Informal Reading Groups
Fall Semester 2011

Meet just one hour per week with 10-15 students and one faculty member 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

Groups begin the week of August 29 - September 2, and meet from 4 to 12 weeks as indicated in this brochure. There are three groups that begin later in the semester, as specified. The last page describes a new program of reading groups that read only one essay or article, and meet only one time for one hour. To participate in any of these groups, email your request to HonorsReading@ou.edu. Groups are filled on a “first-come, first-served basis, so it’s helpful to indicate a second choice. Students may sign up for one reading group AND one or more of the one-time, one-article reading groups.
THE SPIDER'S HOUSE
Paul Bowles' novel about Morocco’s 1954 nationalist uprising

Thursdays, 12:30 to 1:20, 160-E David L. Boren Hall
9 weeks

Paul Bowles (1910-1999) was an American writer and composer, and an associate of many of the leading figures of the Beat generation. He lived as an expatriate in Morocco for 52 years, and many of his novels and short stories focus on the role of an outsider in an alien society and the challenges of understanding across cultures. The Spider's House has been described as “perhaps his best and most beautifully subtle” novel, and is set in Morocco at the time of the 1954 nationalist uprising against the French. It alternates between the viewpoints of a jaded American expatriate writer and an intelligent but illiterate Arab adolescent, and the sharp contrast is “totally relevant to today’s political situation in the Islamic world.” Prof. David Ray is the moderator of this group.

WALDEN: LIFE IN THE WOODS and CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Tuesdays, 5:00 to 6:00 pm
182 David L. Boren Hall
7 weeks

Published in 1854, Walden is Henry David Thoreau's account of the two years he lived in a small cabin he built near Walden Pond in woodland owned by his friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is considered one of the enduring classics of American literature. Thoreau was conducting an experiment in simple living and self-sufficiency, and hoped to achieve a better understanding of society by partially detaching himself from it. Thoreau was a prolific writer, ardent naturalist, lifelong abolitionist, and transcendentalist. The group will also read Thoreau's essay arguing for individual resistance to civil government in moral opposition to unjust government. Honors senior William Prueitt will serve as moderator of this group.

THE EMPEROR OF ALL MALADIES: A BIOGRAPHY OF CANCER

Mondays, 2:30 to 3:20
180/181 David L. Boren Hall
10 weeks

Siddhartha Mukherjee is a physician, cancer researcher, and very gifted writer, who currently is on the faculty and staff of the Medical Center at Columbia University. A former Rhodes Scholar, he is a graduate of Stanford, Oxford, and Harvard Medical School. This book has swept all the national best-seller lists and recently was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. Described as “riveting, wise, deeply humane, and magisterial,” it is an account of cancer research and cancer biology that one reviewer says “reads like a novel” even though it deals with real people, real successes and also false notions and false hopes. Honors student Mubeen Shakir will serve as moderator of this group.
Guy DeBord (1931-1994) was a French writer, filmmaker, Marxist theorist, and radical artist, who participated in several factions of Letterism, a movement of artists deeply influenced by the Surrealists. This short philosophical book is his best known work, and consists of 221 short theses, approximately a paragraph each. DeBord traces the development of a modern society in which authentic social life has been replaced with its representation: "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation." Debord argues that the history of social life can be understood as "the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing." This condition, according to DeBord, is the "historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life". Honors student Dillon Votaw will serve as moderator of this group.

Although Mestrius Plutarchus was a Greek who lived most of his life (circa 45-125 CE) in his small Greek hometown, he was nonetheless a major writer and philosopher with virtually celebrity status within the Roman Empire of his day. His best known surviving work is the massive Parallel Lives, in which Plutarch pairs a philosophical biography of a famous Roman with one of a Greek who was comparable in some way. His intention was not to write a chronicle of great historical events, but rather to examine the character of great men, as a lesson for the living. Although some have been lost, twenty-three pairs of biographies have survived, as well as four unpaired, single lives. This group will read two such pairs, using an edition that has a facing page translation, with the original Attic Greek on the left-hand page and English on the right. This group is intended primarily for students who have taken at least one course in Ancient Greek. OU Honors student Gerard Keiser will serve as moderator for this group.

