

Cool reads, hot days: Reading recs from ASU's English department

By Kristen LaRue-Sandler, ASU News
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If you're looking for book recommendations from folks with serious writing cred, look no further.

Faculty from Arizona State University's [Department of English](#) — with its concentration of Pulitzer, Guggenheim and MacArthur winners — are sharing their top reading picks, perfect for the beach, the porch or wherever you'll be this summer.

Below are their choices for fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry/hybrid.

Readers, take heart: This list is *not*, in any way, [AI generated](#).

Fiction

[“The Wilds: Stories”](#) by Julia Elliott

Recommended by [Kevin Lichty](#), a fiction writer and [graduate](#) of ASU's creative writing program

Published in 2014 by Tin House Books, these are “wild stories of transformation (or near transformation), southern gothic to fabulist, to speculative, to just fun.”

[“Where We Go When All We Were Is Gone”](#) by Sequoia Nagamatsu

Recommended by Kevin Lichty

This collection of fabulist stories, published by Black Lawrence Press in 2016, has got “Kaiju scientists, an orientation for how to be dead, snow babies and an endless street dance. The stories

are intimate, fantastical, tender."

Cities of the Weft series by Alex Pheby

Recommended by Kevin Lichty

The individual novels in this trilogy — “Mordew” (2022), “Malarkoi” (2024) and “Waterblack” (2025) — published or republished by Tor Books, have “magic dogs, talking books, teleporting assassins, a rivalry between would-be gods, a war with an atheist crusade, soul propagandas, impossible cities, living mud, body horror, satire (and) an infinitely inwardly expanding universe.”

“The Known World: A Novel” by Edward P. Jones

Recommended by [Mitchell Jackson](#), John O. Whiteman Dean’s Distinguished Professor in the Department of English, fiction and nonfiction writer, [Esquire](#) columnist and winner of the [Pulitzer Prize](#)

First published in 2003 by Amistad (HarperCollins), this book is “an extraordinary novel that won the Pulitzer Prize. It’s the story of Blacks who enslaved other Black people in Virginia — which is to say it’s also about race and class and freedom and oppression. Slavery was a long time ago, and it’s right now, too.”

“Three Bags Full: A Sheep Detective Story” by Leonie Swann

Recommended by [Nush Powell](#), chair of ASU’s Department of English and a specialist on 18th-century literature, especially [pirate stories](#)

Originally published in 2005 as “Glennkill: Ein Schafskrimi,” this translation from German by Anthea Bell is a 2025 edition from Soho Crime.

“A flock of sheep are determined to seek justice when their shepherd is found dead in suspicious circumstances. They are, however, rather prone to ovine thinking — which is surprisingly mystical at times — and usually unable to make humans understand them, so it takes a while. Will the sheep ever have the European vacation they long for? Will they find another shepherd as good as George? Also, there is a wandering ram named Melmoth. It has [a sequel](#).”

The Century Cycle series by August Wilson

Recommended by [Lee Bebout](#), a literature expert who teaches and researches American and ethnic studies; also the curator of the [Subversive Sticker Project](#)

The “Century Cycle” is a series of 10 plays published over several decades of Wilson’s career. They take place chronologically in this order: “Gem of the Ocean” (2003), “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” (1984), “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” (1982), “The Piano Lesson” (1986), “Seven Guitars” (1995), “Fences” (1984), “Two Trains Running” (1990), “Jitney” (1979), “King Hedley II” (1991) and “Radio Golf” (2005).

"(It's) one play for each decade of the 20th century of the African American experience. I've been wanting to read them in order for years, and I'm finally doing it."

Creative nonfiction

"American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer" by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin

Recommended by [Kevin Sandler](#), who teaches film and media studies, specializing in the U.S. media business with a focus on censorship and [animation](#)

First published in 2005 by Knopf Publishing, the book won the Pulitzer Prize in 2006.

"I read this in preparation for teaching the recent 'Oppenheimer' film. Unsurprisingly, the book does a better job illustrating the historical complexities of both the man and the atomic era in which he worked than the film does, even at its three-hour running time."

