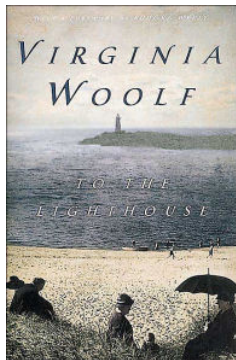
Hemingway was working on this novel during the years of *A Moveable Feast* (see the "travel" TBR list). In *The Sun Also Rises*, Lady Brett Ashley, Jake Barnes and friends drink, and celebrate, and try to make sense of life. Careless, yet weighed down by the Great War's cares, they travel through post-war Paris, and Pamplona, Spain, where the bullfighting is described well enough that it becomes possible to understand why people wanted to watch it (something, I confess, that I had never understood before). This is an exciting, fast-paced book. Hemingway's muscular, declarative sentences — very much on display in these pages — established him as a unique literary voice. For

bonus points, you might read this, and then read *The Old Man and the Sea* to see how Hemingway had changed by the end of his career. (But don't worry — you don't have to write a paper comparing the two!)



Edith Wharton: Twilight Sleep

Long out of print, this satirical novel is now readily available in ebook form, and while it's not as famous as *Age of Innocence* or *Ethan Frome*, I think it's one of Wharton's best. Heiress Pauline Manford is a paragon of productivity, filling every hour of every day with self improvement and philanthropic endeavors. She banishes anything unpleasant from her life. Still, her second marriage and her son's marriage start unraveling around her in a way that comes to a violent climax during the family's summer vacation. This book moves fast, but manages to ask deeper questions about suffering, and what makes us human.

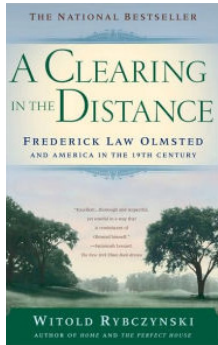


Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse

The Ramsay family, with its studious father, saintly mother, and eight earnest children, spends summers on the Isle of Skye. The young children want to visit the nearby lighthouse as the family is preparing for a dinner party, but their father thwarts them. Time passes, and then they re-enact the scene years later, seeing what doesn't change, but also, the miracle of what does. This lyrical book — which is ostensibly about a few days in family life, but is really about Woolf's vision of art, and human nature, and so much else — is more accessible than many of Woolf's other novels. It is a good first stop for anyone considering exploring more of her work.

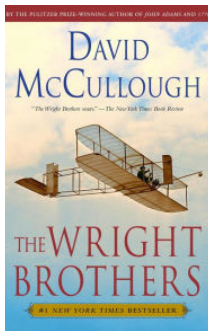
TBR List 4: American Originals

These biographies of quintessential American types not only recount the epic lives of their subjects, they show the country at pivotal moments in history.



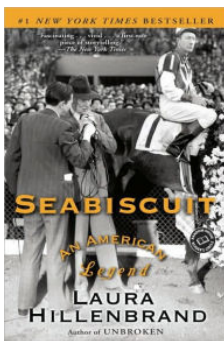
Witold Rybczynski: A Clearing in the Distance

Most people know of Frederick Law Olmsted because he designed Central Park. But his career took him in all kinds of different directions in a way that showed the expansiveness and restlessness of the late 19th century. Olmsted farmed, and wrote, and ran a sanitary commission, and even did a stint running a gold mine after Central Park happened — an event that in most professional lives might seem to inform all future endeavors. Rybczynski takes some curious risks in this biography, occasionally writing in Olmsted's voice, but it mostly works, and the upside of getting in Olmsted's head is that you can't help but root for him as he figures out his place in a country testing its limits.



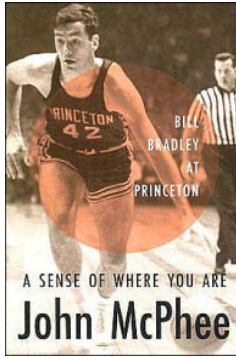
David McCullough: The Wright Brothers

Speaking of a country testing its limits: Heavier-than-air flight went through an exhilarating evolution in the U.S. from 1900 to 1920. In a mere blink of human history, it went from being an impossibility to being an indispensable technology. Orville and Wilbur Wright were the first to make it work, and their small town ingenuity captures something very energetic about the turn of the last century. This is a short book, but McCullough creates a compelling narrative about the Wright brothers' various test flights, and the unsung accomplishments of their sister, Katharine.



