

## Summer Reading Roundup

Summertime's extra hours of daylight may mean a bit more time to sit in a sunny spot—whether at a distant vacation locale or in a comfortable chair at home—and read. Those of us on the *Science Editor* masthead and beyond have some summer reading ideas that depart from the usual style guides, templates, and manuscripts that await us at work. They're listed below, in no particular order. We hope you enjoy one or more of them soon.

**The Kite Runner. (Khaled Hosseini. New York: Riverhead Books; 2003. 400 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1-57322-245-3.)**

**A Thousand Splendid Suns. (Khaled Hosseini. New York: Riverhead Books; 2007. 384 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1-59448-950-1.)**

Both *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* illustrate the brutality of living in a society controlled by fanatics. They exemplify Truth being revealed in fiction as it cannot be in fact-based publications. Both stories take place in Afghanistan over the last 30 years, from communist revolution to Soviet invasion to the US-led war against the Taliban to the Taliban takeover and demise. Both explore the relationships between child and parent, child and society, child and child. And both end with hope for the future, showing the strength of love and character that draws people out of their isolation to transcend hardship and weakness.

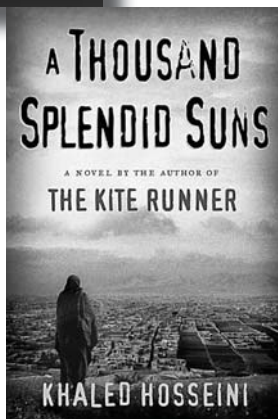
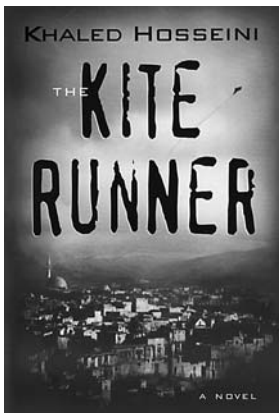
In *The Kite Runner*, Amir tells his story. He is the son of a prominent and wealthy man; his mother died giving birth to him. He grows up in his father's house with Hassan, the son of his father's servant. The two boys are inseparable and spend idyllic days flying kites and telling stories of mythical places and powerful warriors until Hassan is attacked, and Amir's failure to intercede changes their relationship forever. When the Soviets invade, Amir and his father escape to the Afghan

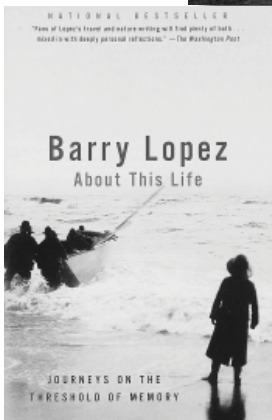
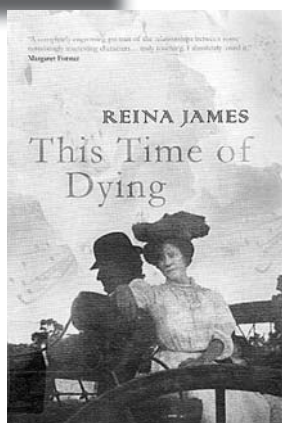
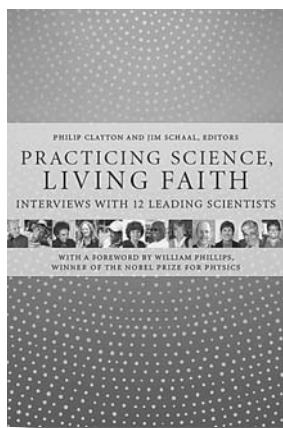
community in California, and Amir thinks he also has escaped his shame. He marries and becomes a writer but returns to Afghanistan to rescue Hassan's son and learns the true nature of his relationship to Hassan. We see Amir grow from a spoiled kid to a self-punishing one and then to a self-punishing adult who eventually and with difficulty finds redemption.

In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, Hosseini tells his tale from the perspective of two women—cultural opposites—during the same period and on into the post-Taliban rebuilding. Mariam is the illegitimate daughter of a wealthy businessman and an emotionally fragile servant. She spends her first 15 years living in a hut outside town with her mother, visited weekly by her father. When her mother dies suddenly, Mariam's adored father forces her to marry the conservative (even before the Taliban enforced Sharia restrictions), 40-year-old Rashid, a shoemaker who lives in another city. After 18 years of marriage and no children, the shoemaker takes another wife, 14-year-old Laila, who grew up in the neighborhood. Laila, the child of teachers, is beautiful, educated, and hopeful of marrying her childhood sweetheart. But, as Laila's parents at last prepare to escape, they are killed by rocket fire, leaving Laila no option but to marry Rashid, who rescued her from a pile of rubble. Throughout the unending civil and domestic violence, Mariam and Laila become allies as de facto mother and daughter.—*Winfield Swanson*

