Informal Reading Groups
Fall Semester 2012

Meet just one hour per week with 10-15 students from the Honors College to discuss about 50 pages of reading from specific books on the topics described in the following pages. The only commitment you make is a good-faith effort to get the reading done and come to the group meeting as often as you can, with the understanding there may be one or two weeks when you need to do other things. Meet other Honors students with similar interests. Our goals are “maximum information and enjoyment, with zero stress.” Books are distributed at the first meeting of each group.

- No tuition or fees
- No quizzes or tests
- No grades
- Free books
- Read, think, discuss with other Honors College students on important topics of mutual interest

Signing up for reading groups begins August 15th. Thirty of the listed groups begin the week of August 27th - August 31st, and meet from 3 to 14 weeks as indicated in this brochure. There are three groups that begin later in the semester, as specified. These groups are listed at the end of the brochure. Books (or, in one case, a flash drive) will be distributed at the first meeting. To participate in any of these groups, email your request on or after August 15th to HonorsReading@ou.edu. Groups are filled on a “first-come, first-served basis, so it’s helpful to indicate a second choice.
Written during the Fifth Century BCE, the Histories of Herodotus are the earliest Greek prose to have survived intact. He is often called “the Father of History” because he was the first historian known to collect his materials systematically, test their accuracy to a certain extent, report their sources, and arrange them in a vivid and well-constructed narrative. As the work is massive, this group will read selections focused on the wars between the Persian Empire and the Greek city-states. It is hoped this sampling will encourage students to read more of the book on their own. Each participant will be given a beautiful and wonderfully annotated edition of the full book.

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

NOTE: Because this book is about 1350 pages in length, the group is envisioned as a two-semester effort. We will read the first half of the book during Fall semester and the second half in Spring 2013.
Written by Edward Glaeser, this brilliantly written book makes the counter-intuitive argument that cities make mankind richer, smarter, greener, healthier, and happier. In a review by Steven Levitt, the author of *Freakonomics*, Glaeser is called "one of the world's most brilliant economists" and the book is called "a masterpiece." It has also been described as thrilling, terrific, gripping, and magisterial. Recommended highly by both conservative and liberal journals, as well as Jon Stewart, host of *The Daily Show*.

This group is moderated by Honors alumnus and current doctoral student in Chemical Engineering, Javen Weston.

Published in May 2012, this book is by Edward Luce, a British journalist educated at Oxford and a regular reporter for *The Financial Times*. He has written a disturbing inventory of the challenges and crises facing America at a time of rapidly growing economic competition. He argues the US is in danger of losing its lead in innovation because of the declining quality of education and a growing failure to attract and retain some of the smartest minds from the rest of the world. Very high and rising levels of debt combined with an almost total paralysis in government complete the bleak picture. Luce argues there are obvious ways to stop America’s accelerating decline, but he believes that achieving them will be very difficult.

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

Gabriel García Márquez is a Colombian novelist, known affectionately as Gabo throughout Latin America. Considered one of the most significant authors of the 20th century, he was awarded the 1972 Neustadt International Prize for Literature and the 1982 Nobel Prize. This book tells the story of a love triangle over the span of fifty years, and is written in a style consistent with "magical realism," a genre pioneered by García Márquez. One reviewer says the book is about love in all its forms: erotic love, unrequited love, marital love, platonic love, angry love, jealous love, adulterous love. It has been praised as "stunning and heartbreaking" by Thomas Pynchon, the author of *Gravity's Rainbow*.

This group will be moderated by Honors senior William Lonn.
**HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY—**

**THE HOUSE OF GOD**

**THE LAST MUGHAL—**

Life and Death in an American Hospital

Fall of a Dynasty: Delhi, 1857

*New York Times* bestseller

*The Science Fiction Classic*

*The Last Mughal—* Fall of a Dynasty: Delhi, 1857

**Wednesdays, 2:30 to 3:20**

160-E David L. Boren Hall

5 weeks

**Tuesdays, 4:30 to 5:20**

180/181 David L. Boren Hall

6 weeks

**Wednesdays, 3:30 to 4:20**

160-E David L. Boren Hall

10 weeks

This is the first of five books in the comedy science fiction "trilogy" by Douglas Adams. The novel is an adaptation of the first four parts of Adams' BBC radio series of the same name. Join hapless hero Arthur Dent as he travels the galaxy with his intrepid pal Ford Prefect, getting into horrible messes and generally wreaking hilarious havoc. Dent is grabbed from Earth moments before a cosmic construction team obliterates the planet to build a freeway. One reviewer writes: "You'll never read funnier science fiction; Adams is a master of intelligent satire, barbed wit, and comedic dialogue." A massive bestseller translated into 30 languages, over the years it has gradually become an international multi-media phenomenon.