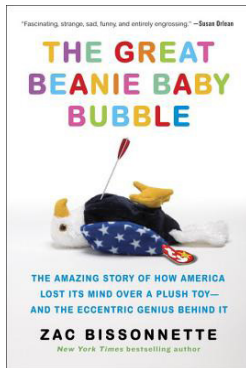
Laura Hillenbrand: Seabiscuit

Seabiscuit, the race horse, didn't seem to be born for great things, but he accomplished them anyway. Hillenbrand's meticulously researched, yet highly readable, saga of the horse and his human entourage is one of the best sports biographies of all time. I forced myself to slow down through the last pages, to savor Seabiscuit's last race, just as he savored his last run against his rivals. A key part of the backstory of this book: Hillenbrand wrote Seabiscuit while nearly incapacitated by chronic fatigue syndrome. Her sympathy for the underdog horse perhaps comes from the perspective that nothing has been easy for her either. No matter. Strong people — and horses — do what they need to in order to win.



John McPhee: A Sense of Where You Are

Before he became a U.S. senator, Bill Bradley enjoyed an illustrious basketball career with the New York Knicks. Before that, he played for Princeton University, producing the kind of lopsided wins that Princeton isn't exactly known for now. John McPhee, also a Princeton alum, followed Bradley around, and discovered the details of his grueling practice regimen, and how he could literally see wider distances than other people. While knowledge of basketball is a plus, it's not necessary to enjoy this story of a young man just starting his journey to stardom. As a side note, McPhee was quite early in his career too at the time, and part of the fun of this book is seeing two men who would become masters of their crafts engage with each other before either became the stars they'd later be.

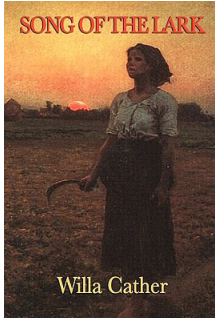


Zac Bissonnette: The Great Beanie Baby Bubble

In the late 1990s, plush, adorable Beanie Babies soared to fame and incredible valuations. Just as quickly, they crashed as people realized they were parting with the mortgage money to acquire stuffed animals. Behind the millennial craze? Ty Warner, an eccentric toy tycoon who would lie about his past, drive everyone around him crazy, be convicted of tax crimes, and yet still create one of the most successful product lines ever. Warner refused to speak to Bissonnette, who exacted his journalistic revenge by talking with absolutely everyone who knew Warner, even befriendng a former girlfriend, and getting access to her unpublished memoir, shortly before she died in mysterious circumstances. This book is wickedly funny, with perfect comedic timing from start to finish. Not all American originals are heroes in the normal sense, and Ty Warner nicely illustrates the larger-than-life shadier sorts we will always have among us.

TBR List 5: Embracing or escaping the small town

Small towns can be nurturing or suffocating. Whether one chooses to flee, to stay, or to fold the place into one's life story is a complicated question. These books come to different conclusions about life in the forgotten places.



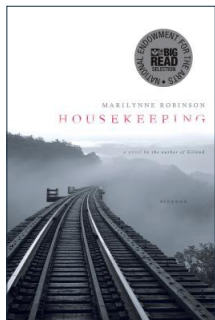
Willa Cather: Song of the Lark

Song of the Lark is the middle entry of Willa Cather's Prairie Trilogy (which includes *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia*), but all three novels stand alone, so you can read this one separately from the others. Thea Kronborg has musical gifts, and an incredible work ethic. With a few steady mentors who help her and — more importantly — know when they cannot help her anymore, she rises from a small Colorado town to the heights of operatic fame in New York City. This book is a fascinating blend of 19th century gritty realism (many of Kronborg's classmates die when a tramp drowns himself in the town water supply, quickly spreading disease), lyrical descriptions of the American west, and insights into the lives of professional musicians.

