



Samantha's Best Books List for Summer

Books that let you explore the exotic

Travels in Siberia / Ian Frazier

957 FRAZIER

In this unconventional travelogue, Ian Frazier describes his experience of Siberia. The narrative lopes along from descriptions of multiple trips he has made over a 10 year span to his research on Russian history and geography to his impressions of Siberian current events and then back to his analysis of just why Siberia holds such enduring interest for him. Imagine a land where Mongols rode the steppes for days at a time, drinking blood from the necks of the horses they ride for sustenance; where prisoners of every class and kind abound; where a modern-day wedding party can stop highway traffic for hours on end as they force travelers to stop and celebrate with them ; where (according to the author) the most beautiful women can be found in every town. The author explores this land, which comprises 1/7 of the earth's land mass, in its brutal winter and buggy summer, and it is by turns amazing, horrifying and sometimes just plain strange – but truly fascinating.

The shadow of the wind / Carlos Ruiz Zafón

FIC RUIZZAFO

Daniel wakes one morning to find that, to his horror, he can no longer remember his dead mother's face. In an effort to comfort him, Daniel's father takes across the city to a mysterious place known to only a few dedicated bibliophiles -- the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. According to custom, initiates are allowed to choose one book from the Cemetery, which they are then bound to protect throughout their lives. Fate compels Daniel to choose a book called *The Shadow of the Wind*. This act sets in motion a series of events which will forever alter Daniel's life. Zafón's plotlines are incredibly elaborate, but there is a sense of inevitability about the events of the novel; he lets the suspense build to the point that it is almost unbearable, then he doles out yet another clue to the mystery. This fast-paced literary thriller filled with fascinating characters and a truly spooky atmosphere. *Shadow of the Wind* is the first in a planned trilogy. The prequel, *The Angel's Game*, is also available at the library.

The arrival / Shaun Tan

YP FIC TAN

A man leaves his family reluctantly and travels alone to a new city; in it, he finds strange buildings, strange creatures, people with strange habits. He must use his wits and perseverance to discover the rules of this new place, in order to make his way here and build a new life that his wife and daughter can join. In this wordless book, Shaun Tan conveys all this through gorgeous sepia-toned illustrations of the weird and bewildering foreign city. That he can do this without the benefit of any text whatsoever is a truly awe-inspiring achievement.



Books that let you revel in your geekiness

The brief, wondrous life of Oscar Wao / Junot Diaz

FIC DIAZ

Diaz won the Pulitzer Prize in 2008 for his account of the life and death of painfully awkward, overweight, Dominican-American sci-fi fanboy Oscar. Oscar loves women but, in general, they don't love him back. The novel is by turns hilarious, profane, heart-breaking and true. The characters are so vivid that when you're finished, you'll feel like you've met them in person. The author seamlessly weaves the history of the Dominican Republic and the effects of the awful Trujillo dictatorship on the Dominican diaspora into his narrative.

At home: a short history of private life / Bill Bryson

643.1 BRYSON

In this ambitious book, Bryson applies his prodigious interest in the world around him to the domestic life. He uses his own home, a former rectory built during the Victorian period in Norfolk, England, as a framework for his book. In the book, he "walks" from room to room, using its contents and functions as a jumping-off point for his research into the history of mundane objects, architecture, landscaping and social life. For instance, his foray into the bathroom allows him to meander through the history of plumbing in the city of London, and his mouse-infested library inspires him to research the humble mousetrap. The breadth of Bryson's interests are truly awe-inspiring, and he has a way of illuminating these small corners of history that make the reader realize just how fascinating the development of chimneys, or electricity for the home, or the cure for scurvy, really can be. Seriously.

