



# Interesting Nonfiction Books: the Best of 2021

At the Portland Library

**Kolbert, Elizabeth**

**304.28 KOL**

***Under a White Sky: the Nature of the Future***

Kolbert takes a hard look at the new world we are creating. Along the way, she meets biologists who are trying to preserve the world's rarest fish, which lives in a single tiny pool in the middle of the Mojave; engineers who are turning carbon emissions to stone in Iceland; Australian researchers who are trying to develop a "super coral" that can survive on a hotter globe; & physicists who are contemplating shooting tiny diamonds into the stratosphere to cool the earth. She examines how the very sorts of interventions that have imperiled our planet are increasingly seen as the only hope for its salvation. Inspiring, terrifying, and darkly comic, an utterly original examination of the challenges we face.

**Wilkerson, Isabel**

**305.5122 WIL**

***Caste: the Origins of our Discontents***

A masterful portrait of an unseen phenomenon in America, Wilkerson explores, through an immersive, deeply researched narrative and stories about real people, how America today and throughout its history has been shaped by a hidden caste system, a rigid hierarchy of human rankings. Beyond race, class, or other factors, there is a powerful caste system that influences people's lives and behavior and the nation's fate. Linking the caste systems of America, India, and Nazi Germany, Wilkerson explores eight pillars that underlie caste systems across civilizations, including divine will, bloodlines, stigma, and more.

**Smith, Clint**

**306.362 SMI**

***How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America***

Beginning in his hometown of New Orleans, Clint Smith leads the reader on an unforgettable tour of monuments and landmarks—those that are honest about the past and those that are not—that offer an intergenerational story of how slavery has been central in shaping our nation's collective history, and ourselves. A deeply researched and transporting exploration of the legacy of slavery and its imprint on centuries of American history.

**Khan, Yasmin**

**641.5956 KHA**

***Ripe Figs: Recipes & Stories from Turkey, Greece and Cyprus***

Recipes inspired by Khan's travels within each country, as well as the people she met and shared meals with along the way, many of them migrants and refugees. Those people and experiences are the subjects of essays interspersed throughout the book's sections, which are organized not by country but by dish type — breakfast, breads and grains, meze, mains, and desserts — underscoring Khan's depiction of the Eastern Mediterranean as a borderless region shaped by migration.

**Didion, Joan**

**814.54 DID**

***Let Me Tell You What I Mean***

Each essay showcases Didion at her very best, spotlighting her sharp-witted reporting, her steely narrative gaze, and her commanding gifts as a prose stylist. Anthologized together in this compact volume, these peerless essays remind us just why Didion looms so large in the pantheon of American literature. Didion touches on topics ranging from newspapers to the fantasy of San Simeon, to not getting into Stanford. In "Why I Write," Didion ponders the act of writing: "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see and what it means these essays are acutely and brilliantly observed. Each piece is classic Didion: incisive, bemused, and stunningly prescient.

**MacDonald, Helen**

**824.912 MAC**

***Vesper Flights***

A collection of MacDonald's best loved essays, along with new pieces on topics ranging from nostalgia for a vanishing countryside to the tribulations of farming ostriches to her own private vespers while trying to fall asleep. Meditating on notions of captivity and freedom, immigration and flight, Helen invites us into her most intimate experiences: observing the massive migration of songbirds from the top of the Empire State Building, watching tens of thousands of cranes in Hungary, seeking the last golden orioles in Suffolk's poplar forests, the strangeness of birds' nests, and the unexpected guidance and comfort we find when watching wildlife.

**Saunders, George**

**891.7 SAU**

***A Swim in a Pond in the Rain: In Which Four Russians Give a Master Class on Writing, Reading, and Life***

A deep exploration not just of how great writing works but of how the mind itself works while reading, and of how the reading and writing of stories make genuine connection possible.

**Hong, Cathy Park**

**BIOG Hong**

***Minor Feelings: an Asian American Reckoning***

Poet and essayist Cathy Park Hong fearlessly and provocatively blends memoir, cultural criticism, and history to expose fresh truths about racialized consciousness in America. Part memoir and part cultural criticism, this collection is vulnerable, humorous, and provocative. Binding these essays together is Hong's theory of "minor feelings." As the daughter of Korean immigrants, Cathy Park Hong grew up steeped in shame, suspicion, and melancholy. She would later understand that these "minor feelings" occur when American optimism contradicts your own reality—when you believe the lies you're told about your own racial identity.

**McConaughey, Matthew**

**BIOG McConaughey**

***Greenlights***

It's a guide to catching more greenlights—and to realizing that the yellows and reds eventually turn green too giving permission to do new things. His core philosophy of what he calls "livin": "Throughout "Greenlights," the doctrine of "livin" manifests itself through aphorisms, bumper stickers and poetry and puns.

**Tyson, Cicely**

**BIOG Tyson**

***Just as I Am: a memoir***

This is Cicely's truth, plain and unvarnished. The actress who has been blessed to grace the stage and screen for six decades. She is a daughter and a mother, a sister and a friend, a child of God divinely guided by his hand. And in her ninth decade, a woman who, at long last, has something meaningful to say. She speaks about her life as well as her abiding, guiding, life long faith; the single constant in her almost century long life.

**Trethewey, Natasha**

**BIOG Trethewey**

***Memorial Drive: a Daughter's Memoir***

Pulitzer Prize-winning Trethewey explores this profound experience of pain, loss, and grief as an entry point into understanding the tragic course of her mother's life and the way her own life has been shaped by a legacy of fierce love and resilience. Moving through her mother's history in the deeply segregated South and through her own girlhood as a "child of miscegenation" in Mississippi, she plumbs her sense of dislocation and displacement in the lead-up to the harrowing crime that took place on Memorial Drive in Atlanta in 1985.

**Payne, Les**

**BIOG X, Malcolm**

***The Dead are Arising: the Life of Malcolm X***

This historic biography, 30 years in the writing and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, conjures a never-before-seen world of its protagonist, a work whose title is inspired by a phrase Malcolm X used when he saw his Hartford followers stir with purpose, as if the dead were truly arising, to overcome the obstacles of racism. Setting Malcolm's life not only within the Nation of Islam but against the larger backdrop of American history, the book traces the life of one of the twentieth century's most politically relevant figures "from street criminal to devoted moralist and revolutionary."

**June 2021** *Portland Library 20 Freestone Avenue*

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