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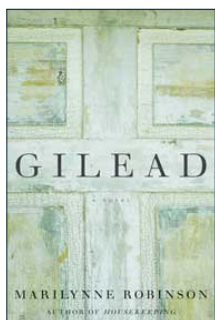
Marilynne Robinson: Housekeeping

Ruthie and Lucille, young sisters, have a tough life in their rural northwest town of Fingerbone. Their grandfather's train plummets off a bridge into the glacial lake that defines the area's landscape. Their mother abandons them and drives her car into the same lake. Their grandmother raises them until she dies, leaving them in the care of bewildered great aunts, and finally their eccentric Aunt Sylvie. Sylvie's care angers Lucille, who wants a normal existence, but enchants Ruthie, who is more taken with the idea of the wandering lifestyle. While this plot sounds incredibly depressing, Robinson's style is more lyrical, detached, accepting — and ultimately intriguing, as the reader realizes that Ruthie, the narrator, is not entirely sane. This was a risky debut, but Robinson manages to make Sylvie and Ruthie's strangeness believable.

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Marilynne Robinson: Gilead

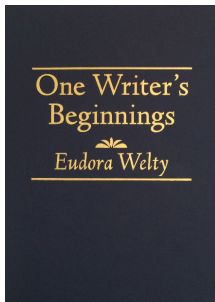
Robinson waited decades after writing *Housekeeping* to release this gem of a novel, and the maturity gained in those years shows, especially if you read *Gilead* immediately after immersing yourself in the world of Fingerbone. Her protagonist, Rev. John Ames, became a father very late in life. Knowing he is dying, he writes a long letter to his almost 7-year-old son, explaining his life in Gilead, Iowa, his ancestors, and the truth that you never truly know what anyone else is going through. Much more religious than *Housekeeping*, *Gilead* moves slowly but fluidly — and ends with a much more upbeat

view of the world. Sample quote: “There are a thousand thousand reasons to live this life, every one of them sufficient.” (If you like this book enough, Robinson continues with the Gilead saga in her books *Lila*, and *Home*, which center on the two other main characters in Gilead).

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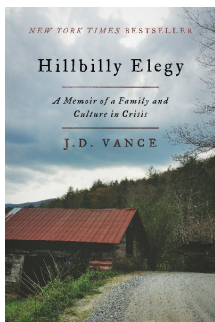
Eudora Welty: One Writer's Beginnings

Eudora Welty, the great chronicler of the American South, began her life as a girl in Jackson, Mississippi. She describes her childhood in this place of victrolas and verandas, and how it taught her to see more clearly, to hear more carefully, and to finally find her voice. This slim, yet evocative memoir is a good place to start before exploring Welty's fiction.

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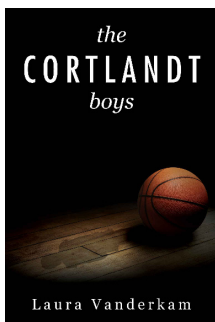
J.D. Vance: Hillbilly Elegy

After the surprising election of Donald Trump, many people began wondering exactly what was going on in the American heartland that led to such anger and a sense of American decline. Vance (whose memoir came out before the election, and who thus manages to look amazingly prescient) attempts to explain the sentiment through his own family story in Kentucky and Ohio. Life as a “hillbilly” is often violent, full of substance abuse, and men who come and go out of his mother's life with shocking frequency. With the help of a few people who believe in him, he escapes to the Marine Corps, and eventually to Yale Law School and an upper class life. But none of this was inevitable, and the reader quickly sees how easy it would be not to make it out.

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Laura Vanderkam: The Cortlandt Boys

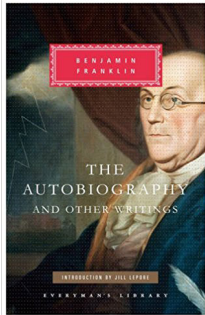
A small town high school boys basketball team wins the Pennsylvania state championship on a last second 3-point shot. This improbable victory plays out in the players' lives over the course of two decades, forever tying them to their little town in the Poconos that has its ways of never letting them go. While I know my writing is not on the same literary level as the other books here, I will say this about my novel: I loved writing it and I still love reading it. It's the kind of novel I wished existed, so I created it. I hope you will like it as well.

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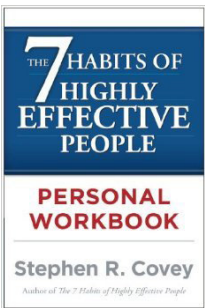
TBR List 6: Your Best Life

Self-help gets a reputation for flimsiness, but at its best it asks deep questions of what it means to live a good life. These books are self-helpful in the search for answers.



