

Favorites

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“The Happiest Man on Earth,” by Eddie Jaku

When someone suggests to me that I should read a book on the Holocaust, I usually pass. Mostly because it is such a sad topic. But this book although sad, raw and real, proved me wrong.

From the moment that Eddie referred to me as his friend I was hooked. From Buchenwald and Auschwitz to escapes, near-death experiences and starting over in a new country, Eddie shows us what it is like to hold on to love and friendship.

“Why argue with the people you love? Go out on the street, stop a person littering and argue with them.” This book took me a few hours to read through, and although it was a quick read the story is no less amazing. The amount of times that fate intervened when Eddie was almost at his end is amazing. I loved it when we got to the end of a chapter of the most harrowing circumstances to hear Eddie say why he was thankful. He had hope and he was still alive.

“Every breath is a gift. Life is beautiful if you let it be. Happiness is in your hands.”

In 2013 Eddie was awarded the Order of Australia medal, and since arriving in Australia has worked with the Australian Jewish community. After everything that Eddie has been through, the number one thing I learned is that there is always hope. He never once lost that. On speaking about the horrors of the Holocaust and sharing his story, Eddie had this to say: “If I get through to even one person, it is worth it. And I hope that is you, my new friend. I hope this story goes with you.”

Kayleigh Baryo,

Branch manager, Wright City branch

Adult non-fiction, autobiographies



“The Stories Behind the Stories,” by Danielle Higley

I came upon this book while shelving at work one day and found the cover and concept intriguing. It is a book about popular children’s stories and the authors’ inspiration behind those stories. I also like the collage artwork on each page. It is unique. You will learn the behind-the-scenes stories of twenty-nine of the most beloved children’s classics. Even though this is considered a children’s book I really think adults will find it most interesting. I got the warm feeling of nostalgia while reading about my favorite books as a child. I have always loved learning about how a creative person comes upon their ideas, what inspires them and why.

You will get a behind-the-scenes look at each author’s life and how that brought them to the point of writing some of our most loved books. I particularly loved reading about “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” and Eric Carle. Carle lived what most would consider a very hard upbringing during wartime but turned his experiences into a positive. I found his story uplifting. He longed for color and enrolled in art school after the war. His memories about nature walks with his father and looking for insects brought us a colorful book about transformation and hope.

Another one of my favorite tales was about “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.” Roald Dahl went to school next to the Cadbury Chocolate Factory and the students were given samples of their newest creations to try. That peaked Dahl’s imagination of what the inventing room would look like inside the factory and Willy Wonka was born. There are so many fun facts in this collection. I think reading this will make you appreciate some of our nostalgic children’s story favorites even more. This is one of the most interesting books I have read in a long time, I hope you enjoy it too. The book’s author also mentioned she wrote it during the pandemic quarantine, so you really never know when inspiration will strike.

Melissa Garber

Adult programmer, Union branch

Juvenile non-fiction, anecdotes, juvenile literature



“Drowning: The Rescue of Flight 1421,” by T.J. Newman

Six minutes after takeoff, flight 1421 suffers from an engine failure and crashes into the ocean.

Many lives are lost, except 12 people who stay on the sealed aircraft with a dwindling amount of oxygen. Among the passengers and crew that elected to stay on board the sinking aircraft are several adults, a father and daughter, and an unaccompanied minor. The father is an engineer and knows more about the physics of the sinking plane than the crew. His soon-to-be ex-wife, Chris, is a highly experienced underwater welder with a crew of workers. They had been near the crash site working and become involved in the rescue efforts. The stranded passengers try to assist as best they can from inside the sunken plane while the rescuers who are topside are trying everything they can to reach the survivors before they become more fatalities. In between attempts, the survivors write down their regrets and overcome their own struggles and stories. On the surface, rescuers have to come to terms with past life-altering events while continuing to work on the rescue.

This novel is one that I couldn't put down. “Drowning” is definitely a plot-driven story focusing on the events and has a pretty fast-paced feel to it. She keeps the anxiety ramping up throughout the whole book. “Drowning” has some really well-written character development. The back stories of the passengers on the plane are interesting and fairly quick, so they don't slow the pace of the book down (even though there are 12 of them!). Even the people who are on the rescue diving teams have short back stories that really explain their drive in the rescue efforts. The stories are happy, sad, funny, and heartbreaking.

This book has been optioned for a feature length film and I'm very curious about who will be cast and what the movie will look like. I am excited to watch it. I will also be reading T.J. Newman's first novel, “Falling,” sometime in 2024. I would love to discuss the ending with anyone who has read this book. I still have questions!

Renny Canaday
Branch manager,
Union branch
Adult fiction, thrillers



“Pandora’s Jar: Women in the Greek Myths,” by Natalie Haynes

I normally find myself solidified in works of fiction when it comes to my personal reading preference. When people ask me what I like to read, I normally explain that I love to read a lot of fiction, but would like to broaden my horizons with some more non-fiction books.

Natalie Haynes’ “Pandora’s Jar” was a perfect gateway into the realm of non-fiction. In this book, Haynes spotlights some of Greek mythology’s most well-known female characters (Pandora, Jocasta, Helen, Medusa, The Amazons, Clytemnestra, Eurydice, Phaedra, Medea, and Penelope).

