Informal Reading Groups
Spring Semester 2010

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.”

- 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 January 25-29, and meet from 5 to 14 weeks as indicated. There are also four groups that begin the week of March 22-26 (the week following Spring Break). To participate, email your request to HonorsReading@ou.edu – groups are filled on a “first-come, first-served” basis, so it would be helpful to indicate a second choice, if you have one.
KEYNES: THE RETURN OF THE MASTER
2009 best-seller by Lord Robert Skidelsky

Mondays, 4:30 to 5:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall – 5 weeks

Skidelsky is the author of the definitive, three-volume biography of John Maynard Keynes, the British economist whose study of the Great Depression of 1929-39 led to a “general theory” of economics that was ascendant in the 1960’s, largely repudiated in the late 1970’s, and is now seen as highly relevant and useful in trying to understand and respond to the global financial crisis of 2007-2009. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

EINSTEIN’S DREAMS
Best-selling novel by Alan Lightman, Professor of physics and writing at MIT

Tuesdays, 4:30 to 5:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall – 4 weeks

This book became a bestseller by delighting both scientists and humanists. It is technically a novel. Lightman 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 group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

PADDY’S LAMENT
The Irish Potato Famine of 1846-1847

Fridays, 3:30 to 4:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall – 7 weeks

This is an excellent and dramatic account of the two years in which an unknown and uncontrollable disease destroyed the Irish potato crop, the sole source of nutrition for the Irish peasantry. In the resulting famine, two million Irish died – a quarter of the population – while their British governors and absentee landlords continued to reserve abundant Irish farm crops for export to Britain. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
David McCullough’s  
**JOHN ADAMS** - Pulitzer Prize winning #1 best-seller  

*Fridays, 12:30 to 1:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall - 14 weeks*

This book was more frequently requested by Honors College students than any other for inclusion in spring semester’s reading groups. Having won the Pulitzer Prize for biography, it went on to serve as the basis for the successful HBO miniseries. Moreover, its author, historian David McCullough was at OU last May to deliver the 2009 commencement address. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

Greg Mortenson’s  
**THREE CUPS OF TEA: ONE MAN’S MISSION TO PROMOTE PEACE… ONE SCHOOL AT A TIME**

*Tuesdays, 1:30 to 2:20, 180 Cate 1 Hall - 8 weeks*

Also frequently requested by Honors College students, this book was the Number 1 New York Times bestseller, and recounts the unlikely journey that took Mortenson from a failed attempt to climb Pakistan’s K2, the world’s second-highest-mountain, to successfully building schools in some of the most remote regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Mortenson is scheduled to speak at OU on April 22nd. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

Thomas Hardy’s  
“finest novel” –  
**TESS OF THE D’URBERVILLES**

*Thursdays, 1:30 to 2:20, 180 Cate 1 Hall – 8 weeks*

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) was an English novelist and poet often associated with the naturalist movement. The famous author of more than a dozen novels, this was the next-to-last and is regarded by many critics as his best prose work. It attracted harsh criticism for its sympathetic portrayal of a “fallen woman” and was initially refused publication. Its subtitle, *A Pure Woman: Faithfully Presented*, was intended to raise the eyebrows of the Victorian middle-classes. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.
UNACCUSTOMED EARTH:
Short Stories by Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri

Wednesdays, 3:30 to 4:20, 160-E
David L. Boren Hall - 5 weeks

This group will read about two-thirds of the short stories in this stunning book. Lahiri’s subject is the gulf that separates expatriate Bengali parents from their American-raised children—and that separates the children from India. Having won the Pulitzer Prize for her short stories, that is the perfect genre for Lahiri’s keen sense of life’s abrupt and painful changes, and her avid eye for telling details. This group will be moderated by Dr. Carolyn Morgan.

Italo Calvino’s 1979 novel
IF ON A WINTER’S NIGHT A TRAVELER

Thursdays, 3:00 to 3:50, 160-E, 150-E
David L. Boren Hall - 5 weeks

Italo Calvino (1923-1985) was the most-translated contemporary Italian writer at the time of his death. The novel concerns The Reader’s search for a novel titled If on a winter’s night a traveler; however, interwoven in this search are the first chapters of ten novels, each with a different plot, style, ambience, and author. Through this fun and often ingenious novel, Calvino deals with how we invent and read stories. This group will be moderated by Dr. Melanie Wright, Director of Curriculum in the Honors College.

