

## **Marblehead League Book Discussion Group 02/14/2020**

1. “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century” (2017) by Timothy Snyder. This is a tiny book with powerful insights from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and what citizens must do to push back against autocrats. Each chapter is a separate historical example, and a lesson such as “Believe in truth”, “Defend institutions”, and “Be as courageous as you can”. Democracy is not inevitable; this book provides insights into actions we can take to sustain it. Plainly written and highly recommended!
2. “Good Economics for Hard Times” (2019) by Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo. Written by two economic professors from M.I.T. who won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2019 for their work, the book describes a series of double blind studies focused at the people level and tests whether certain interventions alleviate social problems. Both positive and negative results are discussed, puncturing some of our “intuitively obvious” thoughts about education, poverty etc. The book is very readable not technical and shows the power of the science and economics to find solutions to social problems.
3. “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion” (2013) by Jonathan Haidt. This book, written by a moral psychologist, explores how humans make judgements about the world and the differing values that can determine which side of politics you choose, coloring every political argument. The author ties moral psychology to evolutionary psychology. It is slow and deep reading but worth it, according to numerous readers!
4. “Midnight in Chernobyl: The Untold Story of the World's Greatest Nuclear Disaster” (2020) by Adam Higginbotham. A complete account of the nuclear disaster that took place on April 26, 1986, written based on extensive archival research by the author. The four reactors at Chernobyl were viewed as the crowning achievement of Soviet technology. The breach happened during a scheduled test. The electricity did not come back on in time to restart cooling the reactor, leading to a complete meltdown. The Soviets did not admit or seek help in stopping the ongoing disaster from outside experts. Some view the disaster as linked with the ultimate dissolution of the Soviet Union, showing the limitation of a top-down authoritarian government. The only downside of the book are the numerous Russian names, sometimes had to keep track of. A true horror story!
5. “Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America” (2019) by Nancy MacLean. This book traces the Nobel –winning economist James Buchanan’s ideas, the Koch brothers, and Libertarianism. The book suggests the existence of a hidden campaign to disempower and dismember our democracy, viewing the wants of citizens as antithetical to capitalism. Not bedtime reading! Winner of several prizes. Citizen activist groups have sprung up to spread the message of this book.

6. “Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?” (2010) by Michael J. Sandel Our readers have recommended this book again and again. Written by a favorite Harvard professor, this book explores the basic tenants of moral philosophy as applied to the real world.
7. “Hold Still” by Sally Mann (2016) This is a memoir by a famous accomplished photographer coming to grips to her beloved roots in the South. At age 69, she explores photos, letters and other memorabilia as she reconstitutes her family history from the fading clues and reintegrates her own memories into the context of the South.
8. “A Single Thread: A Novel” (2019) by Tracy Chevalier A wonderful work of fiction about life in the 1930s in England of “surplus women”, when a generation of young men and fathers was lost in WWI. The main character finds she must break conventions of the time in this unusual environment.
9. “Farsighted: How We Make the Decisions That Matter the Most” by Steven Johnson, (2018) This nonfiction book explores how expert decision- makers make their choices and the skills we can develop to do the same.
10. “How to Be an Antiracist” by Ibram X. Kendi (2019) A nonfictional book that reveals over and over how we cannot just not be a racist, but we need to be antiracist to counter racism. Written by a young black man who, in a series of insights, comes to understand his own innate racism. Interestingly, the revelations could be applied to other “isms” that need to be dismantled. This was a mind-blowing book for a suburban woman reader that identifies racism in its many hidden and crippling forms and gives us ways out of the morass.
11. “Blowout: Corrupted Democracy, Rogue State Russia, and the Richest, Most Destructive Industry on Earth” (2019) by Rachel Maddow. Why are inhabitants of poor countries with rich deposits of oil and gas that are developed by multinational companies, worse off after the development? Why were oil and gas companies unprepared for massive spills? Why were the effects of fracking ignored? The fossil fuel industry’s actions in the U.S. and worldwide are explored.
12. “On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century” (2017) by Timothy Snyder A meditation on threats to democracy with examples of how a variety of attitudes and actions seen in the US today echo the darkest past of the 20th century.