Informal Reading Groups  
Spring 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 January 9th. Twenty-seven of the listed groups begin the week of January 23rd - January 29th, 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 will be distributed at the first meeting. To participate in any of these groups, email your request on or after January 9th to HonorsReading@ou.edu. Groups are filled on a “first-come, first-served basis, so it’s helpful to indicate a second choice.
Published in May 2011, this book contains a dozen essays by Pulitzer Prize winning historian Gordon Wood. The group will read and discuss four of these essays, the central section of the book titled “The making of the Constitution and American Democracy.”

Author Gordon Wood will be at OU on February 27th to participate in the “Teach-In on America’s Founding.”

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
In this exuberantly praised book - a collection of seven pieces on subjects ranging from television to tennis, from the Illinois State Fair to the films of David Lynch, from post-modern literary theory to the supposed fun of traveling aboard a Caribbean luxury cruiseliner - David Foster Wallace brings to nonfiction the same curiosity, hilarity, and exhilarating verbal facility that has delighted readers of his fiction, including the bestselling *Infinite Jest*.

This group will be moderated by Honors seniors John Goetzinger and Cliff Marroquin.

Propelled by the same superb instinct for storytelling that made *The Kite Runner* a beloved classic, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is at once an incredible chronicle of thirty years of Afghan history and a deeply moving story of family, friendship, faith, and the salvation to be found in love. Born a generation apart and with very different ideas about love and family, Mariam and Laila are two women brought jarringly together by war, by loss and by fate. A stunning accomplishment, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is a haunting, heartbreakingly compelling story of an unforgetting time, an unlikely friendship, and an indestructible love.

This group is moderated by Honors freshman Nikke DeYear, an International Security Studies major.

In his new book, Michael Lewis actually makes topics like European sovereign debt, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank not only comprehensible but also fascinating. The book could not be more timely given the worries about Europe’s deepening debt crisis. Combining his familiarity with finance and the talents of a travel writer, Lewis gives the reader a guided tour through some of the disparate places hard hit by the fiscal tsunami of 2008, like Greece, Iceland and Ireland, tracing how very different people for very different reasons gorged on the cheap credit available in the prelude to that disaster.

This group will be moderated by Honors alumnus Tim Burr, now a graduate student in Computer Science.
"Community, Identity, Stability" is the motto of Aldous Huxley’s utopian World State. Here everyone consumes daily grams of soma, to fight depression, babies are born in laboratories, and the most popular form of entertainment is a "Feelie," a movie that stimulates the senses of sight, hearing, and touch. Though there is no violence and everyone is provided for, Bernard Marx feels something is missing and senses his relationship with a young woman has the potential to be much more than the confines of their existence allow. Huxley foreshadowed many of the practices and gadgets we take for granted today--let’s hope the sterility and absence of individuality he predicted aren’t yet to come.

This group will be moderated by Honors sophomore Haley Mowdy a double major in Classical languages and Sociology.

For many years, author Parker Palmer has worked on behalf of teachers and others who choose their vocations for reasons of the heart but may lose heart because of the troubled, sometimes toxic systems in which they work. Hundreds of thousands of readers have benefited from his approach in THE COURAGE TO TEACH, which takes teachers on an inner journey toward reconnecting with themselves, their students, their colleagues, and their vocations, and reclaiming their passion for one of the most challenging and important of human endeavors.

This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray. Dr. Greg Garn, Interim Dean of the College of Education will participate in several meetings.

Critics have praised this new translation by Richard Pevear and T. Larissa Volokhonsky as "far and away the best…faithful, extremely readable, gripping" and "as close to Dostoevsky’s Russian as it is possible." This is a passionate philosophical novel that enters deeply into the ethical debates of God, free will, and morality. It is a spiritual drama of moral struggles concerning faith, doubt, and reason, set against a modernizing Russia.