A major American writer of the 20th century, Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007) wrote twelve novels and numerous short stories and essays. Several of his novels achieved iconic status during the 1960s. Written in 1963, his fourth novel is an apocalyptic satire that is both blackly fatalistic and hilariously funny. It has been praised by critics as "one of the 20th century's most important works" When Vonnegut graded all his books — "comparing myself with myself" — this is one of only two that received an "A+" grade. One reviewer has said that "the one unifying thread that runs throughout all of his works, is the knowledge that the universe is a Big Damn Mess, and that's a terrible thing, but also pretty funny when you stop to think about it.” Prof. David Ray is the moderator for this group.
This Tony Award-winning play is an explosive re-imagining of the mysterious wartime meeting between two Nobel laureates to discuss the atomic bomb. In 1941 the German physicist Werner Heisenberg made a clandestine trip to Copenhagen to see his Danish counterpart and friend Niels Bohr. Their work together on quantum mechanics and the uncertainty principle had revolutionized atomic physics. But now the world had changed and the two men were on opposite sides in a world war. Why Heisenberg went to Copenhagen and what he wanted to say to Bohr are questions that have vexed historians ever since. In Michael Frayn’s ambitious, fiercely intelligent, and daring new play Heisenberg and Bohr meet once again to discuss the intricacies of physics and to ponder the metaphysical—the very essence of human motivation. This play was performed at OU last year to celebrate the centennial of the our Homer L. Dodge Department of Physics and Astronomy. Prof. David Ray is the moderator for this group.

Written by one of America’s very greatest writers and published in 1884-85, this wonderful book is set in fictional St. Petersburg, Missouri, on the shores of the Mississippi River, sometime between 1835 (when the first steamboat sailed down the Mississippi) and 1845. It is often named as one of the Great American Novels; Ernest Hemingway famously said “All modern American literature comes from” Huck Finn, and hailed it as “the best book we’ve had.” Nonetheless, it was criticized upon release because of its coarse language and became even more controversial in the 20th century because of its perceived use of racial stereotypes and because of its frequent use of a racial slur. This group will be moderated by Dr. David Levy, David Ross Boyd Professor of History, Emeritus, a nationally known expert on Twain, a major scholar, and one of the truly great teachers at OU.

While this is her third novel (of a total of eight), it is the first in which Virginia Woolf develops her style as “one of the greatest innovators in the English language.” In her works she experimented with stream-of-consciousness, interior monologue, and the underlying psychological as well as emotional motives of characters. Set in the halcyon days of pre-World War I innocence, the novel follows the progress of a young man as he moves from adolescence to adulthood in a hazy rite of passage. Wandering through the windswept shores of Cornwall to the sun-scorched landscape of Greece, his character is revealed in a stream of loosely related incidents, thoughts, and impressions. Prof. David Ray is the moderator for this group.
SOMETHING WICKED
THIS WAY COMES
Ray Bradbury's "classic of fantasy and horror"

Published in 1962 by fantasy and science fiction writer Ray Bradbury, this novel is about two 13-year-old boys who have a harrowing experience with a nightmarish traveling carnival that comes to their small town one October. The carnival's leader is the mysterious "Mr. Dark" who bears a tattoo for each person who, lured by the offer to live out his secret fantasies, has become bound in service to the carnival. The title comes from Shakespeare's Macbeth: "By the pricking of my thumbs / Something wicked this way comes." The novel has entered popular culture, being mentioned in a Stephen King novel, made into a 1983 film adaptation, quoted in lyrics by several rock bands, satirized on South Park in the episode "Double Trouble," and the novel's title is sung by a choir of wizards during "Double Trouble," in Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. Honors students Elizabeth Abell and Amanda Nedziewicki will be the moderators of this group.

CENSORING AN IRANIAN LOVE STORY
First English translation of a work by one of the most acclaimed and controversial writers in contemporary Iran

If conducting a love affair in modern Iran is not a simple undertaking, then telling the story of that love may be even more difficult. In a country where mere proximity between a man and a woman may be the prologue to deadly sin, where illicit passion is punished by imprisonment or death, telling that story becomes the greatest literary challenge. Shahriar Mandanipour evokes a pair of young lovers who find each other — despite surreal persecution and repressive parents — through coded messages and internet chat rooms; and triumphantly their story entwines with an account of their creator's struggle. Inventive, darkly comic and profoundly touching, this novel celebrates both the unquenchable power of the written word and a love that is doomed, glorious, and utterly real. Honors student Simone Saldanha will serve as moderator for this group.