This group will be moderated by Honors students Christi Connolly and Taylor Jensen.

This raunchy, troubling and hilarious novel has turned into a cult phenomenon devoured by a legion of medical students, interns, residents and doctors. It tells the story of six interns who go from the top of their medical school class to the bottom of the hospital staff to serve a year in the time-honored tradition. Written by a psychiatrist, Stephen Bergman, under the pen name Samuel Shem, the novel is based on his grueling, often dehumanizing experiences as an intern at Harvard Medical School's Beth Israel Hospital in 1974. More than two million copies have been sold, and the book has served as a required guidebook for medical neophytes and a clarion call for the old guard to make striking changes in the way we train young physicians.

This group will be moderated by Honors student Gretchen Scheel.

Bahadur Shah Zafar II, the last Mughal Emperor, was a mystic, an accomplished poet and a skilled calligrapher. But while his Mughal ancestors had controlled most of India, the aged Zafar was king in name only. Deprived of real political power by the British East India Company, he gave his blessing to a rebellion among the Company's own Indian troops in 1857, thereby transforming an army mutiny into the largest uprising any empire had to face. The Siege of Delhi was the Raj's Stalingrad: one of the most horrific events in the history of Empire. This is a "compulsively readable masterpiece, brilliantly nuanced. Every chapter has historical echoes that are still desperately relevant today."

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
The story of Galileo Galilei and his condemnation by the Catholic Church is fairly well known. The Roman Inquisition and the Pope himself persecuted him for rejecting Aristotle’s theory of the universe and embracing heliocentrism. In this compelling and thoroughly researched book, Pietro Redondi claims this is all wrong. While yes, the heliocentric theory was a point of contention with religious authorities, the real reason Galileo was persecuted had to do with his view on atomism and the way this challenged contemporary beliefs of transubstantiation.

This group is moderated by Dr. Rich Hamerla, Associate Dean of the Honors College.

This book is written by John McDonough, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health, who served as senior advisor to Senator Kennedy during the legislative struggle to pass the Affordable Care Act and who also played a major role in the 2006 Massachusetts health reform law. While he favors health reform, this book is mainly descriptive. The first third of the book is a case study of the actual legislative process as it happened in 2009 and 2010, while the final two-thirds are an introduction to the ten different Titles within the new law, which is truly “ten different pieces of legislation rolled into one.”

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

As one reviewer writes, “Pratchett (of Discworld fame) and Gaiman (of Sandman fame) may seem an unlikely combination, but the topic (Armageddon) of this fast-paced novel is old hat to both. Pratchett’s wackiness collaborates with Gaiman’s morbid humor; the result is a delight to be savored and reread again and again.” When a scatterbrained Satanist nun goofes up a baby-switching scheme and delivers the infant Antichrist to the wrong couple, it’s just the beginning of the comic errors in the divine plan for Armageddon which this fast-paced novel by two British writers zanily details.

This group will be moderated by Honors student Whitney Thompson.
New York Times reporter Stephen Kinzer examines the 1953 CIA-sponsored coup that removed from power democratically-elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh. After nationalizing the oil industry, previously run by the British, Mossadegh was the target of the CIA’s first successful major operation to overthrow a government. Kinzer also notes that the 1953 conspiracy plunged the C.I.A. into the regime-change business, leading to coups in Guatemala, Chile and South Vietnam, as well as to the Bay of Pigs.

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

NOTE: First meeting for this group will be Sept 4th

Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town

This dramatic story of the methamphetamine epidemic as it sweeps the American heartland is a timely, moving, very human account of one community’s attempt to battle its way to a brighter future. Methland tells the heroic story of the small town of Oelwein, Iowa—and, through it, the story of drug abuse in Rural America. During a period of four years, journalist Nick Reding brings us into the heart of Oelwein through a cast of intimately drawn characters, including: the town doctor, the town prosecutor, and the mayor as they struggle against the meth epidemic. Reviewers called the book “powerful” and “stunning.”

This group is moderated by Dr. Sarah Tracy, Honors College professor and Director of the Medical Humanities program.

ASPIRE: Discovering Your Purpose Through the Power of Words

Written by Kevin Hall, noted business consultant and an adviser on organizational skills, this best-selling book has been very highly praised. According to one reviewer, “this masterfully written book helps you understand that words have an inherent power. Used correctly and positively, words are the first building blocks for success and inner peace. Used incorrectly and negatively, they are capable of undermining even the best of intentions.” By focusing on eleven words—one per chapter—Aspire! shows how to use these words as building blocks for success and inner peace.

