

**Reading Together Book Suggestions for 2006
Supplemental List
September 27, 2005**

Please add the following titles to your list of possibilities (they have been suggested since the original list was sent to you):

Fiction:

American Gods, Neil Gaiman (2001)

The intriguing premise of Gaiman's tale is that the gods of European yore, who came to North America with their immigrant believers, are squaring off for a rumble with new indigenous deities: "gods of credit card and freeway, of Internet and telephone, of radio and hospital and television, gods of plastic and of beeper and of neon." They all walk around in mufti, disguised as ordinary people, which causes no end of trouble for 32-year-old protagonist Shadow Moon, who can't turn around without bumping into a minor divinity. Released from prison the day after his beloved wife dies in a car accident, Shadow takes a job as emissary for Mr. Wednesday, avatar of the Norse god Grimnir, unaware that his boss's recruiting trip across the American heartland will subject him to repeat visits from the reanimated corpse of his dead wife and brutal roughing up by the goons of Wednesday's adversary, Mr. World. At last Shadow must reevaluate his own deeply held beliefs in order to determine his crucial role in the final showdown. Gaiman tries to keep the magical and the mundane evenly balanced, but he is clearly more interested in the activities of his human protagonists: Shadow's poignant personal moments and the tale's affectionate slices of smalltown life are much better developed than the aimless plot, which bounces Shadow from one episodic encounter to another in a design only the gods seem to know. Mere mortal readers will enjoy the tale's wit, but puzzle over its strained mythopoeia.

Available in audio cassette, audio CD, digital.

A Confederacy of Dunces, John Kennedy Toole (1980)

A spectacular, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by a master of comedy, beloved by readers and critics alike. The place is the French Quarter, the characters, denizens of New Orleans's lower depths. Ignatius J. Reilly is the hero of John Kennedy Toole's tragicomic tale. This 30-year-old medievalist lives at home with his mother in New Orleans, pens his magnum opus on Big Chief writing pads he keeps hidden under his bed, and relays to anyone who will listen the traumatic experience he once had on a Greyhound Scenicruiser bound for Baton Rouge. ("Speeding along in that bus was like hurtling into the abyss.") But Ignatius's quiet life of tyrannizing his mother and writing his endless comparative history screeches to a halt when he is almost arrested by the overeager Patrolman Mancuso--who mistakes him for a vagrant--and then involved in a car accident

with his tipsy mother behind the wheel. One thing leads to another, and before he knows it, Ignatius is out pounding the pavement in search of a job. Over the next several hundred pages, our hero stumbles from one adventure to the next. His stint as a hotdog vendor is less than successful, and he soon turns his employers at the Levy Pants Company on their heads. Ignatius's path through the working world is populated by marvelous secondary characters: the stripper Darlene and her talented cockatoo; the septuagenarian secretary Miss Trixie, whose desperate attempts to retire are constantly, comically thwarted; gay blade Dorian Greene; sinister Miss Lee, proprietor of the Night of Joy nightclub; and Myrna Minkoff, the girl Ignatius loves to hate. The many subplots that weave through *A Confederacy of Dunces* are as complicated as anything you'll find in a Dickens novel, and just as beautifully tied together in the end. But it is Ignatius--selfish, domineering, and deluded, tragic and comic and larger than life--who carries the story. He is a modern-day Quixote beset by giants of the modern age. His fragility cracks the shell of comic bluster, revealing a deep streak of melancholy beneath the antic humor. John Kennedy Toole committed suicide in 1969 and never saw the publication of his novel. Ignatius Reilly is what he left behind, a fitting memorial to a talented and tormented life.

Available in large print, audio cassette.

Gilead, Marilynne Robinson (2004)

From the first page of Robinson's second novel, the voice of Rev. John Ames mesmerizes with his account of his life--and that of his father and grandfather. Ames is 77 years old in 1956, in failing health, with a much younger wife and six-year-old son; as a preacher in the small Iowa town where he spent his entire life, he has produced volumes and volumes of sermons and prayers, "[t]rying to say what was true." But it is in this mesmerizing account--in the form of a letter to his young son, who he imagines reading it when he is grown--that his meditations on creation and existence are fully illumined. Ames details the often harsh conditions of perishing Midwestern prairie towns, the Spanish influenza and two world wars. He relates the death of his first wife and child, and his long years alone attempting to live up to the legacy of his fiery grandfather, a man who saw visions of Christ and became a controversial figure in the Kansas abolitionist movement, and his own father's embittered pacifism. During the course of Ames's writing, he is confronted with one of his most difficult and long-simmering crises of personal resentment when John Ames Boughton (his namesake and son of his best friend) returns to his hometown, trailing with him the actions of a callous past and precarious future. In attempting to find a way to comprehend and forgive, Ames finds that he must face a final comprehension of self--as well as the worth of his life's reflections. Robinson's prose is beautiful, shimmering and precise; the revelations are subtle but never muted when they come, and the careful telling carries the breath of suspense. There is no simple redemption here; despite the meditations on faith, even readers with no religious inclinations will be captivated. Many writers try to capture life's universals of strength,

