

## Nighttime Narrative Nonfiction Book Selection Summaries

**Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity** by Katherine Boo (2012, 244 pages, paperback) Winner of the 2102 National Book Award. In this brilliant, breathtaking book, a bewildering age of global change and inequality is made humane through the dramatic story of families striving toward a better life in Annawadi, a makeshift settlement in the shadow of luxury hotels near the Mumbai airport. As India starts to prosper, the residents of Annawadi are electric with hope. With intelligence, humor, and deep insight into what connects people to one another in an era of tumultuous change, the book is based on years of uncompromising reporting and carries the reader headlong into one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's hidden worlds, and into the hearts of families impossible to forget.

**Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents** by Isabel Wilkerson. (2020, 388 pages without notes) [An Amazon Best Book of August 2020:](#) It has been ten years since Wilkerson's award-winning *The Warmth of Other Suns* was published. While that book pointed to the great migration of Black people to the north as an "unrecognized migration," this new book points to our entire social structure as an unrecognized caste system. Most people see America as racist, and Wilkerson agrees that it is indeed racist. She points out that we tend to refer to slavery as a "sad, dark chapter" in America when in fact it lasted for hundreds of years—but in order to maintain a social order and an "economy whose bottom gear was torture" (as Wilkerson quotes the historian Edward Baptist), it was necessary to give blacks the lowest possible status. Whites in turn got top status. In between came the middle castes of "Asians, Latinos, indigenous people, and immigrants of African descent" to fill out the originally bipolar hierarchy. Such a caste system allowed generations of whites to live under the same assumptions of inequality—these "distorted rules of engagement"—whether their ancestors were slave owners or abolitionists. And the unspoken caste system encouraged all to accept their roles. As Wilkerson develops her argument, she brings in historical figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Satchel Paige. She even looks at the Nazis, who turned us when they were seeking ways to institutionalize racism in the Third Reich.

**Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Family** by Patrick Raden Keefe (2021, 441 pages without notes) By the author of "Say Nothing", this is the history of the secretive Sackler family that was central to the opioid crisis through their ownership of Purdue Pharmaceuticals. Fascinating!

**Hidden Valley Road: Inside the Mind of an American Family.** (2020, paperback 400 pages) A marvel of reportage, research, and style, *Hidden Valley Road* raises the bar on what is possible in narrative nonfiction. Robert Kolker dives into the exceptional story of one family besieged by humanity's most mysterious malady. Kolker writes about the Galvin family with elegance and insight while weaving together the decades long quest to understand the genetics of schizophrenia, somehow creating a story that is as haunting and intriguing as a great gothic novel.

**His Truth is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope** by Jon Meacham. (2020, 368 pages) #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER • An intimate and revealing portrait of civil rights icon and longtime U.S. congressman John Lewis, linking his life to the painful quest for justice in America from the 1950s to the present—from the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Soul of America*

**King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa** by Adam Hochschild. By the author of "Bury the Chains" which we read last year. (1998, 366 pages in paperback) 'King Leopold's Ghost' had an extraordinary impact, attracting readers the world over, altering the teaching and writing of history and affecting politics and culture at national and international levels. Published in English and translated into 11 additional languages, the book has been incorporated into secondary school curricula and appears as a key text in the historiography of colonial Africa for college and graduate students. But it is within Belgium that Hochschild's work has had the most dramatic impact, demonstrating the active and transformative power of history. The publication of 'King Leopold's Ghost' forced Belgians to come to terms for the first time with their long buried colonial past and generated intense public debate that so troubled Belgian officials that they reportedly instructed diplomats on how to deflect embarrassing questions that the book raised about the past. The book offered welcome support for others in Belgium who sought acknowledgment and accountability for Belgian actions in the Congo. Few works of history have the power to effect such significant change in people's understanding of their past."

**The Oregon Trail: A New American Journey** by Rinker Buck. (2014, 464 pages in paperback) A delightful true story of two brothers who decided to follow the original Oregon Trail in order to tell the true stories and history of those who migrated west. A fascinating, humorous, and astute story of American history. They traveled in an authentic wagon pulled by three mules and followed the trail as closely as they could to reach Oregon through 5 states in 5 months. They convince the reader that the best way to see America is from the seat of a wagon and to meet wonderful people and learn stories of those who went first.

**Wilmington's Lie: The Murderous Coup of 1898 and the Rise of White Supremacy** by David Zucchino (2020, 352 pages without notes) **Winner of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction.** This book details the forgotten history of a coup against an elected multiracial government in North Carolina, tracing efforts by white supremacists to establish white rule in Wilmington while cinematically detailing the bloody assault on Black residents of the town.