MONKEY GIRL:
Evolution, Education, Religion, and the Battle for America’s Soul

Wednesdays, 4:30 to 5:20, 182
David L. Boren Hall - 7 weeks

Monkey Girl examines the 2005 trial that took place in Dover, PA, following a lawsuit filed by high school faculty. Told that they would be required to teach intelligent design alongside evolution in science classes, teachers took the Dover Township school board to court where a jury determined that intelligent design is, in fact, Creationism, which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled cannot be taught in public classrooms. To quote Patt Morrison of the Los Angeles Times, “Monkey Girl is compelling and unsettling—and a Rosetta stone for understanding the frightened and oftentimes frightening subculture of Darwin deniers.” This group will be moderated by Dr. Rich Hamerla, Associate Dean of the Honors College.
THE BLUEST EYE
by Nobel Prize winner
Toni Morrison

Every other Wednesday, 7:00 to 8:00, 182 David L. Boren Hall – 6 sessions

Morrison’s first major work is a short but captivating novella about an African American girl who believes that if she can change the color of her eyes, the brutalities of her life in a Midwestern ghetto will magically vanish. The book presents an unflinching portrait of the racism and class privilege inherent in American notions of beauty and how media icons of femininity shape women’s self-conception. This group will be moderated by Dr. Julia Ehrhardt, and will meet every other week, completing a book or several short stories nominated by the participants for each meeting.

EVERYTHING BAD IS GOOD FOR YOU:
How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter
by Steven Johnson

Tuesdays, 3:30 to 4:20, 160-E
David L. Boren Hall – 5 weeks

Science writer Steve Johnson takes on one of the most widely held preconceptions of the postmodern world—the belief that video games, television shows, and other forms of popular entertainment are detrimental to Americans’ cognitive and moral development. Everything Good builds a case to the contrary that is engaging, thorough, and ultimately convincing. This group will be moderated by Dr. Vicki Schaeffer, Honors College Director of Recruitment.

GRAVITY’S RAINBOW
Thomas Pynchon’s 1973 novel and cult classic

Fridays, 1:30 to 2:20, 182, David L. Boren Hall -14 weeks

Often compared to ULYSSES or MOBY DICK, this complex, sprawling novel attained cult status among college students in the 1970s and 1980s. 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 Nick Stanley and Nick Lopez.
Thucydides – Selections from HISTORY OF THE PELOPONNESIAN WARS

Fridays, 2:30 to 3:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall - 5 weeks

This group will read selected portions of this detailed contemporary account of the struggle between Athens and Sparta, written 400 BCE. The conflicts between the two empires over shipping, trade, and colonial expansion came to a head in 431 BCE in Northern Greece, and the entire Greek world was plunged into 27 years of war. Thucydides applied a passion for accuracy and a contempt for myth and romance in compiling this exhaustively factual record of the disastrous conflict that eventually ended the Athenian empire. This group will be moderated by Honors College junior Reid Kelly.

Albert Camus, THE PLAGUE

Fridays, 3:30 to 4:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall – 5 weeks

This Group Begins the Week of March 22-26

French existentialist writer and Nobel prize-winner Albert Camus, who died in 1960, could not have known how grimly current his existentialist novel of epidemic and death would remain. Set in Algeria, in northern Africa, The Plague is a powerful study of human life and its meaning in the face of a deadly virus that sweeps dispassionately through the city, taking a vast percentage of the population with it. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

THE CALCULUS WARS: Newton, Leibniz, and the Greatest Mathematical Clash of All Time

Tuesdays, 4:30 to 5:20, 182 David L. Boren Hall - 5 weeks

This Group Begins the Week of March 22-26

This is a lucid, nontechnical account of the battle between Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) and German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) over who invented calculus first. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

Thursdays, 3:30 to 4:20, 160-E
David L. Boren Hall – 6 weeks
This Group Begins the Week of March 22-26

To be published in February, this is an eye-opening exploration of the ways in which science and engineering must work together to address our world’s most pressing issues, from dealing with climate change and the prevention of natural disasters to the development of efficient automobiles and the search for renewable energy sources. While the scientist may identify problems, it falls to the engineer to solve them. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

Virginia Woolf’s TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

Mondays, 4:30 to 5:20, 182
David L. Boren Hall - 5 weeks
This Group Begins the Week of March 22-26

This is the great English novelist’s most successful and accessible experiment in the stream-of-consciousness style. The three sections of the book take place between 1910 and 1920 and revolve around various members of the Ramsay family during visits to their summer residence on the Isle of Skye in Scotland. A central motif of the novel is the conflict between the feminine and masculine principles at work in the universe. This group will be moderated by Prof. David Ray.

New This Semester:
♦ Almost all books chosen from student suggestions and recommendations
♦ Much more fiction, as requested by students
♦ Six Honors College faculty and staff will serve as group moderators
♦ Two groups will be led by student moderators, with Honors College faculty only at first session and on stand-by as needed
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.