The group will be moderated by Honors sophomore Alex Aria.
Critic Malcolm Gladwell writes: “Atul Gawande has made a name for himself as a writer of exquisitely crafted meditations on the problems and challenges of modern medicine. His latest book, The Checklist Manifesto, begins on familiar ground, with his experiences as a surgeon. But before long it becomes clear that he is really interested in a problem that afflicts virtually every aspect of the modern world—and that is how professionals deal with the increasing complexity of their responsibilities. It has been years since I read a book so powerful and so thought-provoking.” This is a remarkably liberating and persuasive inquiry into what it takes to work successfully and with a personal sense of satisfaction.

The group will be moderated by Honors students Kathleen Evans and Uyen Pham, who are leaders of the Honors Student Association.

Thief of Time is about time travel, the perfect clock, humanity’s innate disorganization, and kung fu. Some of the characters include the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Death’s granddaughter, a genius clock maker (who is also extremely socially awkward), and a couple of History Monks (whose job is to “make sure tomorrow happens at all”). If you like wordplay, witty banter, and/or Doctor Who, you’ll like this book.

This group will be moderated by first-year Honors student Whitney Thompson.”

Eclectic both in style and context, Klosterman’s sixth book is a collection of essays on topics ranging from the intricacies of the journalistic interview, to time travel, to voyeurism, to Garth Brooks, to the Branch Davidian cult, to ABBA. When asked what the book is about, the author said: “there’s quite a bit about violence and Garth Brooks and why Germans don’t laugh when they’re inside grocery stores. Ralph Nader and Ralph Sampson play significant roles. I think there are several pages about Rear Window and college football and Mad Men and why Rivers Cuomo prefers having sex with Asian women. Supposedly there’s a chapter outlining all the things the Unabomber was right about. Most of the core questions dwell on the way media perception constructs a fake reality that ends up becoming more meaningful than whatever actually happened. Also, Lady Gaga.”

This group will be moderated by Honors college alumnus Javen Weston, who is currently a graduate student in Chemical Engineering.
This highly imaginative debut novel features a protagonist with the same name as the author. The fictional Jonathan Safran Foer, also a writer, travels to Eastern Europe after his junior year in college. His mission, as he ventures through the farmlands, is to find Augustine, who may have saved the grandfather he never knew from the Nazis. Accompanying Jonathan on his quixotic quest is Alex, a young Ukrainian translator who speaks hilariously fractured English. The fabled history of his grandfather’s shtetl, or village, is juxtaposed with events in the present using comedy interspersed with tragedy. Generations become united across time in this fanciful tale, as Foer, the author, gives the reader a contemporary version of 19th-century Jewish drama one that blends laughter and tears.

This group will be moderated by third year Honors student William Lonn. After finishing this book, the group will choose a second book to read.

Daniel Everett, a linguist and missionary, arrived in the Brazilian Amazon with his wife and three young children hoping to convert the Pirahã, a previously uncontacted tribe, to Christianity. While studying their society, Everett soon discovered that the Pirahã have no counting system, no fixed terms for color, no concept of war, and no personal property; his findings would challenge fundamental assumptions both of Chomskian linguistics and of his Christian faith. Everett’s life-changing tale invites us, too, to reconsider our ideas about language, thought, and human nature itself.

This group will be moderated by Honors seniors Helen Kerwin and Kalli Wolf.
Henrietta Lacks was a poor Southern tobacco farmer who worked the same land as her slave ancestors, yet her cells—taken without her knowledge—became one of the most important tools in medicine. The first “immortal” human cells grown in culture, they are still alive today, though she has been dead for more than sixty years. If you could pile all her cells ever grown onto a scale, they’d weigh more than 50 million metric tons—as much as a hundred Empire State Buildings. These cells were vital for developing the polio vaccine; uncovered secrets of cancer, viruses, and the atom bomb’s effects; helped lead to important advances like in vitro fertilization, cloning, and gene mapping; and have been bought and sold by the billions. Yet Henrietta Lacks remains virtually unknown, buried in an unmarked grave.

This group will be moderated by Honors junior Ashley Higgs.

Junior tennis, drug addiction, hypnotic videotapes, disabled Canadian terrorists--considered by many to be his magnum opus, David Foster Wallace’s 1996 novel Infinite Jest skates between all of these and more with pedantic ease. Wallace crafts a dense but extremely accessible near-future world that is as applicably satirical now as it was fifteen years ago. Simultaneously believable and implausible, Wallace’s novel challenges readers by creating a macrocosm that is arguably more insane than our own. A gargantuan, mind-altering comedy about the pursuit of happiness in America.

