

Essential reading: Books with lessons to live by

ASU engineering faculty and staff share their recommendations

By Joe Kullman, ASU News
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"Books are the training weights of the mind." — Epictetus, Greek Stoic philosopher

This is the 14th edition of the annual Essential Reading feature, which offers book recommendations by faculty and staff members of Arizona State University's [Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering](#).

Contributors have been asked to choose works of either nonfiction or fiction that they think can provide students with valuable lessons. The book choices offer everything from simple, practical advice to deep philosophical and psychological perspectives on a range of topics, especially pertinent to students' careers and lives.

'Slow Productivity' by Cal Newport

Recommended by [Tiffany Bao](#), assistant professor in the School of Computing and Augmented Intelligence

In a world that is constantly pushing us to move faster, this book offers a refreshing perspective: the value of slowing down.

It doesn't simply advocate for a slower pace — it gives you practical tips you can start using right away to focus on what truly matters to you, both personally and professionally.

After applying its advice, I've found myself more energized and engaged in both life and work. Plus, it's an easy and enjoyable read — you can listen to it while jogging, working out or even cooking.

'Ego Is the Enemy' by Ryan Holiday

Recommended by [Umberto Celano](#), associate professor in the School of Electrical, Computer and Energy Engineering

This is a book I wish I had discovered much earlier. It's the kind of work that powerfully illuminates our inherent biases and the often-irrational forces that shape our actions.

Ego particularly emerges as a subtle yet potent enemy, hindering our progress and understanding. This book serves as a guide to transcending the limitations imposed by ego, fostering self-awareness and revealing the opportunities we miss due to the ego's influence.

While it significantly impacts learning and personal development, this book's insights also extend to improving relationships, health and overall well-being. I wish I had read it during my college years.

'Tuesdays with Morrie' by Mitch Albom

Recommended by [Hahnna Christianson](#), Fulton Schools Dean's Office supervisor

This memoir recounts the author's weekly visits with his former college professor, Morrie Schwartz, who is dying from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis.

Through their conversations, Morrie imparts profound lessons on life, love and finding meaning in the face of mortality.

The book beautifully captures their bond and the wisdom Morrie shares in his final days. I read this book as a teenager, and it greatly impacted my perspective on life. It offers timeless insights on how to live a more fulfilling and compassionate life and shares a touching reminder to cherish relationships and focus on what truly matters.

'We Are Legion (We Are Bob)' by Dennis E. Taylor

The following two are recommended by [Matthew Green](#), associate professor in the School for Engineering of Matter, Transport and Energy

The book describes the exploration of the universe, driven by "conscious" AI.

The story intertwines fascinating science fiction and a future universe that seems not implausible. The audiobook is really entertaining, and this was a fun book to listen to when I needed to unplug.

I really loved the nerdiness as well as the potential lessons about how nuclear energy and AI evolve.

'Angel' by Jason Calacanis

This is a guide to how to become an angel investor, offering an overview of how to evaluate markets, company founders, other investors and more.

It provides a fascinating peek into the brain of a very successful investor. It was recommended by a colleague who started her own company.

Given the interest at ASU in innovation and entrepreneurship, this book can help you understand how to navigate fundraising and interacting with investors by learning the approach used on the other side of the table.

'A Brief History of Time' by Stephen Hawking

Recommended by [Vikram Kodibagkar](#), professor in the School of Biological and Health Systems Engineering

This is a landmark work in popular science that explores the nature of the universe, time and the laws of physics in a way accessible to the general reader.

I first read this book when I was in my late high school years. It is probably one of the few books that I had trouble putting down before finishing. It solidified my passion for science and physics in particular, inadvertently leading me to where I am now.

Hawking takes incredibly complex ideas in cosmological physics and explains them in a way that's clear, inspiring and even fun for young readers. Hawking traces the development of key scientific theories, from Aristotle and Newton to Einstein and quantum mechanics, explaining concepts like space-time, the Big Bang, black holes and the uncertainty principle.

He also discusses newer ideas like string theory and the possibility of a "theory of everything" that could unify general relativity and quantum physics. It challenges readers to think deeply about the cosmos and our place in it, ultimately suggesting that understanding the universe is within reach of human scientific inquiry.

'The Boys in the Cave' by Matt Gutman

Recommended by [Alana Labelle](#), lab manager in the School of Biological and Health Systems Engineering

This book chronicles the 2018 Thai cave rescue of 12 boys — ages 11 to 16 — and their soccer coach.

