

Marblehead League Book Discussion Group 4/30/19

1. "Born a Crime" by Trevor Noah. Trevor talks about growing up and surviving under apartheid in South Africa, as a mixed race person, not belonging to any group and the role his mother played in finding a way through a patriarchal and segregated society. The memoir is a tribute to his mother. It is entertaining and highly recommended.
2. "The First Conspiracy: The Secret Plot to Kill George Washington" by Brad Meltzer.
Written like a novel, the gripping action takes place between July 1775 and July 1776, when Washington was appointed head of the Continental Army. He had to hire the first Secret Service for protection. What a tenuous time for our young emerging country...excellent!
3. "Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation" by Stephen Johnson. The author's topic is how great ideas evolve and come about. He gives many examples, starting with Darwin. He discusses concepts that lead to great ideas such as "Adjacent Possible", "Importance of Networks". The author has also written a related book "Farsighted" about the ability to look ahead and make do-able plans for the future, which require diverse inputs, enlisting non-experts. Fascinating!
4. "Learn Better: Mastering the Skills for Success in Life, Business, and School, or How to Become an Expert in Just About Anything" by Alrich Boser. Author talks about meta-knowledge, of learning to learn, what you have to do to learn.
5. "The Overstory" discussed and highly recommended at a previous League book group and just won a Pulitzer Prize.
6. "1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus" by Charles C. Mann
Discusses the many groups of Native Americans that lived throughout the American continent in 1491, before Europeans. Entire populations disappeared without known reason with new discoveries being made about these cultures every year. There is a single record or diary of an explorer from 1600s with illustrations of Native Americans.
7. "Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland"
by Jonathan M. Metz. In the era of Donald Trump, many lower- and middle-class white Americans are drawn to politicians who pledge to make their lives great again. But as Dying of Whiteness shows, the policies that result actually place white Americans at ever-greater risk of sickness and death."
8. "Working" by Robert Caro. Caro is a gifted, meticulous biographer of Robert Moses, "The Power Broker" and Lyndon Johnson, "The Years of Lyndon Johnson", which is still incomplete. The first volume was published in 1982. "Working" describes his investigative methods, planning, writing and painstaking, rewriting. The focus is on power and how they obtained and used it. He has great insights about the 2 men, their accomplishments and idealism while disclosing nefarious ways they leveraged power. We should not let the Vietnam War diminish what LBJ achieved: Medicare and Medicaid, The Voting Rights Act, several civil liberties

and education bills and Head Start, a survivor of the War on Poverty. He was the rare President who knew how to use power for the benefit of the people.

9. "Blueprint" "Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society" by Nicholas A. Christakis. The author works at the Human Nature Lab at Yale. He posits the existence of a 'social suite' of human behaviors that are beneficial to humans and have been selected through evolution: love, friendship, cooperation, and decency. He "introduces the compelling idea that our genes affect not only our bodies and behaviors, but also the ways in which we make societies, ones that are surprisingly similar worldwide." This is an optimistic book that sees a positive arc of common humanity. He uses examples such as historical shipwrecks and asks what characteristics of the group allowed them to survive compared to shipwrecks that did not.
10. "Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936-1960" by V.O. Key, Jr. A riveting introduction about narcissism and intolerance that sounded like a clarion warning from 50 years ago. It is still available from booksellers.
11. "Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life" by David Brooks. "Brooks explores the four commitments that define a life of meaning and purpose: to a spouse and family, to a vocation, to a philosophy or faith, and to a community." in a society that celebrates individual achievement and total freedom, some discover when they have climbed that peak, it is meaningless and empty. They then seek to climb the second mountain which is service and connection to others.
12. "Rising Out of Hatred: The Awakening of a Former White Nationalist" by Eli Saslow. A home-schooled white nationalist, whose father founded Storm Front, leaves to attend college at New College in Florida, facing for the first time those he has been taught to hate. The book traces the reaction of other students to his reputation and beliefs and the attempts by some to include him in their circle of friends. Dereck Black eventually renounces white nationalism. This was a riveting book that I could not put down. As in other accounts, it takes long term caring and being in relationship with others to break down the wall of hate. Excellent, provocative book.