**Practicing Science, Living Faith: Interviews with 12 Leading Scientists. (Edited by Philip Clayton and Jim Schaal. New York: Columbia University Press; 2007. 272 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-231-13576-4.)**

Imagine having a fireside chat with a renowned scientist about science and faith. Despite close contact with scientists, science editors rarely have such an opportunity. This book comprises interviews about science and faith with





12 leading scientists in diverse fields. Science and faith are often considered strictly separate realms whose intersection causes tension or a loss of objectivity. The scientists interviewed are luminaries in such fields as computer science, entomology, and cognitive neuroscience. Arguably the best known is Jane Goodall. They relate their professional scientific and personal faith journeys and attempt to reconcile the two.

Although each discussion was intensely individual, commonalities emerged. Each of the scientists is a seeker—striving to learn more, not just about his or her field of expertise but about its relationship to faith. It seems natural that those who seek to understand the highest questions in science also seek to understand great moral concerns of mankind. They passionately challenge themselves to contribute beyond the ordinary. A common characteristic of these scientists was humility. Many pointed out the limitations of both science and faith—science as the concrete, that which is provable, and faith as the abstract, such as intuition, duty, and ethics. They found overlap between the two and did not attempt to find singular, finite answers. An additional theme was awe of science and God. Whether technical or theoretical, their comments are fascinating.

Scientific editors will enjoy these thoughtful conversations.—*Jeannette Tomanka*

**This Time of Dying. (Reina James. New York: St. Martin's Press; 2007. 304 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-312-36444-1.)**

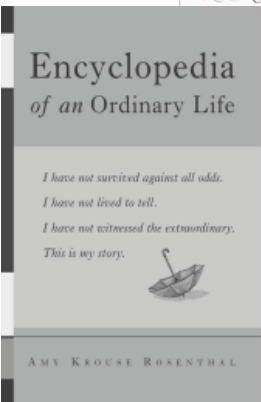
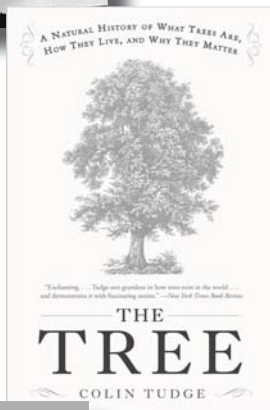
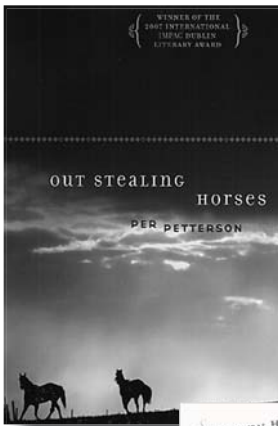
This novel is a must read for those who think flu-pandemic preparedness is much ado about nothing. Dedicated by the author to her maternal grandparents, who died of it, this account of Spanish flu in 1918 London rings true for its hold both on human behavior and on the flu, whose specter looms on our horizon. The author constructs population drama, one patient

and one family at a time. Characters from all walks of life make up the cast of the unfolding tragedy. Woven throughout the story is the romance between a busy undertaker and his aging acquaintance. Their attraction, slowed by awkwardness and saved by spunk, adds an endearing, almost hopeful, quality to a tale rife with decomposing bodies. The reader is drawn into it instantly and stays absorbed till the end.—*Polyxeni Potter*

**About This Life. (Barry Lopez. New York: Vintage Books; 1999. 273 pages. ISBN 10: 0-679-75447-4; ISBN 13: 978-0-679-75447-3.)**

Hearing Barry Lopez speak at a recent conference made it an ideal time to read his *About This Life*, a collection of essays primarily on travel and nature, interlaced with many poetically expressed, thought-provoking reflections. The concern Lopez voices in his introduction about upholding ethics, justice, education, and Enlightenment ideals against prejudice and ignorance everywhere is expressed throughout the book in relation to such things as the unity of humanity and nature, the role of landscape in development of the human personality and the social order, and the similarities of nature photography and literature in teaching us about the profundity of life. His deep awareness of the integrity and meaning of language is reflected in his belief that universal human truths are expressed in the stories told in every culture.

