What to read this winter

GPS professors share which books are must-reads over winter break - ranging from dark mysteries to political thrillers and tales about race and class

By Virginia Watson | GPS News

Though San Diego boasts mild weather year-round, as 2020 reaches a close, the days have shortened and there is a slight chill in the air. With social distancing still in effect, one might find themselves turning to their bookshelves for entertainment. But what to read?

Professors at the UC San Diego School of Global Policy and Strategy (GPS) weighed in with the books they currently can’t put down — including one book recommended by two of our professors. Pick one of these up, grab a blanket and some hot cocoa or tea, and dive in for some cozy winter reading.
Looking for other places to find these books?
If you’d like to read any of these books without purchasing them, check to see if they are available through the following.

UC San Diego students, faculty and staff:
• The UC San Diego Library is currently offering curbside pickup and other options.

General public:
• the City of San Diego Public Library, which is offering contactless pickup service, ebooks, audiobooks and more

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**Eli Berman**
My election season reading has been short stories, a concession to short attention span: Etgar Keret, “The Seven Good Years,” for clever twists and unexpected humor; Amy Tan, “The Opposite of Fate,” reveals true stories behind her superb family sagas, and is beautifully written.

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**Maria Carreri**
*Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents.* This is the latest book from Pulitzer-winning author Isabel Wilkerson, where she examines the laws and practices that created what she describes as a bipolar, Black and white caste system in the U.S.

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**Richard Feinberg**
*“Lula and his Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil”* by John D. French. How a grassroots social democratic movement triumphed in Brazil - and how a disloyal opposition imprisoned its leader and overturned the people's choice. A cautionary tale for the U.S. today.
Rafael Fernández de Castro

“Two Lifetimes as One: Ele and Me and the Foreign Service” by Irving G. Tragen. I have always been drawn to biographies. I’m currently reading the life story of my good friend Irving Tragen, a regular at our USMEX conferences and seminars. His autobiography is an epic story that breaks down his personal life as well as his lengthy career as a State Department expert on Latin American labor issues. I’m truly enjoying the book and I’m learning more about President John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress (AFP), the then administration’s signature program to further ties with Latin America while containing Cuba and potential Soviet influence in the region. But politics aside, the book is also a sprawling romantic tale of an American couple who spent 57 years together. Ele, his wife, is portrayed as both a tender and tough confidant and companion. It will truly satisfy those hungry to know more about the intricacies of State Department programs and strategies in Latin America at the height of the Cold War. It will also satisfy those that are looking for some insight on how to live a long and prosperous life, full of meaning, purpose and love.

David Fortunato

“Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World” by Mark Kurlansky. A very fun account of how the cod industry shaped European political economy, led to the settlement of North America and ultimately collapsed due to our mismanagement. Oh, there are also recipes.

Teevrat Garg

I am reading “The Republican Reversal: Conservatives and the Environment from Nixon to Trump” by James Morton Turner and Andrew C. Isenberg. I am excited about this book because it provides a historical perspective on how the Republican Party transformed from a party amenable on environmental conservation to one staunchly opposed to it. Achieving meaningful climate policy will invariably require political consensus, and I hope the book can offer insights into how this could be achieved in the current political landscape.
Joshua Graff Zivin

"House of Leaves" by Mark Z. Danielewski. An unsettling mystery that feels like the lovechild of Borges and Pynchon. Very difficult to describe, but once you are sucked in, it is very hard to put down.

Stephan Haggard

"The Misinformation Age" by Callin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall. In the current dystopian environment, I reach for non-fiction. Written by two philosophers at UC Irvine, the book examines why even scientists - committed to the best use of evidence - can get things wrong. The answers involve the nature of networks, and particularly the level of polarization and trust in them. If scientists can distrust strong findings, imagine how it can happen to the general public. The book is a primer on how false beliefs spread.

Zoltan Hajnal

"There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America" by Alex Kotlowitz. It’s a compelling and endearing story of two Black boys growing up in the South Side of Chicago in extreme poverty. It raises so many issues about race and urban poverty without trying to solve any of them. But what I love about it is how quickly you fall in love with two young boys who are just trying to grow up.

I also recommend "City of Thieves" by David Benioff - a crazy, wild story about two young men who need to find a dozen eggs for the colonel’s wife or face execution. The only problem is that this is during the Siege of Leningrad, and everything is in chaos. Both dark and charming.

Ruixue Jia

I recommend "A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century" by Barbara Tuchman and "The World of Yesterday: Memoirs of a European" by Stefan Zweig. During this pandemic, I became more curious about past calamitous events like the Black Death and World War I. How did people live in those difficult times? Tuchman’s book tells a history of the turbulent 14th century through the life of a single minor French nobleman, which is an extraordinary approach to writing history. Zweig’s memoir is a recount of his own experience from pre-World War I golden age to the start of World War II. The political upheavals shocked his humanitarian idealism and drove him to despair. Readers who once dreamed to be a citizen of the world may experience similar frustration in today’s world.
Gaurav Khanna

“The Anarchy: The East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire” by William Dalrymple. It’s basically a nonfictional “Game of Thrones” meets big corporations and political intrigue – so a thrilling account for economists, political scientists and historians. It has its fair share of strategy, drunk kings and swashbuckling warriors.

I also recommend “The Gene: An Intimate History” by Siddhartha Mukherjee. Extremely gripping and thrilling account and very relevant to today. My favorite parts are the ones about scientific competition and teamwork, and how that resulted in innovation. (Bonus: also told me that a lot of amazing things and amazing people are in La Jolla).

Elizabeth Lyons

“Homegoing” by Yaa Gyasi. The novel follows each generation of the descendants of two sisters, each born in Ghana, one of whom is sold into the slave trade and brought to America, and the other is married to a wealthy British man in Ghana. It is exceptionally well written; when I’m reading it, I feel I am with the characters.

I also recommend “The Gene: An Intimate History” by Siddhartha Mukherjee. This is a fascinating account of what we know and understand about genetics over time, and how this knowledge can improve or potentially harm our well-being. Mukherjee is an incredibly talented science writer who understands how to explain complex ideas in ways that even someone who almost failed high school biology (me) can understand.

Nico Ravanilla

“The Inner Game of Golf” by W. Timothy Gallwey. I thought I’d start a new quarantine hobby and decided to go with golf because it’s an ideal sport for social distancing. “The Inner Game of Golf” is a great complement to the beginner golf videos I’m watching on YouTube, because instead of focusing on the formulaic way of learning golf, this book focuses on the “feeling” and psychological aspect of golf.

I also recommend “Man’s Search for Meaning” by Viktor Frankl. There are so many nuggets of wisdom from this book. My favorite so far is: “Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation.” It certainly helps instill a sense of peace and stability in these troubling and unsure times.

Susan Shirk

I am an Elena Ferrante fan and I love Naples, so of course I had to read her new novel, “The Lying Life of Adults.” Compared with the “My Brilliant Friend” quartet, it’s a more intimate novel with just a handful of characters. The author depicts the interior life of the adolescent girl with almost painful intensity.
David Victor

"If Then. How the Simulmatics Corporation Invented the Future" by Jill Lepore. A beautifully written story about how the field of marketing combined with polling and computers to create a "people machine" that its backers claimed could predict (and manipulate) human behavior. The company Lepore studies steered sundry activities from presidential campaigns to war, and while it imploded financially, the idea of behavioral manipulation for political and economic ends remains alive today.

Want recommendations for other books similar to those on this list? Ask a UC San Diego subject specialist librarian!