Suggested summer reading list

These are some of the best books I read this year. I think you will like them too. Read one, two, five or more! Most important, have fun and expand your mind. I'd love to chat with you about what you read when you're back in September. :) 

--Mrs. Hanson

Young Adult Fiction

These books are written especially for teenagers.

Landscape with Invisible Hand by M.T. Anderson

Another masterpiece from M.T. Anderson. A short, beautiful and devastating book about money. With his parents' jobs replaced by alien tech and no money for food, clean water, or the vuvv's miraculous medicine, Adam has to get creative to survive and must decide how far he's willing to go - and what he's willing to sacrifice - to give the vuvv what they want.

Far from the Tree by Robin Benway

A wonderful, heartbreaking and ultimately life affirming novel with funny dialogue about adopted siblings who find each other when they are teenagers. Explores questions of family, race, class, sexuality and gender. Every teen will find something to relate to here.

George by Alex Gino

A beautiful, gentle little book about a child named George, born a boy and feels like a girl. This is about the moment in George's life where she has to communicate her truth to those closest to her.

It's written for grades 3-6. I recommend it for grades 3-12 and ages 8-108. Teachers, administrators and parents should read it too to get an understanding of the perspective of a transgender kid and the importance of the school community in the lives of these children. When a transgender child enters our lives we'll be better equipped to understand and support.
It starts slow and builds quickly into a compelling page turner. Nora lives in Queens with her mother and brother in the disastrous summer of 1977--Son of Sam, the blackout, graduating from HS with no plan, a little brother with scary problems beyond the abilities of Nora and her mother to acknowledge out loud, much less "handle." Themes of feminism and the fallout from physical abuse made me think about this book long after it was over.

Scythe by Neil Shusterman

Wow! Shusterman has spectacularly revived the overdone and boring "Hunger Games" type of novel. Rowan and Cintra are apprentice Scythes, training to be a "gleaner" of people in a world where there is no more death, sickness, poverty and politics because everything is now managed by the Thunderhead, the uber-cloud. The first book in a three book series. The second is Thunderhead, which available now. The third book comes out in the fall.

Dear Martin by Nic Stone

Justyce McAllister is top of his class and set for the Ivy League—but none of that matters to the police officer who just put him in handcuffs. And despite leaving his rough neighborhood behind. he can't escape the scorn of his former peers or the ridicule of his new classmates. Justyce looks to the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for answers. But do they hold up anymore? He starts a journal to Dr. King to find out.

Then comes the day Justyce goes driving with his best friend, Manny, windows rolled down, music turned up—way up, sparking the fury of a white off-duty cop beside them. Words fly. Shots are fired. Justyce and Manny are caught in the crosshairs. In the media fallout, it's Justyce who is under attack.

Tempests and Slaughters by Tamora Pierce

Entertaining, compelling, imaginative, thought provoking and full of soul. It starts out freakishly like Harry Potter, which stressed me a little, yet develops far beyond that into 100% original Tamora Pierce. The descriptions of magic are awesome, and the gladiator arena setting is masterful. The themes and plot relate to our present political and social dilemmas. This is the first book in a "prequel" series describing the childhood and adolescence of Numaire, the hero of Pierce's Tortall series.

Goodbye Days by Jeff Zentner

Beautiful writing, deep meaning--what more could you ask for? The best YA I've read this year. One day Carver Briggs had it all—three best friends, a supportive family, and a reputation as a talented writer at his high school, Nashville Academy for the Arts.

The next day he lost it all when he sent a simple text to his friend Mars, right before Mars, Eli, and Blake were killed in a car crash.

New Copy can't stop blaming himself for the accident, and he's not the only one...
American Street by Ibi Zoboi

A Detroit-noire fable, told from the viewpoint of Fabiola, a teenaged girl recently arrived from Haiti. Her mother is detained in immigration so Fabiola goes on to live with her aunt and three cousins. She tries her best to get her mother back, but Detroit tells her a different story than the one she wants. A good pairing with The Hate U Give.

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Young Adult Nonfiction

These books are written especially for teenagers.

Tetris: Games people play by Box Brown

This graphic novel about the development and licensing of one of the world's most famous video games helps us understand the history, business and politics behind the birth of the video game industry. I had no idea this game was invented in the USSR.

I Will Always Write Back by Caitlin Alifirenka and Martin Ganda

Everyone in Caitlin's class wrote to an unknown student somewhere in a distant place. When Caitlin saw Zimbabwe written on the board, it sounded like the most exotic place she had ever heard of—so she chose it. Martin was lucky to even receive a pen pal letter. There were only ten letters, and forty kids in his class. But he was the top student, so he got the first one. That letter was the beginning of a correspondence that spanned six years and changed two lives.

