

SENIOR COLLEGE BOOK CLUB PROGRAM

2025-2026

September 8, 2025, 2-4 pm - Fellows and External Fellows

James by Percival Everett (2024)

Discussion Leader: Meg Fox

“With my pencil, I wrote myself into being,” writes James. The escaped slave who accompanied Huck downriver on a raft in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim is brilliantly reconceived as a highly intelligent and literate man in this 2025 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning novel. Even James uses the familiar slave-talk around whites, but in private the slaves speak standard English and James teaches a group of children “the correct incorrect grammar” to maintain the illusion of white superiority: “The better they feel, the safer we are.” He has read many books from Judge Thatcher’s library, and on his dangerous journey down the Mississippi to purchase the freedom of his wife and daughter, he converses with Voltaire on morality in a delirium after a rattlesnake bite and challenges John Locke on his hypocrisy. Everett thus explores language as performance and power, but shows that for the enslaved, words may not be enough: many adventures brought forward in James are grimmer than those on the same route in *Huck Finn*, as legal rape and murder of slaves were commonplace. Yet somehow irony and the deepening bond with Huck remain at the heart of James’s narrative until near the end of this great read. (Available in all formats; 303 pages)

October 6, 2025, 2-4 pm – Fellows and External Fellows

Fire Weather: A True Story from a Hotter World by John Vaillant (2023)

Discussion Leader: Susan Pfeiffer

Rather than just an intellectual exploration, this is about pressing global issues that require action, written by a Canadian author of great skill. While the Fort McMurray, Alberta, wildfires in 2016 provide a basis for the story line, the reader is informed about Canadian history, the science of wildfires in general, why modern towns burn so quickly, and how extractive industries have suppressed information about climate

change. While published before the devastating Los Angeles fires, its theme is directly relevant to them. Vivid and compellingly written, it is full of information, though painful to read in places. It was on several “Best Books of the Year” lists in the US and Canada, one of Time's must-read books of 2023, and a finalist for the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction. (Available in all formats; 339 pages plus notes)

The 2024 National Film Board film, *Incandescence*, streaming free at <https://www.nfb.ca/film/incandescence/>, provides a vivid illustration of much of the book.

November 3, 2025, 2-4 pm – Fellows and External Fellows

Autocracy Inc: The Dictators Who Want to Run the World by Anne Applebaum (2024)

Discussion Leader: David

Milne

Pulitzer prize-winning author Anne Applebaum unpacks the modern world of autocracy in a short and straightforward way. Stripping away ideological pretensions, she shows that autocratic regimes are surprisingly similar extractive systems that are even mutually reinforcing in today's global economy. All are kleptocracies eager to profit from rich democratic countries and to undermine their foundations. She argues for a vigorous Western response to rising autocracies, but with President Donald Trump once more in power in 2025, this strategy may now face serious obstacles. (Available in all formats; 272 pages)

December 1, 2025, 2-4 pm – Fellows and External Fellows

Orbital by Samantha Harvey (2023)

Discussion Leader: Malcolm Woodland

Winner of the 2024 Booker and Hawthornden Prizes, *Orbital* is called, by its creator, a "space pastoral." In her rhapsodic imagining of 24 hours as the International Space Station orbits earth (with each of the 16 chapters covers a single 90-minute orbiting), Harvey (who has never been to space) lets us experience the colour-drenched vision of earth outside the windows: "the Ganges silt estuaryThe umber plains and ochre

rivers, burgundy valley of a thousand-mile ridge ... the faint smudge of rust that is the extraordinary autumn bloom of the Jiuzhaigou Valley and then the Gobi Desert ... a painter who sees in ... brown bolts of duck-egg mauve lemon and crimson." On board are four men and two women--six astronauts and cosmonauts from Japan, the USA, the UK, Italy and Russia. We witness both the realistic details of the scientific duties and medical tasks of the crew and their reflections on the meaning of life from their unique physical (and, thus, philosophical) perspective in the vastness of space. We read their meditations on what they see and experience--that spectacular beauty of earth but also the everyday of life in space--from their radical position in a spacecraft that affords them both great distance from their own lives and enforced intimacy with the others on board. One of the Booker judges said that the novel transported her from the many crises on Earth (including existential threats like climate and war) and re-framed those crises, and humanity, in a new relief. (Available in all formats; 224 pages)

January 5, 2026, 2-4 pm – Fellows and External Fellows

ChatGPT and the Future of AI by Terrence J. Sejnowski (2024)

Discussion leader: Daphne Maurer

An accessible and timely introduction to how ChatGPT works on the surface and under the hood by someone at the forefront of AI and neuroscience. The author illustrates his points by having ChatGPT generate the chapter summaries. Along the way, he considers whether such chatbots can think or are conscious, whether they work like the human brain, and their strengths and weaknesses. (Available in all formats; 215 pages plus glossary and notes)

February 2, 2026, 2-4 pm - Fellows and External Fellows

The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017 by Rashid Khalidi (2020)

Discussion Leaders: David Milne and Jon Allen

While the Palestine question is invariably front-page news, we have an urgent need for a good historical account of the origins and history of this protracted Middle Eastern conflict. In this compelling work of scholarship and personal history, Rashid

Khalidi provides a narrative framework for understanding the roots and contours of this evolving geopolitical malady. Told from a learned Palestinian perspective and from an important family autobiographical lens, this is already a classic in the literature. Khalidi is the Edward Said Professor of Modern Arab Studies at Columbia University (Available in all formats; 319 pages)

March 2, 2026, 2-4 pm – Fellows and External Fellows

Lincoln in the Bardo by George Saunders (2017)