Animals in translation : using the mysteries of autism to decode animal behavior / Temple Grandin

591.5 GRANDIN

Temple Grandin is a fascinating personality. She is an autistic professor of animal science at Colorado State University, as well as a well-known author and the subject of an Emmy-winning bio-pic. She is an animal-rights activist who is also a consultant to the meat industry regarding methods to make animal slaughter more humane. She feels that her status as an autistic person gives her special insight into the behavior of animals: that many animals have thought processes similar in nature to those of autistic people. In this book, Grandin explains current research on animal behavior and psychology in a very readable way, even for the lay person. Throughout the book, she includes sections on how her experience as an autistic person helps elucidate the research and how it compares to the animal mind.

Books that let you look in on other people's lives

Blood, bones & butter: the inadvertent education of a reluctant chef / Gabrielle Hamilton

B HAMILTON

Hamilton is the chef-owner Prune, one of New York City's most celebrated restaurants. In this memoir, she describes her rough-and-tumble beginnings in the food industry and in life. She has a refreshingly off-beat perspective on love, family and the pursuit of pleasure. All of these things, along



with her non-traditional career path, coalesce in her approach to food and eating. Be forewarned, Hamilton was no angel in her early years.

Look me in the eye: my life with Asperger's / John Elder Robison

362.196 ROBISON

John Elder Robison is Augusten Burroughs' older brother. His memoir covers different ground than his brother's book; there is a significant age difference in the brothers, plus Robison's status as an Aspergian gives him a much different take on life and his surroundings than his sibling. The writing is a little choppy, but after a bit I got used to the flow of it, and I think the funny rhythm actually helped me to understand how Robison thinks. He is surprisingly funny in an extremely deadpan way. Despite his unusual way of expressing himself, Robison is very self-aware. I found this book to be quite inspiring. Robison had a rough time as a kid and an adolescent, between his crazy parents and his Aspergian personality. He did not succeed in the normal ways early in life, but he somehow didn't let that discourage him from pursuing his natural talents and he ended up becoming a successful human being anyway. He is not the same as most of the other folks in his life, but he seems to be okay with that. Very cool.

Books with gutsy chicks

Runemarks / Joanne Harris

YP FIC HARRIS

Young Maddy Smith lives in an alternate Europe which is ruled by The Order, a theocratic group that forbids the use of imagination, magic, or any sort of general quirkiness. Poor Maddy is endowed with all three of these qualities in spades, in addition to a mysterious runemark on the palm of her hand and a mentor called One-Eye who bears a suspicious resemblance to a certain Norse god. Maddy and a slew of goblins and gods embark on an epic quest to fulfill their destinies in this story of what happens *after* Ragnarok. High adventure, sly humor and allusions to Norse mythology abound in this tale from the author of *Chocolat*.

In the garden of Iden / Kage Baker

SF BAKER

This is the first in Baker's Company science fiction series. Somewhere far in the future, a mysterious, highly profitable Company has discovered how to transform people into immortal cyborgs and send them back in time, where they can tweak history just the smallest amount in order to make huge amounts of money for the Company in the future. The Botanist Mendoza is just such an operative, working in the 16th century to save a certain plant from extinction that will prove to cure cancer far, far in the future. Running afoul of the Company's careful plans, however, Mendoza meets her destiny in young religious firebrand Nicholas Harpole, and oh, how the sparks fly.

The last report on the miracles at Little No Horse / Louise Erdrich

FIC ERDRICH

Father Damien Modeste is the priest at the Ojibwe Indian reservation, Little No Horse. He is getting



old, and despite his best efforts, his buried secrets have begun to worm their way to the surface. Father Damien is a woman who has been living for the last half century disguised as a man. Now, at the end of his life, he worries that all the good he has done as a priest will be undone when his secret is discovered. The characters in this novel are perfect – Erdrich writes them with deeply felt compassion and her sense of humor bubbles up every now and then, just at the right time.

Outlander / Diana Gabaldon

FIC GABALDON

Just after the end of World War II, British combat nurse Claire Randall travels to Scotland for a second honeymoon. While out collecting botanical specimens in a stone circle on a Scottish hillside, Claire is somehow whisked back in time to the 19th century. She ends up smack in the middle of a skirmish between British soldiers and a group of Scottish Highlanders. Claire is a smart woman, full of sass and vinegar, and once she figures out what is going on, quickly acclimates to her new surroundings, and to the burly young Highlander who takes her under his wing. Trouble is, she's still married back in 1945...