The Family Romanov by Denise Fleming

Straightforward telling of the story of the final Russian Tsar and his family. Fleming does an excellent job explaining his downfall by putting it in the context of the lives of typical Russians of his era--most of whom were living miserable lives of deprivation. Tsar Nicholas, his imperious wife Alexandra, and their five children chose to live a fairly isolated life on an estate miles from the capitol city in complete luxury. Complications ranging from a seriously ill son to the outbreak of World War I (when Russian fought the Germans despite Alexandra's German roots), show the events that led to the family's overthrow. The final chapters neatly explain the Russian Revolution and how the initial provisional government fell to Lenin and his communists. Excellent historical account and very readable. (Judi Paradis, Goodreads)
Vincent and Theo by Deborah Heligman

The deep and enduring friendship between the artist Vincent and his art dealer brother Theo Van Gogh shaped both brothers’ lives. Confidant, champion, sympathizer, friend, Theo supported Vincent as he struggled to find his path in life. They shared everything, swapping stories of lovers and friends, successes and disappointments, dreams and ambitions. Meticulously researched it draws on the 658 letters Vincent wrote to Theo during his lifetime.

March Books 1-3 by John Lewis

March is a vivid first-hand account in graphic novel format of John Lewis’ lifelong struggle for civil and human rights, meditating in the modern age on the distance traveled since the days of Jim Crow and segregation. Rooted in Lewis’ personal story, it also reflects on the highs and lows of the broader civil rights movement.

Samurai Rising: The Epic Life of Minamoto Yoshitsune by Pamela S. Turner

The gripping, epic true story of Minamoto Yoshitsune, the greatest samurai in Japanese history. A rousing, action-packed saga set in 12th century Japan, superbly illustrated by Gareth Hinds, about warriors and bravery, fierce combat, loyalty and treachery, rebellion and revenge. Turner's passion for her subject is apparent and her painstaking research on the subject is obvious from the extensive end matter. A thrilling story and an insightful look into an exotic and dangerous ancient world.

Symphony for the Dead: Dmitri Shostakovich and the Siege of Leningrad by M. T. Anderson

In September 1941, Adolf Hitler’s Wehrmacht surrounded Leningrad in what was to become one of the longest and most destructive sieges in Western history—almost three years of bombardment and starvation that culminated in the harsh winter of 1943–1944. More than a million citizens perished. Survivors recall corpses littering the frozen streets, their relatives having neither the means nor the strength to bury them. Residents burned books, furniture, and floorboards to keep warm; they ate family pets and—eventually—one another to stay alive. Trapped between the Nazi invading force and the Soviet government itself was composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who would write a symphony that roused, rallied, eulogized, and commemorated his fellow citizens—the Leningrad Symphony, which came to occupy a surprising place of prominence in the eventual Allied victory.

This is the true story of a city under siege: the triumph of bravery and defiance in the face of terrifying odds. It is also a look at the power—and layered meaning—of music in beleaguered lives

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**Adult Nonfiction**

These books are written for an adult audience and are compelling and accessible.
The Unwomanly Face of War by Svetlana Alexievich

An oral history of women who fought on the Russian front in World War II. All I can say is read it. I will add—if you’re wondering if this is appropriate for teens to read, please consider the fact that most of the women interviewed for the book are telling stories of what they did as teenagers during WWII.

The Good Soldiers David Finkel

I watched American Sniper and whatever the movie’s merits, as usual, there was no attempt to give a political context to the horrors on display. This great book does that. So if anyone wanted to find out exactly what the tours of duty in Baghdad in those years were really like, and what was going off in post-Shock & Awe Iraq, and why the troops were there, read this. (Paul Bryant, Goodreads)

The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood by Ta Nehisi Coates

Wow. A beautifully written coming of age memoir. The son of a magisterial, intellectual ex-Black Panther in Baltimore, Coates had an unconventional upbringing. The understanding was that he would leave his family's house when he was 18 and be on his own. The Beautiful Struggle describes how he became a man of whom his father could be proud. Through obsessions with comics, misbehavior in school, getting expelled from the best public high school in Baltimore (Coates was the definition of a kid who tests well but doesn't work hard), growing through drumming, heroic efforts from his family guide him to grow up—he gets there.

The only thing that stops me from recommending it to everyone is that the language can be impressionistic and poetic. If you are uneasy not understanding every single word of a book you’re reading, this is not for you. Otherwise, yes, everyone read this!!

Evicted: Poverty in the American City by Matthew Desmond

"No moral code or ethical principle, no piece of scripture or holy teaching, can be summoned to defend what we have allowed our country to become." The final sentence of this devastating study of American poverty defined by nightmarish struggles for housing is the only time the author shows his outrage. Desmond uses the ethnographic method of interviewing and following the daily lives of members of a community over time to understand their motivations, choices, and behaviors. We get to know a lot of poor people in Milwaukee who bounce from slum to shelter and back again, over and over and over again. I hope Desmond has a similar effect on our country as Jacob Riis. He offers a plan at the end to solve the problem, as well as copious footnotes. The language is easy to read, yet the content is difficult to absorb because the pain and injustice is unrelenting and dizzying.
Don’t Let’s Go to the Dogs Tonight: An African Childhood by Alexandra Fuller

A rich, funny, sad and fascinating memoir about Fuller’s childhood and her family’s way of life as farmers in Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia during the turbulent 70s and 80s. I’ll never forget these people.