"Everything Is Tuberculosis: The History and Persistence of Our Deadliest Infection" by John Green

Recommended by [James Blasingame](#), director of ASU's English education program and an expert in [YA literature](#)

This book by John Green, famous for his young adult fiction, was published this March by Crash Course Books.

After reading Green's first foray into nonfiction, "[The Anthropocene Reviewed](#)," Blasingame picked up this book because "John Green's logic and ability to explain the significance of events in history and the world is riveting. He says tuberculosis is responsible for the invention of what we know as the cowboy hat. True! A hat maker in New Jersey got tuberculosis and was advised by his doctor to go West for the dry climate. The hat maker (John Stetson) came West and was very disappointed in the hats, so he made one in 1865 that protected against the sun, the cold, the rain, everything, and that hat became the standard template for all cowboy hats, or Stetsons, as they were sometimes called."

"The End of Everything: (Astrophysically Speaking)" by Katie Mack

Recommended by Kevin Lichty

Published in paperback in 2021 by Scribner (Simon and Schuster), the book by theoretical astrophysicist Katie Mack is handy "if you ever wanted to know all the ways the universe might end."

“World of Wonders: In Praise of Fireflies, Whale Sharks, and Other Astonishments” by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Recommended by Kevin Lichty

Published in 2024 by Milkweed Editions, the book contains “lyrical essays that interplay between personal essay and natural wonder.”

Author Aimee Nezhukumatathil’s poetic prose in this nonfiction work is accompanied by illustrations by Fumi Nakamura.

“War in Val d'Orcia: An Italian War Diary, 1943–1944” by Iris Origo

Recommended by [Joe Lockard](#), researcher on anti-slavery literature and [human rights philosophies](#)

Originally published in 1947, this book on the daily life of civilians during war is perfect for an “Italian peninsula (summer reading),” according to Lockard, who says the story is mainly centered on “gardening and fighting fascism.”

Poetry and hybrid

“Lost Letters and other Animals” by Carrie Bennett

Recommended by Kevin Lichty

This poetry collection is composed of five, long collage poems and was published by Black Lawrence Press in 2021. It is a meditation on memory — both its loss due to Alzheimer’s and also what remains.

“I just loved the idea of these poems.”

“Abracadabra, Sunshine: Poems” by Dexter L. Booth

Recommended by Kevin Lichty

A 2021 release from Red Hen Press and written by ASU creative writing graduate [Dexter Booth](#) ('12 MFA), this is a series of letters written to lovers, friends and family.

“Maybe I’m just a sucker for the epistle but (this is) another one that uses the letter as a form of poetry.”

“The Figure Going Imaginary: Life Drawing, Poetry, The Cadaver Lab; A Year in Pieces” by Marianne Boruch

Recommended by [Sally Ball](#), poet, director of the ASU creative writing program, and associate director of indie publisher [Four Way Books](#)

Published by Copper Canyon Press this past March, “this wild, intriguing book includes journal notes, more developed (essays), poems (and) drawings. It’s a beautifully made object that follows Boruch’s exploration of art, in a drawing class, (and) science — yes, in the cadaver lab; a poet testing herself in the context of adjacent approaches to ‘the ancient task of learning to see.’”

“The Letters of Emily Dickinson” edited by Cristanne Miller and Domhnall Mitchell

Recommended by Sally Ball

This Belknap Press (Harvard) edition published in 2024 is “such an immersive, wonderful visit to the dear, vivid, loving brain of Emily Dickinson,” Ball said.