struggle, joy and forgiveness-but Robinson truly succeeds in what is destined to become her second classic.

Available in large print, audio cassette, audio CD, digital.

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925)

In 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald announced his decision to write "something *new*--something extraordinary and beautiful and simple + intricately patterned." That extraordinary, beautiful, intricately patterned, and above all, simple novel became *The Great Gatsby*, arguably Fitzgerald's finest work and certainly the book for which he is best known. A portrait of the Jazz Age in all of its decadence and excess, *Gatsby* captured the spirit of the author's generation and earned itself a permanent place in American mythology. Self-made, self-invented millionaire Jay Gatsby embodies some of Fitzgerald's--and his country's--most abiding obsessions: money, ambition, greed, and the promise of new beginnings.

"Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter--tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning--" Gatsby's rise to glory and eventual fall from grace becomes a kind of cautionary tale about the American Dream.

It's also a love story, of sorts, the narrative of Gatsby's quixotic passion for Daisy Buchanan. The pair meet five years before the novel begins, when Daisy is a legendary young Louisville beauty and Gatsby an impoverished officer. They fall in love, but while Gatsby serves overseas, Daisy marries the brutal, bullying, but extremely rich Tom Buchanan. After the war, Gatsby devotes himself blindly to the pursuit of wealth by whatever means--and to the pursuit of Daisy, which amounts to the same thing. "Her voice is full of money," Gatsby says admiringly, in one of the novel's more famous descriptions. His millions made, Gatsby buys a mansion across Long Island Sound from Daisy's patrician East Egg address, throws lavish parties, and waits for her to appear. When she does, events unfold with all the tragic inevitability of a Greek drama, with detached, cynical neighbor Nick Carraway acting as chorus throughout. Spare, elegantly plotted, and written in crystalline prose, *The Great Gatsby* is as perfectly satisfying as the best kind of poem.

Available in large print, audio cassette, audio CD, download, opera, video.

Lost Boys, Orson Scott Card (1992)

Science fiction writer Card turns to suspense with this offering. Step Fletcher, his wife DeAnne, and their children have just moved to Steuben, North Carolina, where there has been a rash of mysterious disappearances. Plagued by various problems, the religious Fletcher family slowly adjusts to the community. Eight-year-old son Stevie, however, spends all his spare time with his imaginary friends. Preoccupied with settling into their new home, Step and DeAnne fail to

understand the connection between Stevie's friends and the young boys' disappearances. Almost too late, Stevie makes the ultimate sacrifice to convince his family that his imaginary friends are real and to reveal the boys' murderer. Card skillfully uses terror as a background to everyday family life. For Stephen King fans and those who like their suspense mixed with the supernatural.

Available in audio cassette.

On the Banks of Plum Creek, Laura Ingalls Wilder (1937)

The adventures of Laura Ingalls and her family continue as they leave their little house on the prairie and travel in their covered wagon to Minnesota. Here they settle in a little house made of sod beside the banks of beautiful Plum Creek. Soon Pa builds a wonderful new little house with real glass windows and a hinged door. Laura and her sister Mary go to school, help with the chores, and fish in the creek. At night everyone listens to the merry music of Pa's fiddle. Misfortunes come in the form of a grasshopper plague and a terrible blizzard, but the pioneer family works hard together to overcome these troubles. And so continues Laura Ingalls Wilder's beloved story of a pioneer girl and her family. The nine Little House books have been cherished by generations of readers as both a unique glimpse into America's frontier past and a heartwarming, unforgettable story.

Available in audio cassette, audio CD.

The Ox-Bow Incident, Walter Van Tilburg Clark (1940)

Set in 1885, **The Ox-Bow Incident** is a searing and realistic portrait of frontier life and mob violence in the American West. First published in 1940, it focuses on the lynching of three innocent men and the tragedy that ensues when law and order are abandoned. The result is an emotionally powerful, vivid, and unforgettable re-creation of the Western novel, which Clark transmuted into a universal story about good and evil, individual and community, justice and human nature. As Wallace Stegner writes, [Clark's] theme was civilization, and he recorded, indelibly, its first steps in a new country.