This group will be moderated by Honors sophomore Jake Morgan.
HEMINGWAY vs. FITZGERALD
The Rise and Fall of A Literary Friendship

Expatriates together in 1920s Paris, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway forged a close friendship that was fueled by admiration, liquor, and jealousy. The author of biographies of each of these two men has now written an account of their intense and sometimes stormy friendship which played a pivotal role in their development as writers. Reviewers have described the book as “written with style, grace, and clarity” and as “bold, risky, and ultimately brilliant.” Another said that the author’s “stunning achievement is that he makes us want to return to Hemingway’s s and Fitzgerald’s work, the one place where their unique flames cannot be extinguished.”

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

Richard Dawkins,
THE GOD DELUSION
The Controversial Best-Seller

This international bestseller argues that there is a conflict between science and religion, and comes down strongly in favor of science. Called by The Times of London “an entertaining, wildly informative, splendidly written polemic,” the book has been translated into 20 languages and has stirred intense discussion around the globe. One reviewer argues that the book “challenges all of us to examine our beliefs, no matter what beliefs one holds: it is a book that forces us to think.” Penn and Teller said the book is “smart, compassionate, true like ice, true like fire. If this book doesn’t change the world, we’re all screwed.”

This group will be moderated by Dr. Marie Dallam, Honors College professor of religion and culture.

In his 2007 hard science fiction novel Postsingular, Rudy Rucker imagines a bizarre, troubling, invigorating near future in which humans come to grips with the technologically mediated evolution which transcend our biological limitations. Rucker, a former professor of mathematics, combines a solid understanding of hard science with a wildly imagined vision of humanity immediately after a major and largely unanticipated intervention of sentient machines. This novel is both far-fetched and quite plausible, and will give us an opportunity to examine the ongoing and inevitable marriage of humans and machines.

This group is moderated by Dr. Brian Johnson, Director of the Honors College Writing Center.

Rudy Rucker's
POSTSINGULAR
Cyberpunk sci-fi and the "Rapture of the Nerds"

Wednesdays, 12:30 to 1:20
180/181 David L. Boren Hall
7 weeks

Richard Dawkins,
THE GOD DELUSION
The Controversial Best-Seller

Fridays, 11:30 to 12:20
182 David L. Boren Hall
10 weeks

Hemingsway vs. Fitzgerald
The Rise and Fall of A Literary Friendship

Fridays, 10:30 to 11:20
160-E David L. Boren Hall
8 weeks
This group will read two books consecutively, both by the highly regarded American writer Kurt Vonnegut, author of *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Cat’s Cradle*. *Galápagos* was published in 1985, and is the eleventh of Vonnegut’s fourteen novels. The novel questions the merit of the human brain from an evolutionary perspective. The title is both a reference to the islands on which part of the story plays out, and a tribute to Charles Darwin on whose theory Vonnegut relies to reach his own conclusions. *Galápagos* is the story of a small band of mismatched humans who are shipwrecked on the fictional island of Santa Rosalia in the Galápagos Islands after a global financial crisis cripples the world’s economy. Shortly thereafter, a disease renders all humans on Earth infertile, with the exception of the people on Santa Rosalia, making them the last specimens of humankind. Over the next million years, their descendants, the only fertile humans left on the planet, eventually evolve into something quite strange. After reading this novel, the group will read a collection of Vonnegut’s best short stories, including some of his earliest and most hilarious work.

The moderator of this group will be Honors student Travis Bates.

This group will read two books consecutively, with the second book actually being the subject of the first book. Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve* won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction AND the National Book Award. It tells the story of how, nearly 600 years ago, an alert man took a very old manuscript off a library shelf, and saw with excitement that he had discovered the last surviving manuscript of an ancient Roman philosophical epic, *On the Nature of Things*, by Lucretius—a beautiful poem filled with the most dangerous ideas. This ”greatest discovery of the greatest book-hunter of the 15th century fueled the Renaissance, inspiring artists such as Botticelli and thinkers such as Giordano Bruno; shaped the thought of Galileo and Freud, Darwin and Einstein; and had a revolutionary influence on writers such as Montaigne and Shakespeare and even Thomas Jefferson. After reading the exciting story of the chance discovery of this long-lost work, the group will read the work itself – *De rerum natura* – in which the poet Lucretius discusses the nature of the universe and the mind.