Landscape and memory, he believes, each nurture us and protect us in different ways from such evils as lies and tyranny. I was left with a deeper understanding of why Lopez talked so enthusiastically at the convention about why he so enjoyed showing his 2-year-old grandson how salmon cavort in the stream near his home in the western Cascade Mountains.—*Ted Wachs*



**Out Stealing Horses. (Per Petterson. Translated from Norwegian by Anne Born. St Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press; 2007. 288 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1-55597-470-1.)**

As a person of 100% Norwegian ancestry that is still celebrated in my family today (and not just over the holiday lutefisk, lefse, and krumkake) and as someone who has read every novel and short story ever written by Midwest immigration chronicler O E Rolvaag, I may have been over-ready to be enveloped by this achingly poignant novel. But it has brought deep acclaim from all corners of the globe for its Oslo-born author. Set near the border of Norway and Sweden at the turn of the 21st century, with flashbacks to World War II intrigue, this account of a 60-something widower still trying, quietly, to make sense of a senseless tragedy in his boyhood, intertwined with his father's abandonment, is mesmerizing. The descriptions of the woods in both their winter and summer glory cast a delicious spell over the troubled but, in their own way, conscientious characters.—*Mary Knatterud*

**The Tree: A Natural History of What Trees Are, How They Live, and Why They Matter. (Colin Tudge. New York: Three Rivers Press; 2006. 459 pages. ISBN 13: 978-0-307-39539-1.)**

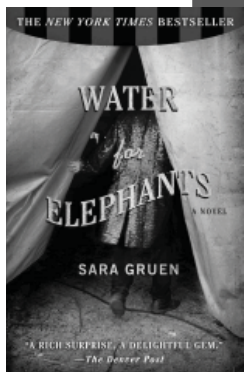
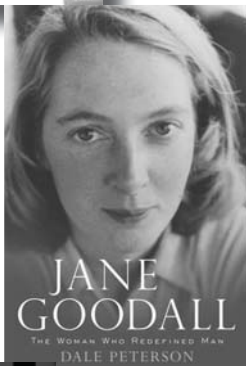
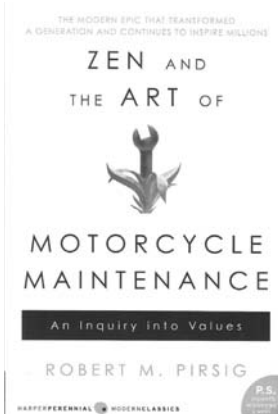
No mistake: Colin Tudge *loves* trees—and in this clever and thoroughly satisfying work, the acclaimed science writer offers perhaps the definitive appreciation of the subject. Beginning with a whimsical definition of a tree as “a big plant with a stick up the middle”, Tudge explores the many paradoxes and surprises implicit in the world of trees; the enormous range of habitats in which they have been able to eke out a living; and the sometimes breathtaking diversity of form, habit, and lifeways that have been tried out by the 60,000 or so natural species that we

collectively call trees. The core of the book is a freewheeling survey of the main tree taxa, in which the author frankly “wallow[s] in the glories” of organisms ranging from monkey puzzles to oaks. Throughout, Tudge’s voice—witty, gently ironic, and wise—invites us to rekindle a sense of wonder at these silent, living creatures that can be taller than skyscrapers, older than written history, and host to sprawling communities of other beings. He also draws out the surprising biologic and evolutionary relationships among things that seem, on the surface, to have little to do with one another. You may not finish the book agreeing with Tudge that trees hold the key to the world’s survival, but *The Tree* is nonetheless an entertaining and ultimately powerful statement on the interdependence of life.—*Stewart Wills*

**Encyclopedia of an Ordinary Life. (Amy Krouse Rosenthal. New York: Three Rivers Press; 2005. 240 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1-4000-8046-5.)**

In a series of short, alphabetically arranged essays, Amy Krouse Rosenthal paints a picture of her life and the people in it. She introduces the book by telling the reader, “I have not survived against all odds. I have not lived to tell. I have not witnessed the extraordinary. This is my story.” The beauty of this book is Rosenthal’s ability to turn the mundane into breathtaking vignettes that cut to the core. She is alternately heart-wrenching and hilarious and always memorable. Among the most striking entries is “Distraction”: “I recognize that everything I do, from my work to going to the movies to raising children to vacuuming, might also be viewed as just one big distraction—*Hey, look over here! Now over here! And now, over here!*—from belaboring the real issue at hand: One day I’m going to die.” It’s a delightful read you’ll want to start over the moment you finish it, not only because it’s gloriously well





written, but because suddenly it makes life anything *but* ordinary.—*Kristen King*

**Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.** (Robert M. Pirsig. New York: HarperCollins; 2005. [First published in 1974.] 430 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-06-083987-1.)