Available in audio cassette, video

Community read in: Chicago (2005)

Pay It Forward, Catherine Ryan Hyde (2000)

An ordinary boy engineers a secular miracle in small-town 1990s California. Twelve-year-old Trevor McKinney, the son of Arlene, a single mom working two jobs, and Ricky, a deadbeat absentee dad, does not seem well-positioned to revolutionize the world. But when Trevor's social studies teacher, Reuben St.

Clair, gives the class an extra-credit assignment, challenging his students to design a plan to change society, Trevor decides to start a goodwill chain. To begin, he helps out three people, telling each of them that instead of paying him back, they must "pay it forward" by helping three others. At first, nothing seems to work out as planned, not even Trevor's attempt to bring Arlene and Reuben together. Granted, Trevor's mother and his teacher are an unlikely couple: she is a small, white, attractive, determined but insecure recovering alcoholic; he is an educated black man who lost half his face in Vietnam. But eventually romance does blossom, and unbeknownst to Trevor, his other attempts to help do "pay forward," yielding a chain reaction of newsworthy proportions. Reporter Chris Chandler is the first to chase down the story, and Hyde's narrative is punctuated with excerpts from histories Chandler publishes in later years (*Those Who Knew Trevor Speak* and *The Other Faces Behind the Movement*), as well as entries from Trevor's journal. Trevor's ultimate martyrdom, and the extraordinary worldwide success of his project, prove that one person can make a difference.

Available in large print, audio cassette, audio CD, digital and film

Slaughterhouse Five, Kurt Vonnegut (1969)

Kurt Vonnegut's absurdist classic *Slaughterhouse-Five* introduces us to Billy Pilgrim, a man who becomes unstuck in time after he is abducted by aliens from the planet Tralfamadore. In a plot-scrambling display of virtuosity, we follow Pilgrim simultaneously through all phases of his life, concentrating on his (and Vonnegut's) shattering experience as an American prisoner of war who witnesses the firebombing of Dresden. Don't let the ease of reading fool you-- Vonnegut's isn't a conventional, or simple, novel. He writes, "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick, and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters..." *Slaughterhouse-Five* (taken from the name of the building where the POWs were held) is not only Vonnegut's most powerful book, it is as important as any written since 1945. Like [Catch-22](#), it fashions the author's experiences in the Second World War into an eloquent and deeply funny plea against butchery in the service of authority. *Slaughterhouse-Five* boasts the same imagination, humanity, and gleeful appreciation of the absurd found in Vonnegut's other works, but the book's basis in rock-hard, tragic fact gives it a unique poignancy--and humor.

Available in large print, audio cassette, audio CD, digital

The Soloist, Mark Salzman (1993)

The difficulties encountered by "gifted and talented" children are dispassionately chronicled in this unusual story about a musical prodigy who as an adult must come to terms with his own mediocrity. When Reinhart Sundheimer's gift as a

world-renowned cellist suddenly and inexplicably deserts him at age 18, he is bereft, for he knows no other life than that of the concert stage and is accustomed to adulation. As a college professor who has never learned social skills, he is aloof from his colleagues and spends his spare time practicing in the vain hope that his gift will return. Then, in one event-filled week, the outside world invades his insular environment. First, he is called to jury duty and, second, he agrees to give cello lessons to a 12-year-old prodigy. Interacting with other jurors during deliberations on a brutal murder case and reacting to the unpredictability of his student and the student's Korean family require emotional resources that he never knew he possessed. Both experiences result in personal insight that allows him to accept his limitations as a musician and gives him courage to broaden his horizons as a man.

Available in large print.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Betty Smith (1943)

The American classic about a young girl's coming of age at the turn of the century. Francie Nolan, avid reader, penny-candy connoisseur, and adroit observer of human nature, has much to ponder in colorful, turn-of-the-century Brooklyn. She grows up with a sweet, tragic father, a severely realistic mother, and an aunt who gives her love too freely--to men, and to a brother who will always be the favored child. Francie learns early the meaning of hunger and the value of a penny. She is her father's child--romantic and hungry for beauty. But she is her mother's child, too--deeply practical and in constant need of truth. Like the Tree of Heaven that grows out of cement or through cellar gratings, resourceful Francie struggles against all odds to survive and thrive. Betty Smith's poignant, honest novel created a big stir when it was first published over 50 years ago. Her frank writing about life's squalor was alarming to some of the more genteel society, but the book's humor and pathos ensured its place in the realm of classics--and in the hearts of readers, young and old.