The windup girl / Paolo Bacigalupi

SF BACIGALU

In a dystopian Bangkok of the future, the oceans have risen, oil is scarce, genetic engineering of plants, animals and humans has run amok and the main currency is the calorie. In this broken city we find the following : Anderson Cooper, an American “calorie man” who searches for favorable genetic mutations in the local fruit to steal for his corporation, Jaidee, a civil servant of unusual integrity amidst the corruption of the Thai government, and Emiko, the genetically engineered “windup girl” of the book’s title, who is both hated and desired by most “natural” humans. Through the fates of these three characters, the author explores possible ramifications of human meddling with the building blocks of nature, while creating a darkly fantastic world of freaks and wonders.

The blind assassin / Margaret Atwood

FIC ATWOOD

This book weaves together three different stories: the first is the present-day Iris Griffen, an elderly but feisty Canadian widow. The second story is of Iris’ childhood and her passionate romance with a socialist agitator on the run from the law. Worked into the frame of both of these narratives nests a third story, a pulp fiction sci-fi story about two lovers caught in a hostile alien world. One of Atwood’s strengths as a writer is how much she makes you care about her characters, despite their flaws. Atwood’s intelligent sense of humor pops up throughout the story, adding a bit of relief to the tragic narrative.

The Spellman files/ Lisa Lutz

MYS LUTZ

Isabel Spellman is the black sheep of her family. She drinks excessively, can’t keep her mouth shut, and engages in the occasional act of “creative vandalism.” She is, however, an excellent practitioner



private investigative work, which happens to be the family business. This madcap quasi-mystery centers around the turmoil that ensues when Isabel secretly decides to start dating a nice, respectable dentist. Of course her family is immediately suspicious and can't help themselves from spying on her and each other. Hijinks ensue.

Books that come close to home

Parrot and Olivier in America / Peter Carey

FIC CAREY

Parrot and Olivier are mismatched partners if ever any did exist. Parrot is a rough-and-tumble middle-aged Englishman employed a French nobleman; Olivier is the spoiled, near-sighted son of French aristocrats. They hate each other on sight, yet through the machinations of their employer and parents, respectively, they are forced together on a voyage to the nascent country of the United States. Olivier is supposed to avoid having his head chopped off; Parrot is to keep Olivier out of trouble. This novel is loosely based on the journey of Alexis de Tocqueville that produced *Democracy in America*. It contains delightful historical details about the early period of our country's nationhood, as well as likeable characters and a liberal dose of Peter Carey's sly sense of humor.

The tin roof blowdown / James Lee Burke

MYS BURKE

In this entry of the Dave Robicheaux series, Burke explores the trauma and aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the surrounding area. Dave, a New Iberian policeman, and his hard-drinking, hard-living buddy Clete Purcell get involved in the case of a looter murdered during the storm, which leads the friends to the door of one of New Orleans' most vicious crime bosses. Burke's hard-boiled mystery series does contain some tough characters and a level of violence, but the author takes the time to develop his characters, flaws and all. He also explores the relationships of race, money and power in the South and in Louisiana in particular. The city of New Orleans is almost like another character in this book – the reader can feel the heat rising off the freeways and smell the muck of the flooded city in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Brownsville / Oscar Casares

FIC CASARES

Each story in this collection is a perfect snapshot of life on the Texas border. This collection of short stories takes place in Brownsville, Texas. Casares makes the everyday lives of his characters strangely compelling– the neighbor who does not return the tools you lend, the jealous spouse, the adult child who just can't get it together and move out of the house already. The author approaches his characters with a wonderfully dry sense of humor. The dialogue in these stories is spot-on – the characters are perfect replicas of people one might find in any blue collar South Texas town.