A narration of a summer motorcycle trip by a father and his son, Chris, this book is indeed a classic philosophic adventure into basic questions on living life. The book provides an insight into the challenges and conflicts of social values against intellectual values and helps the reader to reconcile the conflict among science, religion, and humanism. It highlights two often conflicting “minds and personalities in the same body” about what values are important in life. Although the book is based on actual occurrences, the author warns the reader that it is not very factual about motorcycles! The opening lines:

“And what is good, Phaedrus  
And what is not good—  
Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?”

These are frequent everyday conflicts in many a mind.

—*Emmanuel Ameh*

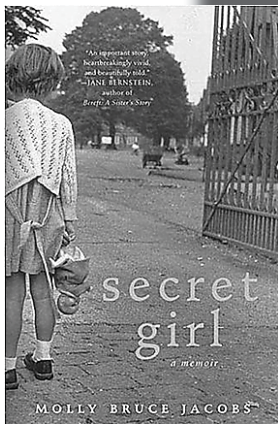
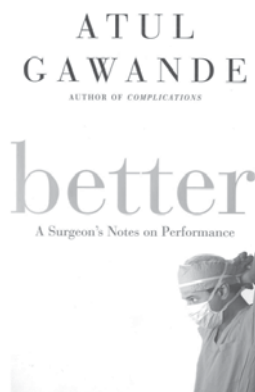
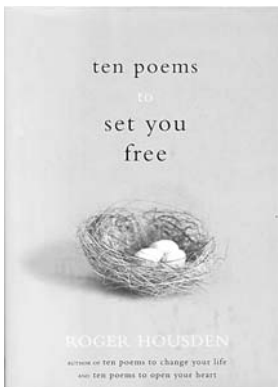
**Jane Goodall: The Woman Who Redefined Man.** (Dale Peterson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company; 2006. 740 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-395-85405-1.)

Jane Goodall fulfilled her girlhood dream of visiting Africa. Little did she know that her encounter there with anthropologist and archaeologist Louis Leakey would lead to a life chronicling the behavior and social interactions of chimpanzees in their natural environment and changing long-held views of animal intelligence and of humans in relation to their ancestral lineage. Dale Peterson’s comprehensive and detailed biography follows Goodall’s progression from early naturalist

to scientist, activist, and messenger of peace. He tells much of her story through excerpts from letters she wrote to friends and family. Starting out with credentials only from Queen’s Secretarial College, Goodall faced challenges as a woman in science in the 1960s but also faced challenges of malaria, tragedy, personal relationships, and administrative problems at the remote Gombe Chimpanzee Reserve in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). At the forefront of modern ethology and primatology, her discoveries of chimps using tools—and with their violence, carnivory, and individual personalities—dissolved preconceived notions and forever altered the paradigm that “tools make the man.” Humans had been distinguished from other mammals by their use of tools, but Goodall’s observations of chimpanzees using straws to capture termites caused scientists to reexamine how they defined humans and whether common behaviors of humans and chimps were also characteristic of their common ancestors. After establishing research stations and programs, and mentoring others, the soft-spoken, patient, and unassuming Goodall became an advocate for improved care for chimpanzees in scientific research and promoted conservation through creation of reserves and sanctuaries.—*Susan Shirley*

**Water for Elephants.** (Sara Gruen. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill; 2007. 350 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-560-5.)

Summer is a great time to attend a circus—or to read a riveting novel about one. And *Water for Elephants*, set largely in a circus traveling town to town in the Great Depression, is definitely a page-turner. It is interesting that the author, who has an English degree, worked as a technical writer before—and for a while during—the writing of this book. This experience may help to account for the thorough background research, the readable prose, and the careful structuring



of the tale. There is plenty of the literary, too, including biblical allusions that escaped me until pointed out. (I did, however, recognize the quotation from Dr Seuss.) With its nonagenarian narrator-protagonist, the book both offers a historical view and touches on contemporary issues of aging. Those of us in biomedical fields may appreciate the perspectives emanating from this character's being a veterinarian. Highly recommended.