Discussion Leader: Lisa Steele

The “bardo” is a Tibetan Buddhist concept referring to an intermediate state between death and rebirth. Set in 1862, the early years of the American Civil War, the novel opens with President Abraham Lincoln and his wife Mary Todd Lincoln about to host a fancy state dinner while their 11-year-old son Willie is lying upstairs deathly ill with typhoid fever. It is Willie’s eventual death that propels Lincoln to enter the “bardo” when he visits the crypt containing his son’s body several times. Here, he is surrounded by spirits, not only of Willie but of a number of other souls who have not yet admitted that they are, in fact, dead. Themes of grief – Lincoln’s own almost debilitating experience over the loss of his son - and mortality – from his personal experience to a more universal consideration of an afterlife permeate the novel. Here, the spirits speak, debate, declare, weep and laugh until finally, led by a courageous Willie, each embraces his death and is released from the bardo and Lincoln himself is able to return to the very real job of shepherding America through its most difficult time in history. (Available in all formats; 368 pages.)

All are encouraged to try the audio version of this book on Audible, the chorus of voices that speak throughout – including the always entertaining David Sedaris – create a wonderfully dense experience of the spirit world that Saunders offers. And as a special treat, listen for a very evocative sound effect as a spirit exits the Bardo.

April 6, 2026, 2-4 pm – Fellows and External Fellows

Every Valley: The Desperate Lives and Troubled Times that Made Handel's "Messiah" by Charles King (2024)

Discussion Leaders: Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon

George Frideric Handel's (1741) *Messiah* is an oratorio that has been called "the greatest piece of participatory art ever created." Choirs and orchestras perform it annually at Christmas and Easter, with audiences singing along. As the subtitle of the book suggests, Charles King delves into Handel's creation of this monumental work within the social and cultural context of the "Troubled Times" of Enlightenment Britain, with its philosophical and political conflicts, royal intrigues, and military and imperial ambitions. The author focuses this broader history on a series of "Desperate Lives": a depressive dissenter stirred to action by an ancient prophecy; an actress plagued by an abusive husband and public scorn; an Atlantic sea captain and penniless philanthropist; and an African Muslim man held captive in the American colonies and hatching a dangerous plan for getting back home. But at the centre of the story is Handel, the German-born, Italian-trained composer, brought to England in 1712 by (the German) King George I. When he created *Messiah*, Handel was in early middle-age, not terribly healthy, and deeply concerned about his continuing success in a difficult London theatre scene. How a "masterpiece of hope" was born out of this particular "Desperate" life at the particular "Troubled" time is the story *Every Valley* tells. (Available in all formats; 351 pages)

May 4, 2026, 2-4 pm – Fellows and External Fellows

Silent Spring by Rachel Carson (1962)

Discussion Leader: Sara Shettleworth

Published only 64 years ago, *Silent Spring* already qualifies as a classic. As an accessible popular account of the damage being done to the environment by substances such as the then-common pesticide DDT, it was a wakeup call for government control of the chemical industry. As most people know, it had a huge impact, helping to galvanize the then-nascent environmental movement. We are now seeing the benefits of actions inspired by the information in this book in such developments as the ban on DDT and the resulting return of bald eagles and other of

DDT's victims. Written by a scientist who was also a clear and compelling writer. (Available in all formats. For those who do not already have a copy, the 2002 40th Anniversary edition is recommended (400 pages plus notes). It includes an illuminating introduction by Carson's biographer, Linda Lear, and an afterword by noted ecologist E.O. Wilson).

June 1, 2026, 2-4 pm - Fellows and External Fellows

Sparks: China's Underground Historians and the Battle for the Future by Ian Johnson (2023)

Discussion Leader: Peter Alberti

This book tells the story of the great tragedies of recent Chinese History from the personal perspective of its victims. It is an unabashedly “underground” history which stubbornly resists the attempts of the Chinese Communist party to stamp and control the “official” history of the modern nation. As the subtitle suggests, this battle over history is a power struggle central to who shall prevail in the future. Such a struggle, of course, is not unique to China. It raises fundamental questions: What is history? Who are its claimants? What qualities mark works of history from other literature or indeed from state propaganda? (Available in all formats; 319 pages)

July 6, 2026, 2-4 pm - Fellows and External Fellows

The Underworld: Journeys to the Depths of the Ocean, by Susan Casey (2023)

Discussion Leader: William Logan

Cutting-edge technologies in recent years have allowed scientists and explorers to dive miles beneath the surface of the ocean, and we are beginning to understand this strange and exotic underworld: A place of soaring mountains, smouldering volcanoes, and valleys 7,000 feet deeper than Everest is high, where tectonic plates collide and separate, and extraordinary life forms operate under distinct rules. This book brings the depths of the oceans to life. The author is a journalist who has written much about the ocean and participates in the deep dives herself. She does a great job of discussing the importance of mapping the ocean floor and of exploring all the life that teems below. She highlights the many men and women that have devoted their lives and money to something often overlooked by the larger science community. From a

climate perspective, she includes a chapter on deep sea mining, exploiting the sea for minerals and other substances which can have severe environmental consequences. The other environmental issues discussed are destructive fishing, plastics and other pollutants. This book informs us of a major part of our world about which we know so little but is of such importance to us and deserves more of our attention. (Available in all formats; 352 pages)

The book includes color plates, but for those who want an even more vivid illustration of the material in this book, David Attenborough's new film *Ocean* is recommended. <https://silverbackfilms.tv/shows/oceanwithdavidattenborough/>.