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PHILANTHROPY

Balancing the Books

READING IS AN ENRICHING ACTIVITY WE WANT EVERYONE TO BE ABLE TO ENJOY



BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

I am a slow reader, but I still love to read. While this deliberate pace has been helpful in my profession, where a good amount of my time is spent reviewing legal documents such as wills, trusts, and gift agreements, it has not helped me set any leisure reading records in my Vero Beach Men's Book Club. While these gentlemen don't keep an

official page count, something needed to change if I wanted to maintain my standing and still feel like I belonged.

At the beginning of last year, I made a commitment to read for pleasure every day. While you might think the shameful threat of coming in last place among my book club brethren would be motivation enough, actually it was a recent grant

from Indian River Community Foundation's Community Enrichment Fund that motivated me.

According to Literacy Services of Indian River County, it is estimated that one in five adults in the county struggles with literacy. The organization was founded in 1971 with a mission to deliver comprehensive and innovative learning

INDIAN RIVER INSIGHTS

Public libraries are a great resource for compiling a reading list.

opportunities to local adults seeking English language and literacy skills to achieve their goals. Funding from the Community Foundation and other generous donors supports students to complete simple activities I sometimes take for granted, such as completing a job application, reading a newspaper, reading to their children, or helping students complete homework.

Each year, dozens of volunteers are paired up with adult students to provide free, confidential, one-to-one or small-group tutoring. Space is provided in partnership with all Indian River County librar-

ies. In addition to page counts, board president JoAnne Hitt tells me that success is measured in results that include better-paying jobs or business ownership, completion of career-specific certifications, and achievements like earning a high school GED or U.S. citizenship.

By sticking with my own daily reading challenge, even just a few pages every day, I am surprised by how many books I was able to finish in 2024. For those who might have adopted “more reading” as a New Year’s resolution back in January, I would like to share the following as encouragement.



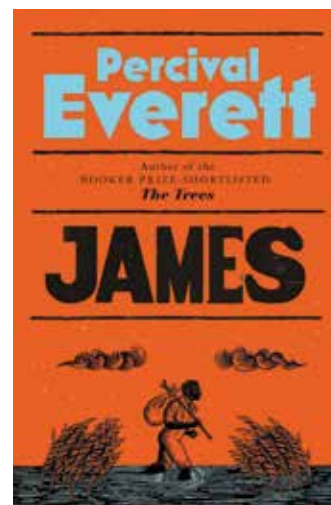

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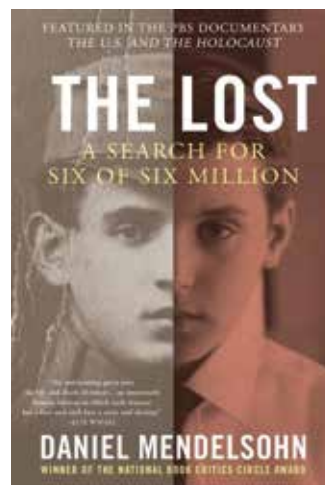
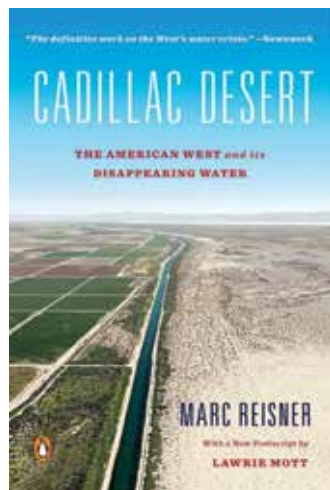
Joining a book club or keeping a monthly reading list are ways to keep your brain active and open your mind to new worlds.

My 2024 reading list started by finishing Norman Davies' *Europe* and Edward Rutherfurd's *Paris: The Novel*. The former is an informative slog through the continent's history and the latter is an intriguing observation of the lives of six families from the Middle Ages through the mid-20th century. Both books were pleasant escapes from the frenetic pace of life in the 21st century, offering a perspective much different from today's "on-demand" culture.