The co-moderators of this group will be Prof. David Ray and Honors student Daniel Meschter.
This group will read two books simultaneously. GRAVITY’S RAINBOW is a complex, sprawling novel that has often been compared to ULYSSES or MOBY DICK. It attained cult status among college students in the 1970s and 1980s. The narrative is set primarily in Europe at the end of World War II and centers on the design, production and dispatch of V-2 rockets by the German military, and, in particular, the quest undertaken by several characters to uncover the secret of a mysterious device named the "Schwarzgerät" ("black device") that is to be installed in one specific rocket. The book has inspired an enormous amount of commentary, including two online concordances. In addition to reading the novel, the group will consider and discuss artist Zak Smith’s book Pictures Showing What Happens on Each Page of Thomas Pynchon’s Novel Gravity’s Rainbow.

WARNING: This book contains profanity and some graphic scenes many would consider obscene. If you find such material offensive, DO NOT sign up to read this book.

This group will be moderated by Honors College students Alex Aria and Jackson Haffener.

This group will read two books consecutively. The first contains two novellas by Leo Tolstoy, both of them regarded as short masterpieces. In Ivan Ilyich, the approaching death of a 45 year-old judge makes him examine the meaning of his life. In The Kreutzer Sonata, Tolstoy struggles with the relationships among love, carnal sex, and jealousy. When published in 1889, it was banned throughout much of Europe for indecency and has been inspiring debate about feminist issues and women characters in literature ever since that time. In a second book, the group will read and discuss five of the best short stories by Anton Chekhov. All from his mature work. The stories delve beneath the surface of Tsarist Russian society, and examine the hidden motives of Chekhov’s characters and the ways in which social forces shape their lives. The stories include “The Black Monk,” “The Peasants,” and “The Lady with the Toy Dog.”

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray
**V FOR VENDETTA**
by Alan Moore and David Lloyd

*Thursdays, 2:30 to 3:20*
*160-E David L. Boren Hall*
*4 weeks*

A frightening and powerful tale of the loss of freedom and identity in a chillingly believable totalitarian world, *V For Vendetta* stands as one of the highest achievements of the graphic novel medium, and a defining work for its creators, Alan Moore (author of *Watchmen* and frequently described as the best graphic novel writer in history), and David Lloyd, who illustrated in cinematic chiaroscuro and devised V’s Guy Fawkes-inspired appearance which has transcended the story and made its way into the real world, frequently being used by protesters demonstrating against the perceived injustices of governments, financial institutions and other powerful organizations.

This group will be moderated by Honors student Michael Wilkinson.

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**David Wong's JOHN DIES AT THE END**
"Hilarious and Genuinely Scary"

*Tuesdays, 2:30 to 3:20*
*160-E David L. Boren Hall*
*10 weeks*

Author David Wong has been described as “a mash-up of Douglas Adams and Stephen King.” This highly praised work adroitly spoofs the horror genre while simultaneously offering up a genuinely horrifying story. The terror is rooted in a substance known as soy sauce, a paranormal psychoactive that opens video store clerk Wong’s—and his penis-obsessed friend John’s—minds to higher levels of consciousness. Or is it just hell seeping into the unnamed Midwestern town where Wong and the others live? One reviewer notes the book “blends horror and suspense with comedy – a tricky combination – and pulls it off effortlessly.”

This group will be moderated by Honors student Michael Wilkinson.

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**ESCAPE FROM CAMP 14:**
One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom

*Tuesdays, 10:30 to 11:20*
*160-E David L. Boren Hall*
*5 weeks*

North Korea is isolated and hungry, bankrupt and belligerent. Between 150,000 and 200,000 people are being held in its political prison camps. Very few born and raised in these camps have escaped, but Shin Donghyuk did. In *Escape from Camp 14*, journalist Blaine Harden tells the story of Shin Dong-hyuk and through the lens of Shin’s life unlocks the secrets of the world’s most repressive totalitarian state. A book without parallel, this is a riveting nightmare that bears witness to the worst horrors, and yet includes a moving testament to one man’s courageous struggle to retrieve his own lost humanity.

This group will be moderated by Honors student Kevin Hadley.
THE UNFORGIVING MINUTE: A SOLDIER'S EDUCATION

Tuesdays, 6:00pm to 6:50
182 David L. Boren Hall
8 weeks

The book details author Craig Mullaney’s journey from West Point cadet, to Ranger School, to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, then to Afghanistan, and highlights the key moments along the way that shaped his mind and future. Mullaney discusses a wide range of engaging issues, such as violence conditioning in military training, the unique benefits and challenges of interracial dating and marriage, and the value of education abroad. I found his frank description of life as a Rhodes Scholar particularly insightful, and his portrayal of leadership during “the unforgiving minute” in modern combat was inspiring to say the least. The book has received substantial praise from critics, including President Boren.

This group will be moderated by Honors student Conor McBride.