THE BURIED MIRROR
Reflections on Spain and the New World by world famous Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes

Mexican novelist and diplomat Fuentes believes that a common cultural heritage can help the countries of Latin America transcend disunity and fragmentation. In a splendidly illustrated survey, he perceptively explores Spanish America's love-hate relationship with Spain and its search for an identity in its multicultural roots. His guiding metaphor is the mirror—whether the glass found in Olmec tombs that guided the dead through the underworld, or Cervantes's Knight of the Mirror, who attempted to cure Don Quixote of madness. It is the unavoidable encounter of cultures that has shaped the New World experience: "When we exclude, we betray ourselves," counsels Fuentes. "When we include, we find ourselves." Honors student William Prueitt will serve as moderator for this group.
Hamlet's BlackBerry
by William Powers
Not neo-Luddite propaganda, but a useful reminder of the costs of 24/7 connectivity
Thursdays, 1:30 to 2:20
160-E David L. Boren Hall
6 weeks

Mark Twain
The Divided Mind of America's Best-Loved Writer
"brilliantly places his life and work in historical context"
Tuesdays, 12:30 to 1:20
160-E David L. Boren Hall
5 weeks

Habeas Corpus in America:
The Politics of Individual Rights
"an impressive and engaging account"
Mondays, 4:30 to 5:20
160-E David L. Boren Hall
5 weeks

With the subtitle A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age, this national best-seller is not anti-internet or anti-digital communication, but tries to discuss both the benefits AND the costs of constant connectivity and increased multi-tasking. Featured on the PBS Newshour and NPR's Diane Rhem Show, the author suggests remedies for seeking a BALANCE, thus restoring the possibilities and creative insights that come from reflection. He makes a powerful case for the need to step out of the digital stream now and again. Prof. David Ray is the moderator of this group.

This new, concise, and extremely well-written biography of Mark Twain presents both the life and the works of this great American writer in the context of sweeping social change. The author discusses the effects of westward expansion, the Civil War, American imperialism, the end of slavery followed by the start of a new chapter in race relations, and the advances and excesses of the Gilded Age. The book draws upon the letters and diaries of Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain was his pen name) and also a careful reading of the truly vast secondary literature. Prof. David Ray is the moderator of this group. The author of the book is David Levy, who is David Ross Boyd Professor of History, Emeritus, and one of OU’s truly great teachers. He will join this group for its last one-hour meeting to answer questions and discuss the process of researching and writing the book.

It is often thought that habeas corpus is a cornerstone of our legal system as the principal constitutional check on arbitrary government power, allowing an arrested person to challenge the legality of his detention. This major new study traces the history of the writ from the Founding to Hamdi v. Rumsfeld and Boumediene v. Bush, and illuminates crucial developmental moments in its evolution. The author demonstrates that during the antebellum period, Reconstruction, Gilded Age, Great Society, and the ongoing war on terrorism, habeas corpus has waxed and waned in harmony with the political context of the time. Highly recommended for students interested in the Constitution or considering law school, the group will have Prof. David Ray as moderator. The author, Prof. Justin Wert, is unquestionably one of the rising superstars among OU’s younger faculty. He will join this group for its last one-hour meeting to answer questions and discuss the process of researching and writing the book.
Published in 1982, this novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award, and was the basis for the 1985 film of the same name, which received 11 nominations for Academy Awards. Its protagonist named Celie is a poor black woman whose letters tell the story of 20 years of her life, beginning at age 14 when she is being abused and raped by her father and attempting to protect her sister from the same fate, and continuing over the course of her marriage to “Mister,” a brutal man who terrorizes her. Celie eventually learns that her abusive husband has been keeping her sister’s letters from her and the rage she feels, combined with an example of love and independence provided by her close friend Shug, pushes her finally toward an awakening of her creative and loving self. Honors students Elizabeth Rucker and Lauren Brentnell will serve as moderators of this group.

Victor Hugo (1802-1885) was a celebrated French novelist, poet, playwright, dramatist, essayist, whose best known works include Les Misérables and The Hunchback of Notre Dame. This novella was one of his first mature works, and has influenced major writers in subsequent generations. A man vilified by society and condemned to death for his crime wakes every morning knowing that this day might be his last. Graphically detailed, this first-person chronicle describes both the prisoner’s wretched environment and his thoughts, reminiscences, and despair at his impending doom. Honors student Lauren Weaver will serve as moderator for this group.