Available in large print, audio cassette, audio CD, digital, video.

Where the Sidewalk Ends, Shel Silverstein (1974)

Come in . . . for where the sidewalk ends, Shel Silverstein's world begins. You'll meet a boy who turns into a TV set, and a girl who eats a whale. The Unicorn and the Bloath live there, and so does Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout who will not take the garbage out. It is a place where you wash your shadow and plant diamond gardens, a place where shoes fly, sisters are auctioned off, and crocodiles go to the dentist. Shel Silverstein's masterful collection of poems and drawings is at once outrageously funny and profound.

Available in audio cassette.

Books on a Single Topic: **Education**

There Are No Shortcuts, Rafe Esquith (2003)

What's a Los Angeles middle-school teacher to do when charged with a bunch of fifth and sixth graders, none of whom speak English at home and most of whom are eligible for free lunches? If you're Esquith, you have them read Twain, perform Shakespeare, play classical guitar and study algebra. You take them camping and to concerts and the theater. How do you manage to do that? If you're Esquith, your school day doesn't run from the usual 8 to 3, but from 6:30 to 5, and you're available on Saturdays and during recess, lunch and vacation time as well. You take on extra jobs and go into debt to pay for the supplements. "I have never claimed to be rational," says Esquith in this intimate, lively account of his 17-year career at an L.A. public school. Part memoir, part manual, but primarily a call for action, Esquith's book is explicitly directed to parents and "concerned citizens" as well as teachers. Esquith has known "anguish and disheartening failure," but hasn't given up. For him, education's "bad guys" often occupy the district, union or school offices and frequently the classrooms. Despite his struggles, Esquith's account is upbeat, witty and usually good-humored. There's rewarding professional success-college for his former students and honors bestowed on him-and refreshing personal achievement: his own development and transformation as he moves from saving the world to setting limits on himself, even though, of course, "there are no shortcuts."

Available in audio cassette, audio CD.

Teaching With Fire: Poetry That Sustains the Courage to Teach, Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner, eds. (2003)

Those of us who care about the young and their education must find ways to remember what teaching and learning are really about. We must find ways to keep our hearts alive as we serve our students. Poetry has the power to keep us vital and focused on what really matters in life and in schooling. *Teaching with Fire* is a wonderful collection of eighty-eight poems from such well-loved poets as Walt Whitman, Langston Hughes, Billy Collins, Emily Dickinson, and Pablo Neruda. Each of these evocative poems is accompanied by a brief story from a teacher explaining the significance of the poem in his or her life's work. This beautiful book also includes an essay that describes how poetry can be used to grow both personally and professionally.

Teaching With Fire was written in partnership with the Center for Teacher Formation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Royalties from this book will be used to fund scholarship opportunities for teachers to grow and learn.

Not available in alternative formats.

Suggestions that do not meet Reading Together criteria:

[any book on pediatrics]

The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion, Barbara Brown Taylor (2000)

Essays on the dialogue between science and Christian faith, written by an Episcopal priest.

Not available in alternative formats.

The Magus, John Fowles (1965)

Filled with shocks and chilling surprises, *The Magus* is a masterwork of contemporary literature. In it, a young Englishman, Nicholas Urfe, accepts a teaching position on a Greek island where his friendship with the owner of the island's most magnificent estate leads him into a nightmare. As reality and fantasy are deliberately confused by staged deaths, erotic encounters, and terrifying violence, Urfe becomes a desperate man fighting for his sanity and his life. A work rich with symbols, conundrums and labyrinthine twists of event, *The Magus* is as thought-provoking as it is entertaining, a work that ranks with the best novels of modern times.

Not available in alternative formats.