This group will be moderated by first year Honors and engineering student Carl Szmutko.

"Teacher seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world.” Refreshing dialogues between an eager student and his wise gorilla mentor piece together the story of the world by weaving together mythology, ethics, and history. Together, teacher and student explore how mankind came to believe we are the supreme product of evolution and that all life on Earth is at our disposal, and what that belief means for the sustainability of life on Earth.

This group will be moderated by fourth year Honors student and Environmental Sustainability major Madeline Dillner.
Sherlock Holmes
Selected Short Stories

Mondays, 2:30 to 3:20
160-D David L. Boren Hall
6 weeks

The Aleph and Other Stories
by Jorge Luis Borges

Thursdays, 4:30 to 5:20
160-D David L. Boren Hall
10 weeks

The Practice of Everyday Life
by Michel de Certeau

Thursdays, 5:30 to 6:20
160-D David L. Boren Hall
5 weeks

Many students have suggested that some of the reading groups should focus on short stories rather than a long narrative; thus each week’s reading “stands alone,” and having to miss one week’s meeting does not mean participants are behind in the reading. This group will choose a selection of the short stories featuring legendary detective Sherlock Holmes, created by the Scottish physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and written from 1887 through 1924. Holmes is a master of logic and disguise, and his cases are narrated by his assistant and close friend, the fictional Dr. John Watson. The group will read different stories that those read by a similar group in Spring 2011.

This group will be moderated by Honors student Aamina Shakir.

Full of philosophical puzzles and supernatural surprises, these stories contain some of Borges’s most fully realized human characters. With uncanny insight he takes us inside the minds of an unrepentant Nazi, an imprisoned Mayan priest, fanatical Christian theologians, a woman plotting vengeance on her father’s “killer,” and a man awaiting his assassin in a Buenos Aires guest house. This volume also contains the hauntingly brief vignettes about literary imagination and personal identity collected in The Maker, which Borges wrote as failing eyesight and public fame began to undermine his sense of self. After reading this book, the group will read two more books: Aura by Carlos Fuentes and Pedro Páramo by Juan Rulfo.

This group will be moderated by Economics Honors junior Benjamin Hill and Biochemistry Honors senior Alim Ramji.

In this incisive book, Michel de Certeau considers the uses to which social representation and modes of social behavior are put by individuals and groups, describing the tactics available to the common man for reclaiming his own autonomy from the all-pervasive forces of commerce, politics, and culture. In exploring the public meaning of ingeniously defended private meanings, de Certeau draws brilliantly on an immense theoretical literature to speak of an apposite use of imaginative literature.

This group will be moderated by Dillon Votaw, an Honors junior double-majoring in Art and Japanese.
**THE RAPE OF NANKING:**
The Forgotten Holocaust Of World War II
by Iris Chang

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

In December 1937, the Japanese army swept into the ancient city of Nanking. Within weeks, more than 300,000 Chinese civilians and soldiers were systematically raped, tortured, and murdered—a death toll exceeding that of the atomic blasts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. Using extensive interviews with survivors and newly discovered documents, Iris Chang has written the definitive history of this horrifying episode.

This group will be moderated by first year honors student John Grinde.

**THE SIEGE OF KRISHNAPUR**
by J. G. Farrell

*India, 1857: the year of the Great Mutiny*

*Tuesdays, 7:00 to 7:50*
*182 David L. Boren Hall*
*8 weeks*

*The Siege of Krishnapur* is a cynical masterpiece that explores the moral hypocrisy of Victorian civilization. Stereotypes are subjected to merciless scrutiny against the backdrop of a sepoy rebellion in the India of the British East India Company. The combination of satire and swashbuckling tension make for a cracking good read.

This group will be moderated by Honors College freshman Daniel Meschter.

