Daniel Goldin’s Summer 2020 Reading List

Boswell Book Company

1. *The Beauty in Breaking*, by Michele Harper (on sale July 7)
   This is a doctor’s memoir. It is a long-standing genre in bookselling, but mostly the stories are told by white men, and more rarely white women or men of color. Hearing from a Philadelphia-based black female emergency room doctor offers us a powerful perspective, such as when Dr. Harper spoke to a female veteran who had been the subject of multiple sexual assaults in her previous squad, or when she confronted a white doctor in her charge, who was willing to do a forced medical procedure at the request of the police without the subject’s approval, without a court order. Was this illegal? It was. Did they regularly do this? They did.

2. *The Coyotes of Carthage*, by Steven Wright
   This UW-Madison law school professor, who also teaches at the creative writing program, has written a novel about a political operative whose last mission went awry. He has been assigned to swing a South Carolina town vote to allow mining at a local mountain, likely leading to devastating destruction. As a black man, he is likely not going to be able to win the trust of the mostly white community, so he hires a white evangelical couple to do his groundwork. While Wright’s novel has been positioned as both thriller and satire, I think it most resembles the traditional espionage genre of John Le Carre and Alan Furst, in its character focus, internal machinations, and philosophical dilemmas. Wright has said that this novel is an indictment of the Citizens United case and shows how the repercussions play out. Wright is in conversation with Chris Lee at Boswell on July 1. It is on Zoom, with details on our website.

3. *The Vanishing Half*, by Brit Bennett (ok this one is super popular!)
   Two identical twins make a break from their predominantly black Louisiana town, where light skin tone is placed as a premium. One sister returns in town with a dark-skinned daughter while the other splits with a white husband, after realizing she can pass for white. Years later, the cousins are inadvertently brought together in Los Angeles. Yes, there is a lot of drama here, a bit of a wink as one cousin’s biggest acting triumph is in a soap opera. The Mothers was a lauded novel and a NYT bestseller, but Bennett’s second novel has exploded to another level, following a similar trajectory of Celeste Ng – I’d say Little Fires Everywhere is a good comparison. This one is out for reprint and will take a bit to come back into stock.

4. *How We Fight for Our Lives*, by Saeed Jones (paperback on sale July 7). The Lambda Literary Awards were just announced and there has been a lot of interest in the winners. I enjoyed two of the fiction winners – Lot by Bryan Washington and Patsy by Nicole Dennis Benn, but I’m highlighting Saeed Jones’s memoir, which comes out in paperback in a few weeks. Jones knew he was queer but struggled to come to terms with his family, particularly because he split his time between his Christian grandmother in Memphis and his Buddhist mother in Dallas. His story is told in vignettes and explores racism and homophobia.

5. *Everywhere You Don’t Belong*, by Gabriel Bump
   Claude McKay Love is a nerdy black teenager raised by his spirited grandmother, a veteran of the Civil Rights movement, and her best friend Paul, a gay man. They live in the South Shore neighborhood of Chicago, a once grand enclave that has fallen on hard times with a legacy “shaped, by racism and police brutality.” Claude has to navigate between the gangs and the police, trying to distance himself from both, leaning a bit on his friend Janice, on whom he harbors a crush. Claude thinks he might have left
things behind when he goes to college, but his past follows him. We’re doing an event with Access, with Bump in conversation with Nasif Rogers and Shana Lucas on July 22. Most of our events are on Zoom, and the registrations are on our boswellbooks.com page.

6. *If I Had Two Wings*, by Randall Kenan (pub date August 14, likely on sale before)
My colleague Chris convinced me to read this forthcoming collection of stories from Kenan, Professor of English at UNC-Chapel Hill, not knowing that I still treasure my hardcover copy of his first collection, *Let the Dead Bury the Dead*, from 1992. Many of the stories are centered in Tims Creek, North Carolina, but the characters often drift away. One story is about a middle-aged man’s encounter with Billy Idol in 1980s New York, while another is about a woman’s encounter with Howard Hughes, and an attempt to get her to cook for him to recapture his past. My favorite focused on a sixty-something woman who inadvertently learns that she has healing powers when she joins a megachurch.

7. *Crooked Hallelujah*, by Kelli Jo Ford (pub date July 14, likely on sale before)
Ford’s debut is about three generations of Cherokee women centered in Oklahoma, though there is quite a bit of resettling involved. Grandma Lula is a conservative Christian, her daughter Justine rebels and winds up having a child young. The story jumps around in time, so we so granddaughter Reney’s life at different times, coming to terms with her family. There is a strong through line, but like many contemporary novels, many of the chapters also work as complete stories. Weather is also an important part of the book as the family must confront tornadoes, fires, and floods. The voice is amazing, and the author is even more so – I got to meet her at a conference last winter, in what I call “before time.”
We’re planning to virtually host Ford on July 27.

I run one of our in-store book clubs, now virtual, and I am always looking for interesting books with a different perspective. I came across this novel, acclaimed in India, with an eye-catching package from Black Cat that convinced me to check it out. That is what I miss about browsing! It is a story set in Tamil Nadu and focuses on a couple whose family fortune rises and then falls, but the key here is that it’s all told through the perspective of their goat Poonachie. Yes, think of *Watership Down* but this book is not for kids – there’s violence and sexual assault and heartbreak, but yes, also romance. Murugan’s novel takes a perceptive look at problems in Indian society – there was a lot of tumult for his previous novel, *One Part Woman*, which led to his house arrest, with the book to then be blessed by the high court. It wound up nominated for the National Book Award translation prize.

9. *Lakewood*, by Megan Giddings
Here is another book I discovered at my winter bookseller conference which has been a bit below the radar. It is about a young black woman who, with her grandmother deceased and her mom struggling, decides to put off college and sign up to be an experiment subject in a small Michigan town. She is put in an office setting, but the office is fake, and she is subjected to a number of tests, some emotional, and others with physical harm threatened. Who is part of the test and who is a subject? The book is in the genre of psychological horror, recalls the Tuskegee Study, and reminded me a little of Jordan Peele’s *Get Out* and the recent collection *Friday Black*, but Giddings work is little more subtle and smoldering, and is also partly a coming-of-age, mother-daughter story.

10. *We Ride Upon Sticks*, by Quan Barry
Here is a novel from earlier this year that I just can’t let go – I can’t figure out why everyone isn’t reading it. It is set in 1989 Danvers, Massachusetts, and focuses on the high school girls field hockey team. Every chapter is a match and each center on one person on the team. They are complete losers until one of
them decides to start a witch’s book, which in this case is a notebook featuring the likeness of Emilio Estevez, and they start winning games. It is funny and smart and nostalgic while looking at race, gender, and class as these students grow into who adulthood. I’m very competitive and so I like to look at how we’re doing in sales compared to other bookstores and for this one, we’re #1 in sales, but I would love to see this book take off and us drop back to #20. Barry is Professor of English at UW-Madison.

Speaking of Massachusetts-set books, I’d like to give a shout out to Christina Clancys’ *The Second Home*. It is about a family split after the parents die suddenly, told through the perspective of two estranged sisters and their equally estranged adopted brother. The book is set partly in Cape Cod, but it is also a love letter to Milwaukee and has a Boswell shout out. I just gave it to my childhood friend who is living in Cape Cod and she loved, loved, loved it.