Tangerine, Edward Bloor (1997)

Paul starts seventh grade after moving from Houston to a ritzy new development in Tangerine County, FL. Legally blind following some repressed childhood incident, he nonetheless sees familial, environmental, and social anomalies of the local landscape with greater acuity than the adults around him. His intense mother quickly assumes a leadership role in the Homeowner's Association. His civil engineer father is obsessed with his older brother Erik's football career. Lurking beneath their suburban veneer are real dangers that deepen the disquieting atmosphere: smoke from an unquenchable muck fire casts a pall over the area; lightning kills a football player during practice; a sinkhole swallows the school's portable classrooms; and Paul's conflicts with Erik, a truly nasty, probably psychotic kid. Paul is determined to do whatever it takes to make it on the soccer field, in the classroom, and with his peers. The difference between local people with knowledge of the land and ignorant newcomers who are perplexed by it is powerfully portrayed. Equally clear is that class consciousness and racism have built fences through which Paul chooses to blast holes. Mix a sensitive male protagonist reminiscent of Asa in Bruce Brooks's *What Hearts*, ratchet the soccer scenes from Joseph Cottonwood's *The Adventures of Boone Barnaby* up several degrees of intensity, and enjoy this satisfying family/healing,

coming-of-age struggle in which everyone takes some licks, but Paul keeps on kicking.

Not available in alternative formats.

Second supplemental list (9/28/05):

Fiction:

Cat's Cradle, Kurt Vonnegut (1963)

One of Vonnegut's most highly praised novels. Filled with humor and unforgettable characters, this apocalyptic story tells of Earth's ultimate end, and presents a vision of the future that is both darkly fantastic and funny, as Vonnegut weaves a satirical commentary on modern man and his madness. Available in audio cassette, digital.

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, Maxine Hong Kingston (1975)

The Woman Warrior is a pungent, bitter, but beautifully written memoir of growing up Chinese American in Stockton, California. Maxine Hong Kingston distills the dire lessons of her mother's mesmerizing "talk-story" tales of a China where girls are worthless, tradition is exalted and only a strong, wily woman can scratch her way upward. The author's America is a landscape of confounding white "ghosts"--the policeman ghost, the social worker ghost--with equally rigid, but very different rules. Like the woman warrior of the title, Kingston carries the crimes against her family carved into her back by her parents in testimony to and defiance of the pain.

Available in large print, audio cassette.

Suggestions that do not meet Reading Together criteria:

Ceremony, Leslie Marmon Silko (1977)

Tayo is a half-white Laguna Indian emotionally stricken by white warfare and almost destroyed by his experiences as a World War II prisoner of the Japanese. Unable to find a place among Native American veterans who are losing themselves in rage and drunkenness, Tayo discovers his connection to the land and to ancient rituals with the help of a medicine man, and comes to understand the need to create ceremonies, to grow and change, in order to survive. He finds peace by "finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together -- the old stories, the war stories, their stories -- to become the story that was still being told." **Ceremony** is somber in tone, its narrative interspersed with fragments of myth, the writing imbued with the grace and resonance of a ceremonial chant. It powerfully evokes both a natural world alive with story and significance, and the brutal human world of Highway 66 and the streets of Gallup, where Navajos, Zunis, and Hopis in torn jackets stand outside bars "like cold flies stuck to the wall." **Ceremony** is deeply felt, but avoids glib mysticism; it is informed not by bitterness and racial animosity, but by a larger sense of sorrow and an awareness of "how much can be lost, how much can be forgotten." Tayo's spiritual healing becomes an offering of hope and redemption for tribal cultures. Not available in alternative formats.

A People's History of the United States, Howard Zinn (1980, 2003)

According to this classic of revisionist American history, narratives of national unity and progress are a smoke screen disguising the ceaseless conflict between elites and the masses whom they oppress and exploit. Historian Zinn sides with the latter group in chronicling Indians' struggle against Europeans, blacks' struggle against racism, women's struggle against patriarchy, and workers' struggle against capitalists. First published in 1980, the volume sums up decades of post-war scholarship into a definitive statement of leftist, multicultural, anti-imperialist historiography. This edition updates that project with new chapters on the Clinton and Bush presidencies, which deplore Clinton's pro-business agenda, celebrate the 1999 Seattle anti-globalization protests and apologize for previous editions' slighting of the struggles of Latinos and gays. Zinn's work is an vital corrective to triumphalist accounts, but his uncompromising radicalism shades, at times, into cynicism. Zinn views the Bill of Rights, universal suffrage, affirmative action and collective bargaining not as fundamental (albeit imperfect) extensions of freedom, but as tactical concessions by monied elites to defuse and contain more revolutionary impulses; voting, in fact, is but the most insidious of the "controls." It's too bad that Zinn dismisses two centuries of talk about "patriotism, democracy, national interest" as mere "slogans" and "pretense," because the history he recounts is in large part the effort of downtrodden people to claim these ideals for their own.

Not available in alternative formats.