They are third generation white colonists from the British empire. Fuller provides an excellent list of memoirs and fiction by Africans to counter the white narrative.

The Brothers: The Road to an American Tragedy by Masha Gessen

Everyone knows the story of the Boston Marathon bombings. This journalistic investigation goes to Dagestan, Chechnya and Cambridge to understand the story of the Tsarnaev family and what led to its awful ending. Gessen raises questions about the trustworthiness of the FBI (Comey is discussed) and the trial. The questions she raises are nuanced. Everyone knows the Tsarnaev brothers did it. But what else did they do? How was the FBI involved? And what was the fallout for their Chechnyan compatriots? How do young people find their identity when they are constantly moving between countries?

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Adult Fiction

These books are written for an adult audience and are compelling and accessible to mature teens.

Flight of the Sparrow by Amy Brown Belding

Well written historical fiction set in 1600s New England during King Phillip's War between the Puritans and the Indians. The main characters are based on real characters -- chiefly Mary Rowlandson who was taken captive and returned after 4 months. Mary questions Puritan values and becomes an independent woman. There's some love and romance. Themes of race, slavery, and religion are explored. I read it in two sittings!

Ready Player One by Ernest Cline

OASIS is a virtual environment that many people prefer to the real world. Five young adult gamers meet and compete with the evil Sixers in OASIS to find the ultimate multibillion dollar prize and keep OASIS free and open to humanity. The corporate Sixers will use the prize to privatize OASIS for profit. Competitors need to summon and use an encyclopedic knowledge of 80s popular culture, including computer games, MRP games, music, television and movies to compete.

How many ways did I love this book? It combines fast paced, suspenseful storytelling with the thrills and twists of gaming, love, evil, thoughts about gender roles, the nature of virtual reality vs. real life, and A HAPPY ENDING!! So, I love this book in pretty much every way. It's a quick read and totally absorbing, funny and touching. I highly recommend to anyone who likes a good story.

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Exit West by Mohsin Hamid

An exploration of the migrant experience with an overlay of fantasy/speculative fiction. I couldn’t put it down. I read it right after The Underground Railroad and was struck by their similarities and relationship to each other. Short and fast read.

Barkskins by Annie Proulx

A Dickensian saga of the conquest of North America through the story of one European and one Micmac family, and the trees that define their lives through logging and planting. It sounds REALLY BORING but it’s not—I learned so much (but then again I love trees) and laughed too.

Since so much chronological ground is covered, the characters are introduced and killed off pretty quickly, just like the trees they chop down. At one point the reasons for death came so fast and were so inventive that it was just plain funny.

The main belief of the Micmac is that all plants, animals and earth live together in an interwoven equilibrium. At the end of Barkskins I realized that Proulx told the story of these people, trees, water, and earth in a way that repeats and extends that model. Brilliant!!!!!

The Impossible Fortress by Jason Rekulak

The year is 1987 and Playboy has just published scandalous photographs of Vanna White, from the popular TV game show Wheel of Fortune. For three teenage boys the magazine is priceless beyond measure and impossible to attain. So, they hatch a plan to steal it.

Failed attempts lead them to a genius master plan—they’ll swipe the security code to Zelinsky’s convenience store by seducing the owner’s daughter, Mary Zelinsky. It becomes Billy’s mission to befriend her and get the information by any means necessary. But Mary isn’t your average teenage girl. She’s a computer loving, expert coder, already strides ahead of Billy in ability, with a wry sense of humor and a hidden, big heart. But what starts as a game to win Mary’s affection leaves Billy with a gut-wrenching choice: deceive the girl who may well be his first love or break a promise to his best friends.

A fun read. Entertaining in a caper-ish way. Could see it on Netflix, etc. I like the theme of creativity.

The Goldfinch by Donna Tartt

A sprawling, page-turning epic, part crime thriller/mystery/literary fiction about art, fate, and the meaning of life. I adore Russian literature and this was definitely an homage. Lots of people doing puzzling things, led by their twisted hearts. People can't help but love what they love, even if it's wrong. Beautiful descriptions of art and antiques, as well as a New York that has drifted off into the sunset.
The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

Cora is a slave on a cotton plantation in Georgia. Life is hellish for all the slaves but especially bad for Cora. When Caesar, a recent arrival from Virginia, tells her about the Underground Railroad, they decide to take a terrifying risk and escape. Matters do not go as planned and, though they manage to find a station and head north, they are being hunted.

In Whitehead's conception, the Underground Railroad is no metaphor - engineers and conductors operate a secret network of tracks and tunnels beneath the Southern soil. Cora and Caesar's first stop is South Carolina, in a city that initially seems like a haven - but the city's placid surface masks an insidious scheme designed for its black denizens. Even worse: Ridgeway, the relentless slave catcher, is close on their heels. Forced to flee again, Cora embarks on a harrowing flight, state by state, seeking true freedom.

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