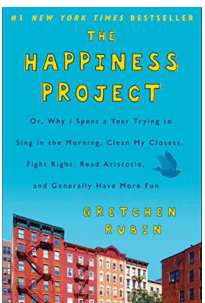
Benjamin Franklin: The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin

While Benjamin Franklin could certainly fit in the “American originals” category, this autobiography has more in common with the self help genre than most memoirs. Franklin is eager for any young kin reading this book to understand how he learned self-discipline, and to win friends and influence people (indeed, I thought about putting *How to Win Friends and Influence People* on this list, but Dale Carnegie quotes so extensively from Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography that I thought why not go to the source?) Franklin is funny, self-deprecating, and honest. He describes how he conquered his bad habits, and quit the temptation of arguing just to feel righteous. Better to be effective, and with credits to his name including the Free Library of Philadelphia, the University of Pennsylvania, electricity, and diplomatic relations with France, he seems to have found the secret of success.



Stephen Covey: The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People

If you never read another book on personal productivity, but you read this one, you’ll probably get the gist. Covey teaches readers simple truths that are powerful when practiced: take responsibility for your life. Begin with the end in mind. Put first things first. Seek to understand other people, and find ways for them to win as you win. Keep “sharpening the saw” to preserve your mental and physical health. This book came out in 1990, so it’s got various 1980s buzz words (“synergize!”) and his productivity tips predate email and social media temptations, but the advice is still solid. Spend time on things that are important, but not urgent (rather than the urgent, but not important) and you will be hard-pressed not to succeed.



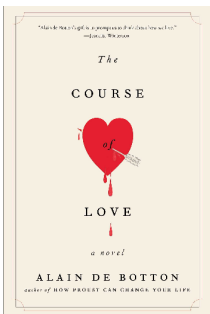
Gretchen Rubin: The Happiness Project

Going into 2006, Gretchen Rubin knew she had a good life: a strong marriage, two healthy children, a solid writing career. So why wasn’t she happier? Seeking answers, she undertook a year-long project to boost her level of bliss, looking at everything from how much she slept to her spirituality. Compulsively readable, this book has inspired thousands of happiness projects among readers looking to enjoy their own lives more too.



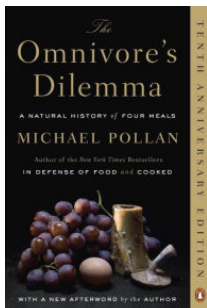
Laura Vanderkam: 168 Hours

People always lament that there aren't enough hours in the day. And maybe there aren't. But what if we look at a week? In this guide to holistic time management, I ask readers to look at life more broadly, figure out their core competencies, jettison what isn't worth their time, and discover that they're only as busy as they think they are.



Alain de Botton: The Course of Love

What happens after “happily ever after?” In this novel (which has enough philosophizing that I’m willing to categorize it as self-help), de Botton tells the story of a young couple who fall in love, wed, and proceed to fight about money, childrearing, and each others’ neuroses. One even has an affair. And yet they are as in love at the end of the novel as they are at the beginning because of their sheer desire to make their relationship work. This is the real course of love, with a lot of wisdom on how to actually achieve a happy marriage.

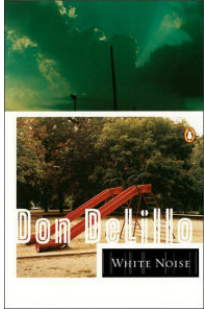


Michael Pollan: The Omnivore's Dilemma

While food seems like a pedestrian topic, we spend a lot of our lives eating, and fueling our bodies, of course, enables everything else. Unlike many animals, humans face diverse choices about what to eat. Ideally we can think about ethics and sustainability in addition to taste. Pollan immerses himself in the food chain, and tells the tales of fascinating people, from farmers to hunters, to foragers. This rigorous journalism (also evident in *Cooked*, another great book), makes this book more readable than some of Pollan's polemics (e.g. *Food Rules*, and *In Defense of Food* — feel free to skip those).

TBR List 7: Encounters with the absurd

Novels — and sometimes even non-fiction! — can take us to very strange places. These books push the boundaries of believability in the pursuit of a good story.