POETRY AND MUSIC—A Listening Group That Explores the Connections Between Them

Fridays, 2:30 to 3:20
160-E David L. Boren Hall
7 weeks

In addition to reading certain poems, this group will listen to those poems and also to selected music that relates to the same subject as the poem or that suggests parallels between the poet and the musician (for example, the group will discuss parallels between Emily Dickinson and Adele). Instead of a book, students will be given a flash drive onto which the music will have been loaded. Each week the group will consider five poems and five songs relating to topics like love, war, or poverty. Poets like Frost, Wordsworth, Adriene Rich, Allen Ginsberg, and Langston Hughes will be considered, and musicians including Goyte, Bon Iver, Fun, the Black-Eyed Peas and the Postal Service.

This group will be moderated by Honors student Kevin Hadley.

Shakespeare's JULIUS CAESAR
Read the Play, Then See the Play

Fridays, 3:30 to 4:20
160-E David L. Boren Hall
4 weeks

This group will read and discuss one of Shakespeare’s best known plays, and one that is a link between his histories and his tragedies. This play is a story primarily about a conspiracy to murder Caesar. The conspirators’ plan has many flaws and they must struggle with the aftermath of what they have done. Shakespeare uses contrasts between characters and relationships to paint a picture of severe differences, strengths, and weaknesses.

After reading the play, the group will attend the final dress rehearsal of the OU School of Drama’s late September production of Julius Caesar, in which the play is set in modern times. In addition to seeing the final dress rehearsal, those who wish to do so may also attend a formal performance.

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
Avant-garde short stories by an author “who may be the most important writer working in Israel right now; certainly he is the closest observer of its post-intifada, post-Oslo spiritual condition. Kafka said that literature should be an ax to break the frozen sea within us. Kerek is a writer whaling at the ice with a Wiffle ball bat” [Stephen Marche]. The stories have been described as “shorty, strange, funny, and deceptively casual.”

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

Winner of the National Book Award, this highly acclaimed book “masterfully captures the story of our nation’s greatest environmental disaster.” Reviewers have called it “dramatic, vivid, and heart-wrenching.” One said “it haunts the reader from the first page” and “this is can’t-put-it-down history.”

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

This book became a best-seller by delighting both scientists and humanists. Author Alan Lightman, who teaches both physics and writing at MIT, uses simple, lyrical, and literal details to locate Einstein precisely in a place and time -- Berne, Switzerland, spring 1905, when he was a patent clerk privately working on his bizarre, unheard-of theory of relativity. The book takes flight when Einstein takes to his bed and we share his dreams, 30 little fables about places where time behaves quite differently. It’s a mind-stretching meditation by a scientist who’s been to the far edge of physics and is back with wilder tales than Marco Polo’s. This is a repeat of what has been the most successful and popular reading group at the Honors College.

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
Surprising Benefits of Informal Reading Groups at the OU Honors College

[Excerpts from a letter from Jordan Rogers, engineering major and Honors College alumnus]

I remember anticipating the reading group featuring Other Colors and commenting to a friend that I did not expect to enjoy myself. This was because of nothing more than the fact that I had, “no interest in Turkey, and no interest in literature.”

I soon found that I was completely in the wrong. As I engaged in the book as well as dialogue with a professor and with other students, especially the ones who had visited Turkey, I found myself thrilled and excited to learn more about Orhan Pamuk, Istanbul, the Ottoman Empire, and Turkey.

And then I understood what might be the most important lesson I’ve ever received: I AM interested in both Turkey and literature. This is something that I would have never anticipated for I have no personal connection or natural interest in either.

The implications of this discovery were astounding, for my lack of interest in Turkey was actually a presumed lack of interest, and it only took one book to prove otherwise.

But if this was true of Turkey and literature, what wouldn't I find fascinating if I took the time to study? Suddenly, everything in the world was interesting. I was overwhelmed, but in a very positive way.

When I started the informal reading groups this semester I had to be very disciplined to finish the 50 pages required for both books each week.

Since my epiphany, if it can so be called, I have required myself to read 50 pages of any book every day. At first, this seemed like a chore, for my days were full already with school and clubs. But I pushed myself, and every day it seems less and less like a chore. I’m feeling now the daily desire to read, the feeling that I WANT to read, something I have never felt before.

You’ll be amazed to hear that I wake up about 90 minutes earlier now just so I can start the day right - with a book. By the time you read this I will have finished three books in as many weeks - all fiction classics.

I want to emphasize that the books we read and the discussions we had among the students were great… and I left feeling energized about reading. My definition of education has drastically morphed, and I now challenge myself to pursue lifelong learning.