As someone that’s been doing a lot of looking at Greek mythology recently, I figured myself fairly familiar with each of these characters. However, often the challenge with these plays and stories is that they’re such ancient tales that their stories have evolved over the years. Take for example Helen. Haynes explains that throughout the years, the reasoning for deserting her lawful husband for the Trojan prince Paris has changed. In some retellings, she is stricken by a sudden love for Paris thanks to Aphrodite. In others, she is kidnapped by Paris, or sometimes a clone of her is taken back to Troy. These motivations drastically change the perception of how we viewed Helen way back when, and how we view her today in modern retellings of the same story. Pandora, who brought down a jar that contained a great evil to the world of mortals, is also scrutinized. Was her jar truly meant to contain all the great tragedies, or was it merely symbolic of change in a new world? Haynes demonstrates once more her extensive background in scholarly studies of Greek mythology in this book which kept me coming back for more. I really enjoyed this read, and it was written in such a digestible way that it has opened my eyes to the world of nonfiction books, rather than make me shy away. If you enjoyed reading “The Iliad” or “The Odyssey,” I believe you would really enjoy “Pandora’s Jar,” which has received praise from other authors such as Margaret Atwood and Madaline Miller.

Kaitlynn Cescutti

Library assistant, administration
Adult non-fiction, Greek mythology



"The Comic Book Lesson," by Mark Crilley

I may not be a comic book nut, but I am interested in how storytellers and illustrators work. I want to know what a creative person's process is. Specifically, I want to understand everything about what makes a great reading experience. Mark Crilley delivered for me in a big way with "The Drawing Lesson" and knocked it out of the park in "The Comic Book Lesson."

It was an exciting, funny and heartwarming story. Just as a standalone story, it is excellent and well-written. The art was engaging and pulled its weight. It helped to tell Emily's story visually and seamlessly with the dialogue.

I was expecting the author to jump right into the nuts and bolts of his process. Instead, Mark invited me to join young Emily on her creative journey. Emily has a big story idea knocking around the dusty spaces of her head. Like Dorothy in Oz, little Emily finds three friends who mentor her along her way to authorship.

The characters are so fun and relatable. They feel real, and their struggles make the moments of success so much more exciting. Emily and her friends have distinctive personalities and experiences. Each character adds a new layer to the story, building up to a touching ending and a tear-jerking epilogue.

I read it twice and found even more valuable tips and examples. "The Comic Book Lesson" very carefully guides you right through the book. It led me from the first lesson on how to draw characters consistently, right down to the nitty-gritty of finding the purpose of a story and allowing it to shape the reader's experience.

Overall, it is an exceptional genre-blending book. Check it out at your local library, or do what I did and add it to your personal library.

Danae Valdez

Library assistant, administration
Young adult non-fiction, comic
book techniques and authorship



“The Fright Before Christmas: Surviving Krampus and Other Yuletide Monsters, Witches, and Ghosts,” by Jeff Belanger

Christmas is not my favorite holiday. Around Black Friday each year, my heart (like the Grinch’s) shrinks to “two sizes too small,” and stays that way until at least mid-January. I think a lot of people feel the same. The glitz, the rampant consumerism, the lack of sunlight... it just gets to you.

But I do like spooky stuff. So Jeff Belanger’s “The Fright Before Christmas” sounded like something I could identify with, especially since he opens his prologue with his own Grinch-like rant about how the stupid plastic wreath keeps falling off his front door. Belanger catalogs numerous cultural traditions, including the Nordic holiday of Yule, ancient Rome’s Saturnalia, and – of course – the observance of Christ’s birth, which all originated during the winter solstice: That bleak time of year when the Earth’s tilt causes the shortest days and longest nights. Out of those long, dark nights inevitably arose legends of creepy-crawlies and fearsome beasts.

Paranormal entities aside, winter is a terrifying time of year. In the days before supermarkets and central heating, winter equaled starvation and death. Holiday feasting was a last hoorah before hunkering down with nothing to do but think about how skinny your cows were, or how your roof might collapse under the weight of all that snow.

Across this dismal landscape stalked imaginary monsters like the Grýla, the Karankoncolos, and the Yule Cat: Personifications of the very real fears these yarn spinners faced.

Some of them aren’t malevolent; they’re mischievous, or just weird. My favorite chapter was about Iceland’s Yule Lads (there are 13 of them, with names like “Door Slammer” and “Spoon Licker” to describe the specific type of havoc they are assigned to wreak in your home).

Some of them are all but forgotten; some are completely new to us Westerners. Although, Krampus is popular again in pop culture. And Belsnickel might be making a comeback. (Dwight Schrute dressed up as him for a Christmas party a decade or so ago.) Belanger dwells on some dark topics, but arrives ultimately at a cheery conclusion: “I need only the magic of this holiday to work on me, to understand that the sun is coming back since the winter solstice took place, that brighter days lie ahead....” The magic of the holiday didn’t quite work on me. But this book did make my season spookier, and therefore a lot more fun.

Erica Mosley,
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Adult non-fiction, Christmas folklore, Christmas history



"Death in the Aegean," by M. A. Monnin

I especially enjoyed this novel because of the setting. The author's descriptions of the Greek Isles were so beautiful, I felt like I was there in person, enjoying the sun and azure blue waters. I have always loved archeology and history, so this mystery set around the disappearance of a rare gold statue, tied in with the murder of a young wealthy bride was right up my alley!

Financial wizard Stephanie Adams goes to Greece on a long-needed vacation and ends up tangled in a web of deception, greed and murder. Along the way, she meets a German tourist who appears to be more than just a stationery store owner. Falling for him might be the last thing she ever does!

"Death in the Aegean" reminds me a little of Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Orient Express"—there are interesting characters, beautiful settings and an intricate plot that will keep you guessing. Who murdered Emma—her husband, who stands to gain all of her money? The travel blogger who had her career destroyed by Emma? The British backpacking thief who coveted Emma's jewelry? Did the theft of the Akrotiri Snake Goddess statue have anything to do with the murder? Stephanie Adams suspects so. Can she, with the help of her mysterious German tourist friend, solve the mystery of the stolen gold statue as well as find a murderer? Will she find the love of her life or will he turn out to be the villain? You will have to read the book to find out what happens!

Lori Jane Perdew

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fiction

