

WITF/Radio Smart Talk
Summer Book Recommendations
June 10, 2019
Travis Kurowski

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous, by Ocean Vuong

Vuong exploded onto the poetry world in 2016 with his debut collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*. I loaned out my copy of that book, bought copies for others, told everyone to read it. So I was looking forward to Vuong's debut novel this month, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, a story of love and loss and violence and sexuality and translation and Vietnam and America and the opioid crisis—all loosely based on Vuong's own life growing up in Connecticut as the son of Vietnam refugees. The novel is written as a letter from a son to his mother in a language she cannot read, a letter to a woman understandably and heartbreakingly worried that "Everything good is always somewhere else." The book is poetry in prose in the way Hemingway said great novels are aiming for, and then some.

We Speak for Ourselves: A Word from Forgotten Black America, by D. Watkins

Baltimore native and author D. Watkins is an engaging, passionate writer whose latest book *We Speak for Ourselves* feels like someone standing right in front of you telling you how it is. The book is an old school polemic, an argument built on facts and experiences that Watkins knows all too well: black people continue to be institutionally left behind and legislatively constricted, and most economically disadvantaged of these remain ignored. And Watkins has had enough, *We Speak for Ourselves* a voice from the too often spoken-for and a megaphone for the voiceless.

Good Omens, by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman

American Gods, by Neil Gaiman

I saw Neil Gaiman speak the other week at Rutgers University in New Brunswick on the same day that his new Amazon Prime show debuted—a show based on his 1990 coauthored novel *Good Omens: The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch*. Gaiman had just flown in from London show opening festivities the evening before. He was exhausted and enchanting. My friend who brought me to the reading said that Gaiman was the closest thing to a wizard he'd ever seen. After the event, I couldn't help but agree. Gaiman read aloud from *Good Omens* at Rutgers for a spellbinding, gut-busting 20 minutes that felt like a full-length movie. The novel is a fantastic companion or prelude to Gaiman's star-studded new Amazon show (which I also highly recommend!). Relatedly, I've been listening to the full-cast audiobook of Gaiman's 2002 Hugo, Nebula, Locus, Stoker, and on-and-on award-winning novel *American Gods* during my long runs these past weeks, the trail flying beneath me like the new gods and the old in their battle for the new world.

The Female Persuasion, by Meg Wolitzer

Perhaps the perfect novelist for our feminist moment, Meg Wolitzer has been writing about women and power and relationships since her 1982 *Dead Poets Society*-esque debut novel *Sleepwalking*. My brother recommended to me her latest novel *The Female Persuasion* and I

loved it (and I've talked enthusiastically about it way too much to my poor college-age daughter). The novel tells the story of college freshman Greer Kadetsky's meeting and following the famous public intellectual Faith Frank out into the world...and then moving complicatedly out beyond Faith. It's also about—among other things—the Ivy-League-to-Wall-Street-pipeline, art video games, death, love, and growing up.

The Overstory, by Richard Powers

Winner of the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, I bought Richard Powers's latest novel *The Overstory* for my father for Christmas, because it was about so many of his favorite subjects: The Pacific Northwest, the natural world, and history. I have yet to read the book though, as my plan was to borrow his copy, and his plan, alas, was to read the book this summer at their lake house in Minnesota. And it's poor manners to read a gift book before the receiver gets a chance to. I recently saw acclaimed environmental writer Terry Tempest Williams speak in Iowa, where she told a packed audience that *The Overstory* absolutely changed her life. Since writing the novel, Powers himself has said he has to go out into nature every day for a few hours or he doesn't feel human. The United Nations says one million species face extinction, and The White House is working hard every day to suppress climate science. I'm not sure I can wait until my dad returns from the lake.

X-Men: Grand Design (series), by Ed Piskor

Marvels, by Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross

Spider-Man: Life Story, by Chip Zdarsky and Mark Bagley

Fans of the blockbuster, record-breaking, superhero-cinema-extravaganza that is and was *Avengers: Endgame* are no doubt looking for other similar experiences elsewhere. I would point them to where I've been reading enthusiastically since watching *Endgame*—the three books and book series in the list above. *Endgame*, like all superhero movies, is a rumination on decades of superhero comics and their themes (What's a hero? What's a weirdo? etc.). Piskor's action-packed summary of decades of X-Men comics, Busiek's reimagining of superhero origin stories from bystander perspectives, and—most recently—Zdarsky's political rewriting of the important moments of Spider-Man history should give readers more than enough superhero nostalgia and newness to chew on.

The Book of Delights: Essays, by Ross Gay

After seeing poet Ross Gay read earlier this year at Midtown Scholar bookstore from his new book of essays *The Book of Delights*—well, to sum up: I went in a cynic and left a devoted optimist. Gay reminded me how important it is to focus on delights (waffle cones, a thumbs up) and how easy it is to forget to, which is why I assigned my creative writing classes last semester to write their own “delight” essays. The assignment is simple, but produces wonder: First, think of something small that delighted you today. Second, write about it without stopping. *The Book of Delights* is a series of language backflip essays about things that delighted Gay; he wrote the pieces continuously for a time, and edited them down into the current book. The constraint of delight, pushed through the fireworks of Gay's intelligence, has made a moving work destined to bring joy to even the fussiest of readers.

Also check out:

How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy, Jenny Odell

Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore, by Elizabeth Rush

Hattiesburg: An American City in Black and White, by William Sturkey

Sea Monsters, by Chloe Aridjis