Next up was Gilbert King's *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Both books are by Pulitzer Prize-winning authors whose works, through both nonfiction and fiction, provide an important reminder that, in quality-of-life measures such as health and prosperity, race still matters. In Indian River

County, the life expectancy for Black residents living in Gifford is approximately 12 years shorter than that of white residents in Indian River Shores, reading and math proficiency of Black students is behind that of white students, and two-thirds of Black households live either in poverty or one paycheck away from it.

The selection of the next two books was inspired, in part, by



visits with two of my children attending college on the West Coast. Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* and Dayton Douglas and Ken Burns' *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*, were interesting lessons on America's expansion and the all-important topic of water in the American West.

Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six*

Million taught me something I knew little about through the author's globetrotting journey to tell the story of ancestors lost to the Holocaust in Poland. While I will never know the generational trauma that families like Mendelsohn's carried, this memoir has helped me to be more empathetic to people I know who have experienced anti-Semitism.

Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast* helped get my mind ready for a diving trip to Honduras with my wife, Stephanie, and my youngest son, Grant. Walter Isaacson's amazing biography *Leonardo da Vinci* did the same in advance of another trip to Europe.

I read Mary Shelley's Gothic novel *Frankenstein* with the intention of getting into the spirit of Halloween. Instead, it turned into a surprising reflection on the importance of belonging and the pain that can come from being excluded.

Another Isaacson book, *Code Breaker*, introduced me



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The goal of Moonshot Moment is 90 percent literacy by third grade.



to the formidable biochemist Jennifer Doudna and her pioneering work in the field of gene editing. I gave a copy to my friend Adam's daughter for inspiration as she applied to college to pursue her own interest in biochemistry.

My friend and local Vero Beach author Roddy Johnson's *Different Battles: The Search for a World War II Hero* helped cleanse my literary palate after the mind-bending dive into CRISPR (a type of gene-editing technology). Despite years of riding waves up and down Florida's east coast, until I read this book I had no idea how closely German submarines patrolled the Treasure Coast during wartime.

Another Walter Isaacson biography, *Einstein*, filled in many gaps in my prior knowledge of this genius. Next came a recommendation from my friend George, *Love and Whiskey*, wherein Fawn Green tells the remarkable story of Jack Daniel and his master distiller, Nathan "Nearest" Green.

Perhaps my favorite book of the year was a rather quick read. In his novel *James*, Percival Everett reimagines Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective Huck's friend, the escaped slave Jim. This is one book I definitely will return to.

Carrying me into the New Year was Jen Sookfong Lee's novel *The End of East*, about three generations of a family living in Vancouver's Chinatown. I've never visited but am already planning a trip that will include a few days riding the frigid waves in the surf town of Tofino, just off the coast on Vancouver Island.

Over the years, the Community Foundation has awarded grants to numerous local charities working to reach the goal of our community's Moonshot Moment: 90 percent literacy by third grade. Many of the books I read last year, while not written for children, ended up in the Moonshot Little Library at my office. Sometimes clients and other visitors pick up

titles they find interesting, and occasionally they drop a book of their own into the bin. I see each of these as small acts of solidarity supporting the bold idea of making Indian River County the literacy capital of our nation.


Thankfully, community support of the Moonshot Moment is widespread. Partners range from those who are expected (and more serious), such as Florida's Superintendent of the Year, David K. Moore, to the unexpected (and more creative and fun), like Ballet Vero Beach executive director Adam Schnell. Business leaders, law enforcement officials, parents, and many other stakeholders are all part of this journey.

Dave Eggers, best-selling author and founder of the independent publishing house McSweeney's, shares a perspective that books have a unique way of stopping time in a particular moment. They say, "Let's not forget this." By this time next year, it is entirely possible that I will have already forgotten many of the characters, settings, conflicts, and interesting perspectives that came from reading 15 books in 2024. Not a record by any stretch of the imagination, but a memorable accomplishment for me, nonetheless, and one I plan to celebrate by keeping the pages turning.

May all of you meet your reading goals for 2025! 🌟



The Moonshot Little Library at the Indian River Community Foundation office is filled with books donated by staff, clients, and visitors.



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