**THE SUN ALSO RISES**
Ernest Hemingway’s "most poignant novel"

*Fridays, 4:30 to 5:20*
*160-D David L. Boren Hall*
*6 weeks*

The quintessential novel of the Lost Generation, this is one of Ernest Hemingway’s masterpieces and a classic example of his spare but powerful writing style. A poignant look at the disillusionment and angst of the post-World War I generation, the novel introduces two of Hemingway’s most unforgettable characters: Jake Barnes and Lady Brett Ashley. The story follows the flamboyant Brett and the hapless Jake as they journey from the wild nightlife of 1920s Paris to the brutal bullfighting rings of Spain with a motley group of expatriates. It is an age of moral bankruptcy, spiritual dissolution, unrealized love, and vanishing illusions.

The moderator of this group is Honors junior Sean McCormick.
**THE NIGHT THOREAU SPENT IN JAIL**  
A Play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee  
*Fridays, 3:30 to 4:20  
160-D David L. Boren Hall  
3 weeks*

A now classic American drama: “If the law is of such a nature that it requires you to be an agent of injustice to another, then I say, break the law.” So wrote the young Henry David Thoreau in 1849. Three years earlier, Thoreau had put his belief into action and refused to pay taxes because of the United States government’s involvement in the Mexican War, which Thoreau firmly believed was unjust. For his daring and unprecedented act of protest, he was thrown in jail. The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail is a celebrated dramatic presentation of this famous act of civil disobedience and its consequences.  

This group is moderated by Prof. David Ray.

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**QUIET: THE POWER OF INTROVERTS IN A WORLD THAT CAN’T STOP TALKING**  
*Tuesdays, 1:30 to 2:20  
160-D David L. Boren Hall  
8 weeks*

At least one-third of the people we know are introverts. Although they are often labeled “quiet,” it is to introverts that we owe many of the great contributions to society—from van Gogh’s sunflowers to the invention of the personal computer. With an insightful look at how dramatically we undervalue introverts, and how much we lose in doing so, Susan Cain charts the rise of the Extrovert Ideal in the twentieth century and explores its far-reaching effects. She questions the dominant values of American culture, where forced collaboration can stand in the way of innovation, and where the leadership potential of introverts is often overlooked. She draws on cutting-edge research in psychology and neuroscience to reveal the surprising differences between extroverts and introverts. In praise of this thought-provoking read, one reviewer notes that Quiet “will change the way you see yourself, other people, and the world.”

Honors junior Simone Saldanha will serve as the moderator for this group.

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**THE ECONOMIST**  
British newsweekly serves as basis for discussion of current events  
*Wednesdays, 5:30 to 6:20  
182 David L. Boren Hall  
10 weeks*

This group will read ten weekly issues of THE ECONOMIST, copies of which will be available on Mondays in the main office of the Honors College. The discussion will focus on the cover story, the “leaders” (editorials), and whatever other articles most interest the group.

Prof. David Ray will be the moderator for this group.
Many students have suggested that some of the reading groups should focus on short stories rather than a long narrative; thus each week's reading "stands alone," and having to miss one week's meeting does not mean participants are behind in the reading. This group will read a dozen of the greatest short stories by Irish writers, including "The Dead," the last story in THE DUBLINERS by James Joyce.

The group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

Only children can colonize the planet Prokaryon, genetically modified for a world whose chemistry kills unaltered adults. A colony of orphans struggle to survive, and find the planet hides strange secrets. Slonzewski, a noted biologist, has written a novel that features enough absorbing material on genetics and planetary ecology to satisfy an aficionado of hard SF. At the same time, she tackles a wide range of moral issues, from overpopulation to ecological responsibility and the ethics of machine intelligence. Slonzewski will be speaking on the OU campus on Wednesday, April 11th, and has agreed to a meeting and discussion with the participants of this reading group.

The group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

This biography of Dickens is focused on the 1830s and the novelist's early career. One review notes, "In following the twists and turns of Charles Dickens's early career, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst examines a remarkable double transformation: in reinventing himself Dickens reinvented the form of the novel. It was a high-stakes gamble, and Dickens never forgot how differently things could have turned out. Like the hero of Dombey and Son, he remained haunted by "what might have been, and what was not."

Dr. Melanie Wright is the moderator of this group.
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.