“‘Dear Jane,’ begins one letter, ‘I have written you a great many letters since you left me — not the kind of letters that go in post offices and ride in mailbags — but queer, little silent ones.’ Some of her letters are so long! They are full of her mind at work, which is what writing actually is.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image

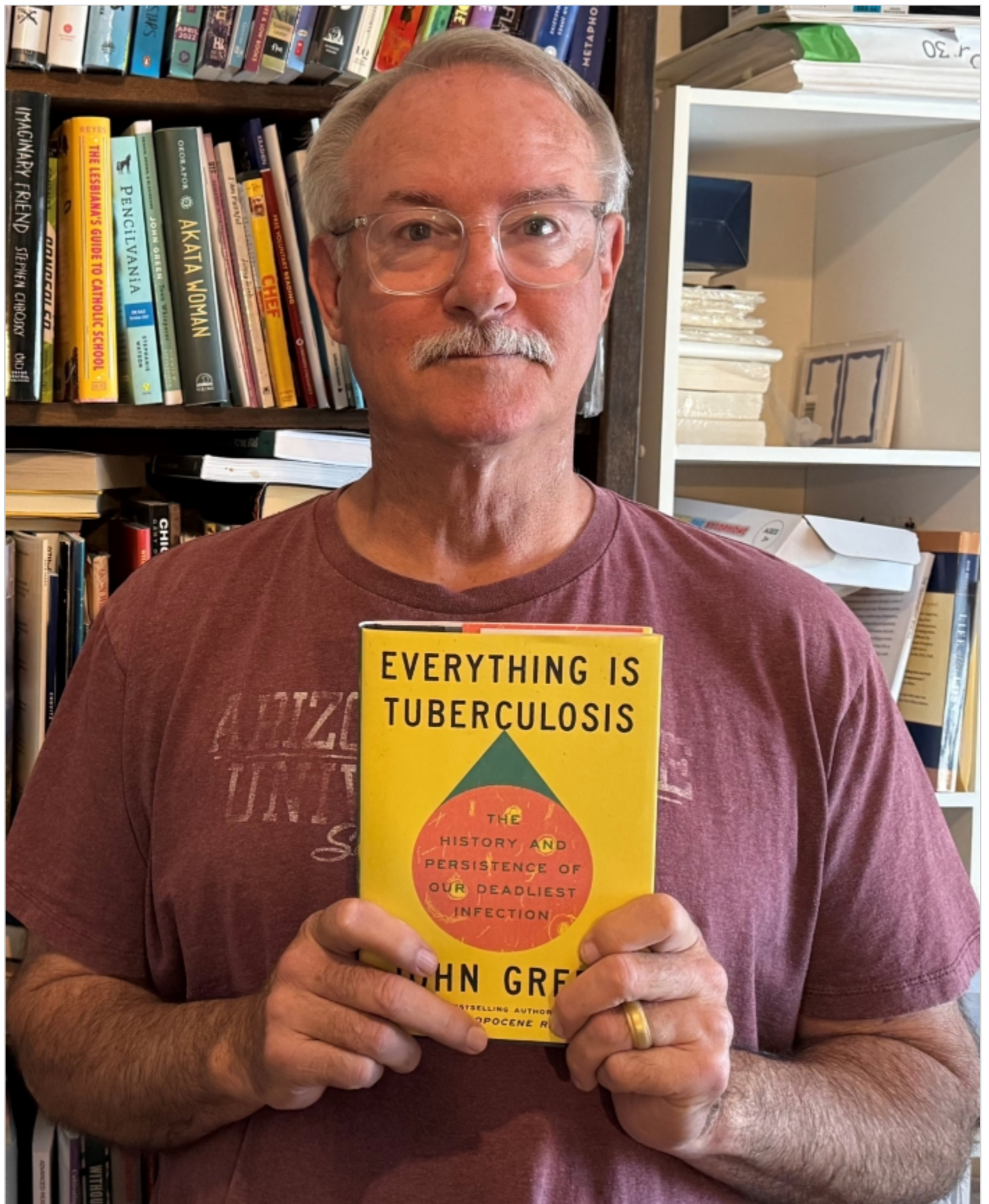


Six of the recommended titles that appear below, found at a neighborhood bookstore in Mesa, Arizona. Photo by Kristen LaRue-Sandler/ASU

Text image(s)