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was a French author and journalist and one of the key philosophers of the 20th century. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. Published in 1946, this novel is Camus’s compelling and troubling tale of a disaffected, apparently amoral young man. It has earned extraordinary popularity in part because it reveals so vividly the anxieties of its time: alienation, the fear of anonymity, and spiritual doubt. The plot is simple. A young Algerian, Meursault, afflicted with a sort of aimless inertia, becomes embroiled in the petty intrigues of a local pimp and, somewhat inexplicably, ends up killing a man. Once he’s imprisoned and eventually brought to trial, his crime, it becomes apparent, is not so much the arguably defensible murder he has committed as it is his deficient character. Honors student Lauren Weaver will serve as moderator of this group.
Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) was an American author and journalist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957. *Winner Take Nothing* was published in 1933 as his third book of short stories, and is arguably his very finest writing. One reviewer says the fourteen stories “glow with the mark of his unique talent. Hunters, wives, old men of wisdom, waiters, fighters, women loved, women lost: they are all here, living on the raw edge, making love, facing the inevitable reality of death. The characters, the dialogue, the settings, the remarkable insight could have come only from Hemingway’s imagination. As an introduction to his work, or as an overview of the themes he developed at greater length in his novels, it is a stunningly successful collection.” Prof. David Ray is the moderator of this group.

Widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was an American author of novels and short stories, whose works are the paradigmatic writings of the Jazz Age, a term he coined himself. A member of the “Lost Generation” of American expatriate writers living in Paris in the 1920s, Fitzgerald finished four novels. *Gatsby* is regarded as his supreme achievement and the exemplary novel of the Jazz Age. It is “an exquisitely crafted tale” of the fabulously wealthy Jay Gatsby and his doomed love for the beautiful Daisy Buchanan, told in the context of lavish parties on Long Island in the 1920s. Prof. David Ray is the moderator of this group.

In the 1920s and 1930s, thousands of men and women were sterilized at asylums and prisons across America. Believing that criminality and mental illness were inherited, state legislatures passed laws calling for the sterilization of “habitual criminals” and the “feebleminded.” But in 1936, inmates at Oklahoma’s McAlester prison refused to cooperate; a man named Jack Skinner was the first to come to trial. A colorful and heroic cast of characters—from the inmates themselves to their devoted, self-taught lawyer—would fight the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Only after Americans learned the extent of another large-scale eugenics project—in Nazi Germany—would the inmates triumph. Combining engrossing narrative with sharp legal analysis, Victoria F. Nourse explains the consequences of this landmark decision, still vital today—and reveals the stories of these forgotten men and women who fought for human dignity and the basic right to have a family. One critic described this short book as “remarkable and riveting, a landmark study of a landmark case in Constitutional law.” Prof. David Ray is the moderator of this group.
• Think you might not have time to read an entire book?
• Don’t want to make a long-term commitment?

One article, one hour, one time
Honors discussions

“History: Mankind’s Better Moments” by Barbara Tuchman – A self-trained historian who taught at Harvard, Radcliffe, the University of California and the US Naval War College, and whose works were best-sellers and earned a Pulitzer Prize, this short essay is adapted from her Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment of the Humanities, delivered in Spring 2000.

One-hour discussion: Friday, August 26, 3:30 to 4:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall

“A Mathematician’s Lament” by Paul Lockhart – Written in 2002 and later published in the online journal of the Mathematical Association of America, Lockhart is a mathematics teacher at Saint Ann’s School in Brooklyn, New York. His article had been circulating through the mathematics and math ed communities ever since. Stanford’s Keith Devlin called it “quite frankly, one of the best critiques of current K-12 mathematics education I have ever seen. Written by a first-class research mathematician who elected to devote his teaching career to K-12 education.”

One-hour discussion: Monday, August 29, 1:30 to 2:20, 160-E David L. Boren Hall

“Mr. Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books” by Jonathan Franzen – By the author of the new bestselling novel Freedom, in this controversial 2002 article, Franzen chronicles his growing disenchantment with the novels of William Gaddis, and more generally with the modernist-inspired ideal of “difficult” literature—the belief that “the greatest novels were tricky in their methods, resisted casual reading, and merited sustained study.” Franzen won the National Book Award in 2001 and was a finalist for the 2002 Pulitzer.

One-hour discussion: Friday, September 9, 11:30 to 12:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall

“The Online Threat: Should We Be Worried About A Cyber War?” by Seymour Hersh, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who first broke the stories about the My Lai massacre in the 1960’s and about CIA and FBI illegal misconduct in the 1970s. From the November 1, 2010 issue of THE NEWYORKER, this article suggests the real danger lies in confusing cyber espionage with cyber war, and discusses Chinese military intelligence cyber attacks during the first months of the Obama administration.

One-hour discussion: Monday, September 12, 1:30 to 2:20, 160-E David L. Boren Hall

For copies of these articles (either digital or hard-copies), to join one or more of these one-hour small-group discussions, or to propose an article or essay, write honorsreading@ou.edu.