—Barbara Gastel

**Ten Poems to Set You Free. (Roger Housden. New York: Harmony Books; 2003. 144 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1-4000-5112-0.)**

"Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back. . . . Whatever you do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius and magic in it. Begin it now." This is a most welcoming line from the book. This "little" book invites the reader to "claim the life and joy we were born for." It is a collection of poems by different authors and shows how to integrate the truth of poems into reality and everyday living. It provides an inspiration to living life to the fullest in today's world. The book is a demonstration of the powers of poetry. If you like good poetry, you surely will enjoy the "little" book.—EA

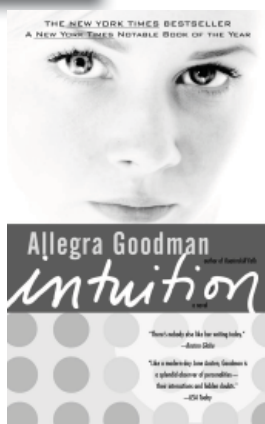
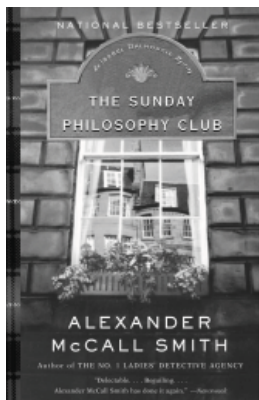
**Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance. (Atul Gawande. New York: Metropolitan Books; 2007. 273 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0-8050-8211-1.)**

Seeking good medically related reading? Consider *Better*, by Atul Gawande, author of *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science* (reviewed in *Science Editor*, November-December 2002). Whether the new book actually is better seems debatable. But it certainly is very good. As before, Gawande skillfully interweaves science, storytelling, and more. Of the 11 chapters, the ones that seem especially compelling include

"Casualties of War" (about how the death rate among Americans wounded in Iraq has been greatly decreased from rates in previous wars) and "The Score" (centering on the Apgar score, devised by anesthesiologist Virginia Apgar to rate the condition of babies at birth). Strengths of both pieces include consideration of implications. For instance, in "Casualties of War", Gawande writes regarding survivors, "We have never faced having to rehabilitate people with such extensive wounds. We are only beginning to learn what to do to make a life worth living possible for them." Regular readers of *The New Yorker* and *The New England Journal of Medicine* already will have seen versions of some chapters. No matter; the chapters bear rereading, especially when summertime leisure promotes reflection.—BG

**Secret Girl. (Molly Bruce Jacobs. New York: St. Martin's Griffin; 2007. 240 pages. ISBN-10: 0-312-36406-7.)**

Imaging finding out at age 13 that you have a sister you never knew about. She's almost your age and mentally retarded, the twin of your younger sister, and your family has denied her existence since they put her into a home immediately after she was born. That is what happened to Molly Bruce Jacobs, and in *Secret Girl*, she explores her experience of coming to terms with her sister's existence. Jacobs's turbulent childhood turns into a turbulent adulthood, both despite wealth and societal status. As she confronts her rampant alcoholism, she also decides to confront her sister. What follows is a surprisingly close relationship between two women who share the same genes but completely different lives. Jacobs offers remarkable insight into her drinking problem, her failed marriage, and her parents' denial of their retarded daughter. She is honest about her own shortcomings and openly fantasizes about what some conversations could have been,



creating a very true portrait of herself and her family.—KK

**The Sunday Philosophy Club.** (Alexander McCall Smith. New York: Anchor Books; 2005. 247 pages. ISBN-10: 1-4000-7709-5.)

In this delightful mystery novel, the club noted in the title does not meet. And protagonist Isabel Dalhousie—editor of the *Review of Applied Ethics*—does not do a great deal of editing. But there is plenty to fill the book: engaging reflections on moral issues, enticing character studies, inviting descriptions of Edinburgh—and above all, a mystery to solve after suddenly a young man falls from the upper reaches of a concert hall. The passages about editing a journal probably are why someone thought to give me this book. And the content on this theme is indeed a gift. A favorite exchange:

“You sound like the *Review of Applied Ethics*,” said Cat dryly.

“I am the *Review of Applied Ethics*,” Isabel replied.

I think some of us can relate.—BG

**Intuition.** (Allegra Goodman. New York: The Dial Press; 2006. 352 pages. ISBN-13: 978-0385-33612-3.)

This was the first novel and third book selected by the fledgling quarterly book club of our local American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) group in Minnesota. (It also appeared in last year’s *Science Editor* summer-reading column.) Goodman’s deft narrative, albeit fictional, of what happens when a whistleblower turns in her lab colleague (who also happens to be her ex-boyfriend) for scientific fraud is chillingly realistic, seemingly drawn from the headlines. The protagonist’s emotional and professional turmoil

elicits a range of responses from both her inner and institutional circles. The work and home lives of her variously ambitious mentors and co-workers are drawn in great detail. A fun aspect for fans of English literature (as well as of the scientific literature) is coming upon the many allusions in the text to poets, novelists, and playwrights (such as John Donne, George Eliot, Shakespeare, and Milton) and their masterpieces. Even the movie *Gone with the Wind* and the *American Heritage Dictionary* figure briefly in the plot.—MK

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