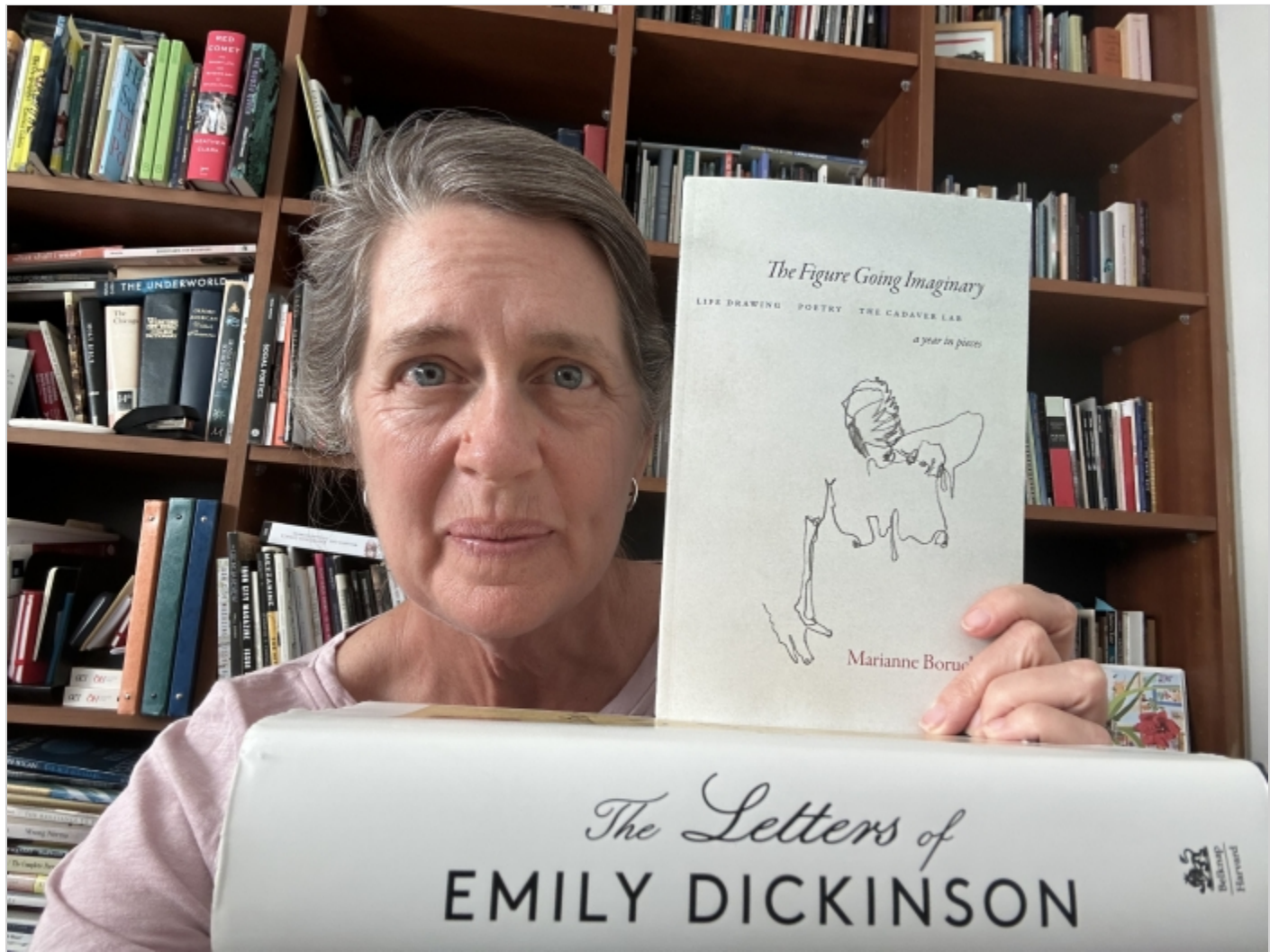
Nush Powell recommends the German novel "Three Bags Full: A Sheep Detective Story" by Leonie Swann



President's Professor James Blasingame recommends a creative nonfiction book about the history of tuberculosis.



Associate Professor Joe Lockard recommends "War in Val d'Orcia," which tells about the daily life of civilians in Italy during World War II.



Sally Ball's book recommendation follow's a poet's exploration of art and science.