

17 books to soak up this summer

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Arts & Culture

Harvard Library staff recommendations cover romance, fantasy, sci-fi, mystery, memoir, music, politics, history

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Harvard Library Communications

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For many of us, summer is the slow season, when the days are long and the nights are soft — the perfect time to reach for our to-read lists. Perhaps you like to stake out a spot on a beach or lakeside, armed with an old favorite or a new curiosity.

If you're wondering what to read next — a sweltering summer romance to help you simmer down, a travelogue to travel with, a hard-boiled mystery to escape into, or a historical-political treatise to perhaps change your outlook — consider these recommendations from Harvard Library staffers.

Titles available through Hollis contain links.

“The Friend Zone,” “The Happy Ever After Playlist,” and “Life’s Too Short” (three-book series)

Abby Jimenez

Romantic comedy, fiction

To be honest, these were the first books in a very long time that made me legitimately laugh out loud. Abby Jimenez writes with a flair that is just captivating and truly draws the reader into the story. I couldn't put these books down. Laughter and tears and, oh, the romance! I really hope these become movies some day!

— **M.J. Grein**, senior administrative coordinator at Countway Library

“Unreasonable Hospitality: The Remarkable Power of Giving People More Than They Expect”

Will Guidara

Memoir, business, nonfiction

An intriguing book about providing people with a moment of joy while securing it for yourself at the same time. All set in the extremely stressful world of New York restaurants, this book is part of the readings for [Associate Director for Access Services] Steve Beardsley's team meetings. It also influenced, and is featured in, the TV show “The Bear.” Through real stories of various restaurants, the book illustrates the distance a person can go to make a simple, standard, transactional relationship into something wonderful for all parties. A highly entertaining and a fun read.

— **Lee H. Fenn**, Access Services

“Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle”

Dervla Murphy
Travel, nonfiction

Irish writer Dervla Murphy traveled alone to many non-Western countries, almost always by bicycle. She lived willingly with hardship and privation: intense cold and heat; fleas; unreliable food supplies; poor road conditions or no roads; no doctors, no laundromats, and no bike mechanics. In “Full Tilt” and other books, she took me to places I’ll never visit and shared experiences I’ll never have, as many great books do.

— **June Rutkowski**, cataloger at Harvard Library Information and Technical Services

“The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York”

Robert Caro
Biography, nonfiction

“The Power Broker” is an exquisite tome of investigative journalism that illuminates the foundation of today’s intertwined crises of urban transportation and land use. Caro chronicles the catastrophes that have befallen New York (and the nation) thanks to the precedent set by Robert Moses’ monumental 40-year reign over city and state governmental agencies. Moses’ insistence that the ends justify the means and his disregard for anyone else’s lived experiences provide urgent reminders that institutional decision-makers must prioritize social infrastructure alongside other goals.

— **Alessandra Seiter**, community engagement librarian at Harvard Kennedy School

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/OtJ_KvGVPzo

“Bookshops & Bonedust”

Travis Baldree
Fantasy, fiction

Viv, the newest member of the Rackam’s Ravens adventurer company, just knows she’s going to be an integral part of the team — up until the point when she barely survives the first battle. She’s now in for weeks of boredom in a sleepy inn in a small town. Good thing there is a bookshop! This is a great choice if you are looking for a fun read, a bit of adventure, fun characters, and a summer romance.

— **Debbie Ginsberg**, faculty services manager at Harvard Law School Library

“Easily Slip Into Another World: A Life in Music”

Henry Threadgill and Brent Hayes Edwards
Autobiography, music, nonfiction

The autobiography of the Pulitzer Prize-winning composer and avant-garde jazz saxophonist and flutist Henry Threadgill is an extremely readable and hard-to-put-down memoir. As expected, one learns of the many influences that led to Threadgill’s unique and instantly recognizable music. What makes this memoir unique from other

autobiographies of jazz musicians are the nearly 100 pages devoted to Threadgill's experiences as a Black infantryman in the Vietnam War; these memories are raw and vividly told.

— **Ed Copenhagen**, reference archivist

“Dictatorship! It’s Easier Than You Think!”

Sarah Kendzior and Andrea Chalupa; illustrated by Kasia Babis

Graphic nonfiction

Since it's an election year — a beach read on a very serious topic. A graphic historical-political treatise, “Dictatorship!” provides insights into how democracies slide into authoritarianism, how dictators gain and maintain power — but with the kind of satirical irreverence that makes reading about a weighty and depressing subject seem almost enjoyable. But be forewarned: You may look at the world through different eyes after this.