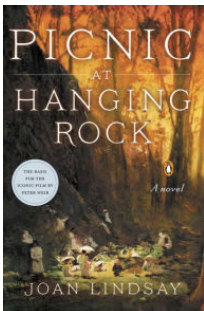
Don DeLillo: White Noise

Jack Gladney teaches Hitler studies at a liberal arts college in the midwest. He and his fourth wife, Babette, are raising four precocious offspring in a confusingly blended family. All is tolerable until an industrial accident unleashes a chemical cloud over their small town, pushing the adults to probe deeply, and bizarrely, into their fears about death. This book is shorter and more accessible than some of DeLillo's other work (e.g. the wonderful, but ponderously long *Underworld*), and manages to be grim, poignant, and incredibly funny at the same time.

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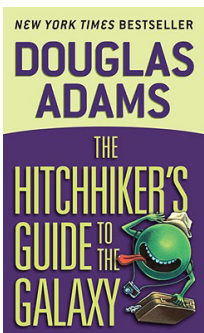
Joan Lindsay: Picnic at Hanging Rock

A pleasant outing for boarding school girls who live in the Australian bush turns tragic when three students and a teacher disappear. One girl is later found, improbably alive after a week, but completely clueless about what happened. The widening circle of this mystery starts sucking more and more people in, leading more and more toward their dooms. Entirely creepy, this book also slyly gets readers to question the more accepted strangeness of people trying to live proper English lives in that sunburned country on the opposite side of the world.

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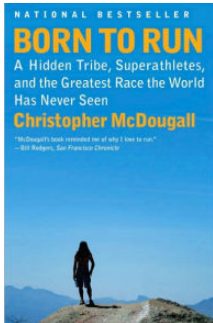
Douglas Adams: The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Moments before Earth is destroyed, Arthur Dent is whisked away by Ford Prefect, a friend who is revising a book called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. The two travel through space meeting various bizarre characters, and trying to figure out the secret of life, the universe, and everything (which turns out to be a bit more pedestrian than one might think). Whimsical and hilarious, this book raises interesting questions without being overbearing. Humor can make much work that earnestness does not.

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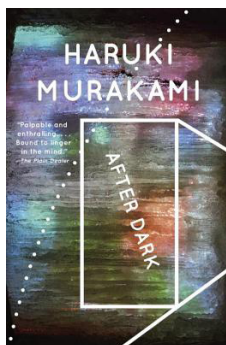
Christopher McDougall: Born to Run

McDougall, a frequently injured runner, sets off into the Mexican hills to learn the secrets of an indigenous tribe whose members can run for days. He winds up recruiting several big name ultra-runners for one of the strangest 50-mile races ever. This 2009 book — which purports to be non-fiction, but stretches the conventions of the genre — basically set off the barefoot running craze. Though short-lived, that craze continues to influence how people think about human motion and what the human body is capable of.



Eudora Welty: The Optimist's Daughter

Laurel, a middle-aged, widowed woman, returns to New Orleans to care for her father after surgery. He never recovers, though, throwing her into forced dealings with his second and much younger wife, Fay. Shrill and absurd, Fay makes no sense in the various memories of the judge's life, but as Laurel returns to the Mississippi community where she grew up, in order to bury her father, she explores all parts of her past, and finds herself understanding her life's griefs, and other people's griefs, more and more. Welty wrote *The Optimist's Daughter* toward the end of her long career, and she manages to pack a lot of power into this slim novel.



Haruki Murakami: After Dark

No list of encounters with the absurd would be complete without a Haruki Murakami novel. While there are plenty to choose from, I'll throw *After Dark* in here, since it moves swiftly, and features a time motif (a topic, you may have gathered, that I am obsessed with). Mari, a 19-year-old student, is spending the night reading in Denny's when she is asked to translate for a Chinese prostitute who has been assaulted in a nearby rent-by-the-hour hotel. Mari, the hotel's owner, and a trombone-playing friend try to track down the culprit through late night Tokyo with all its neon and wildness. Meanwhile, Mari's sister Eri, exists in a parallel narrative, immersed in a deep, magical

sleep, and haunted by some sort of menacing figure — a theme that weaves in and out of the other action. Each chapter advances a little later into this fortuitous night.