After soccer practice, the group rode their bikes to a cave and explored it. That afternoon, the rainy season arrived early and suddenly, trapping them in the cave. Nine days later, after a three-hour scuba dive through 1.5 miles of twists, turns and tight squeezes by two professional cave divers, the boys and their coach were found.

Remarkably, they were alive and in good spirits, but oxygen was dwindling in the cave, heavier rains were on the way and they did not have the expertise to cave-dive out. The story of their rescue reveals lessons of leadership, both inspiring and appallingly inadequate.

The story also speaks to engineers and innovators. Cave rescues are high risk because there are limited options to reach and rescue those who are trapped, lost or stranded. Many rescue plans and approaches were considered in this case, but only a very high-risk rescue was suitable. This book encourages us all to continue our work in innovation.

'The Cave' by José Saramago

Recommended by [Jean Larson](#), associate research professor in the School of Sustainable Engineering and the Built Environment

Portuguese Nobel Prize winner José Saramago is my most beloved author. I recommend all his books, and "The Cave" might be my favorite. It draws inspiration from Plato's famous allegory of the cave, using it as a philosophical framework to explore themes of illusion, reality and enlightenment.

It follows Cipriano, a potter who deals with the rejection of his craft by the Center, a massive shopping complex that is all-controlling. Out of necessity, he moves into the Center with his daughter and her husband, finds a runaway dog (names it Found) and discovers something underneath the Center that changes everything.

This book offers a powerful reflection on modern society's relationship with technology, consumerism and conformity. Saramago's unique narrative style and thought-provoking themes encourage critical thinking and a deeper appreciation for the value of individuality and tradition.

'The Only One Left' by Todd Ritter

The following three are recommended by [Joana Sipe](#), assistant professor in the School of Integrated Engineering

This gothic thriller set in the 1980s involves a hospice nurse preparing to take care of a woman accused of murdering her family members many decades earlier. When I read mysteries, I often try to guess the end. The ending of this story is as unexpected, cinematic and as entertaining as they get.

'Dare to Lead' by Brené Brown

As a new assistant professor starting a lab group, I see Dr. Brené Brown's book as essential reading for everyone working as a member of a team.

Based on her BRAVING model — boundaries, reliability, accountability, integrity, nonjudgment and generosity — Brown emphasizes the importance of being a compassionate, vulnerable and daring leader who lives by those values by choosing courage over comfort.

'Laudato si' by Pope Francis

Pope Francis, who recently passed away, describes the interconnectedness of the public and the environment, highlighting how environmental problems are often intertwined with social injustices. It's a call to action for everyone against environmental degradation. As an environmental health engineer, this is a big motivation for my career and values.

'Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World' by David Epstein

Recommended by [Binil Starly](#), director and professor in the School of Manufacturing Systems and Networks

I cherish this book because it has illuminated both my strengths and weaknesses. Though I once believed that being a “jack of all trades” was a liability, I have repeatedly found that my ability to integrate insights from diverse fields — ranging from engineering to business and economics — has proven invaluable.

This multifaceted perspective has empowered me to innovate, think of out-of-the-box solutions, engage with varied stakeholders and approach challenges with a comprehensive, systems-thinking mindset.

'AI Snake Oil' by Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor

Recommended by [Darcia Wilkinson](#), assistant professor in The Polytechnic School

Artificial intelligence has become such a ubiquitous, vague and convoluted term. Ask the average person what AI means, and you will get responses that reflect confusion, excitement, fear and a mix of other emotions.

“AI Snake Oil” takes a delicate approach to demystifying AI and dissecting the headlines that contribute to misunderstanding and misplaced AI hype by advocating for a more critical understanding of AI.

The authors provide definitions of what AI is and is not by categorizing the definitions into two subcategories: predictive AI, which uses data to assess future outcomes, and generative AI, which learns patterns from past data points to suggest probable answers based on prompts from users.

The book dives into real-world examples of how AI can be both helpful and harmful and provides clarity about how people could navigate hype and sales pitches to better understand the complex social context surrounding AI.

This is a good read for those who want a deeper understanding of AI risks, ethics and how these issues overlap with the human experience.

Recommendations from past years:

[2024](#)

[2023](#)

[2022](#)

[2021](#)

[2020](#)

[2019](#)

[2018](#)

[2017](#)
[2016](#)
[2015](#)
[2014](#)
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[2012](#)

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Main image



Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering students (from left) Mare Rotchford, electrical engineering; Aayoush Iyer, computer science; and Maria Thomas, aerospace engineering, take advantage of the sunny spring weather on Arizona State University's Tempe campus to read books outdoors. Photo by Erika Gronek/ASU

Text image(s)



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