— **Daniel Becker**, reference, collections, and instruction librarian for the Botany Libraries

“Listen for the Lie”

Amy Tintera

Mystery, fiction

I don't normally read murder mystery novels, but this was chosen by my book club and I was hooked from beginning to end! The sarcastic humor of the main character lightens the tone and prevents the story from getting too dark. I read this book but others who listened to the audiobook said it was really well done.

— **Hannah Hack**, administrative coordinator at Harvard University Archives

“Shubeik Lubeik”

Deena Mohamed

Fantasy, fiction

In what may be the best book I've read all year, “Shubeik Lubeik” follows the path of three wishes, sold by a man who would prefer it if wishes did not exist at all, across a fantastical Cairo as they link Aziza, Nour, and Shokry across generations, classes, and beliefs. While the interwoven story is powerful, it is really Nour's struggles with depression and the role a powerful wish might play in “fixing” it that I can't shake from my mind. All of the visual metaphors are apt, but the way that Deena Mohamed uses words — words that pour out uncontrolled and hang in the air as if they hold real, physical space — that is something unique that I hope other cartoonists find ways to embrace.

— **Matthew Noe**, lead collection and knowledge management librarian at Harvard Medical School

Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/dNljS1SLXGQ>

“Scorched Grace”

Margot Douaihy
Mystery, fiction

This book takes the tired conventions of the hard-boiled detective noir and revives them by centering the story on Sister Holiday, a queer, tattooed Catholic nun with a checkered past, while she investigates a series of arsons and associated murders centered on the convent school where she lives and works in modern-day New Orleans. The mystery itself is compelling, but it was the idiosyncratic and morally complex set of characters that really drew me in. This is the first of a new series, and I’m intrigued to know what comes next.

— **Rachel Greenhaus**, library assistant for printed and published materials, Schlesinger Library

“How Infrastructure Works: Inside the Systems That Shape Our World”

Deb Chachra
Nonfiction

Since seeing Deb Chachra in conversation with Sara Hendren at Harvard Book Store, I haven’t stopped talking about this book with anyone willing to listen! Chachra trains your eye to see the largely invisible infrastructure that underlies our everyday lives, and since she lives in Cambridge many of the book’s examples are set in the Boston area. She emphasizes how the design of infrastructural systems often negatively impacts the most vulnerable members of our society. Most importantly, she makes clear that another world is possible — we can design equitable infrastructure, for ourselves and for the generations to come.

— **Chelcie Juliet Rowell**, associate head of digital collections discovery at Harvard Library

“Some Desperate Glory”

Emily Tesh
Science fiction

I cried both times that I read this book, once with my eyes and once with my ears, but they weren’t wretched tears. Rather, I felt like I was coming apart and being put back together in a different configuration. It’s a space opera with complicated timelines, but don’t be put off if you’re not a regular science fiction reader. It’s a story of deradicalization, and healing from religious trauma, and embracing your unrecognized queerness, and coming to fiercely believe in a different social contract based on community care, rather than the social contract of individual might you were raised to enforce.

— **Chelcie Juliet Rowell**, associate head of digital collections discovery at Harvard Library

“Underground: A Human History of the Worlds Beneath Our Feet”

Will Hunt
History, nonfiction

Part travelogue, part memoir, and part history, Will Hunt embeds himself with those who explore natural and constructed worlds below. Interesting and exciting, “Underground” mines theories as to why some love the deep while others avoid it. A memorable read.

— **Colin Lukens**, senior repository manager, Office for Scholarly Communication

“Never a Dull Moment: 1971 — The Year That Rock Exploded”

David Hepworth
Music, nonfiction

David Hepworth explores popular music and musicians from 1971, positioning that year as the zenith of album-based rock and when the genre became self-aware. Funny, a bit gossipy, well-researched, and beautifully organized, Hepworth is a peerless historian of rock and roll’s adolescent period. Added bonus: It will inspire your playlist for the entire summer!

— **Colin Lukens**, senior repository manager, Office for Scholarly Communication

Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/x20ixZFgj_g

“Nine Lives: Mystery, Magic, Death, and Life in New Orleans”

Dan Baum
History, biography, nonfiction

I recently went to New Orleans and wanted to read more about the city, so I picked up “Nine Lives.” This fascinating book follows nine people living in New Orleans from very different walks of life. The book spans the period of time between Hurricane Betsy in 1965 through the devastating Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Each person chronicled shows a different facet of New Orleans culture and how resilient people and communities can be.

— **Susan Gilman**, librarian at Tozzer Library