

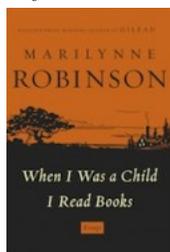
# Readings

## Bulk Up Your Beach Bag

### Zócalo's Top 10 Summer Reads (With a Little Help from Our Friends)



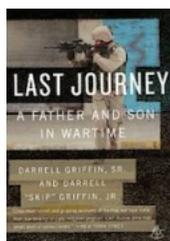
Who was it that deemed summer the season for pink-jacketed novels and glossy embossed thrillers? Not Zócalo's high school teachers, who assigned Machiavelli and David Halberstam to tide us over until Labor Day. And not Zócalo, either. If you're going to get your body in shape for the beach, why not spend some of your time there exercising your brain? So, embracing the spirit of summer edification and thumbing our noses at the publishing establishment, we asked some Zócalo friends what nerdy new nonfiction books they think are worthy of our beach bags and suitcases between now and September.



#### **When I Was a Child I Read Books: Essays by Marilynne Robinson**

The book I'm packing in my beach bag (really an oversized purse that I will lug around on my usual errands because I'm going nowhere this summer) is this essay collection. Robinson is known best for her novels, but when it comes to nonfiction I find her a special and exquisite practitioner. Her essays are rooted in questions about the Bible and Christian faith. But they're also preoccupied with many of my own preoccupations: the corrosive rhetoric of the American political process, the rise of idiocracy (not her term), and the austere enchantments of the American West. Perfect reading while you're waiting for an oil change at Jiffy Lube, which is where I plan to be soon.

—*Meghan Daum* is the author of *Life Would Be Perfect if I Lived in That House* and a Los Angeles Times columnist.



#### **The Last Journey: A Father and Son in Wartime by Darrell Griffin, Sr. and Darrell "Skip" Griffin, Jr.**

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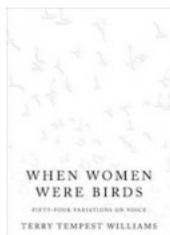
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The courage to think and love are at the heart of this story. How does a father pay homage to his son whose life was cut short while on tour in Iraq? Griffin writes a searing, honest, and compelling book about the journey that veterans, their families, and we as a human species face when we go to war.

—**Ralph Lewin** is president and CEO of Cal Humanities.

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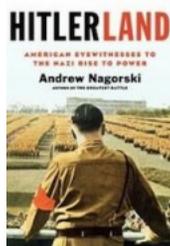
***When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice* by Terry Tempest**

**Williams**

I reviewed Williams's new memoir for *Orion Magazine*, and in the months since I've read it I've found my mind wandering back to the people and emotions and landscapes she evokes. Williams' writing manages to feel simultaneously meditative and urgent, at peace with itself and always searching. *When Women Were Birds* is a strange book, and it's also a beautiful one.

—**Cheryl Strayed** is the author of *Wild* and *Tiny Beautiful Things*, and writes the "Dear Sugar" column for *TheRumpus.net*.

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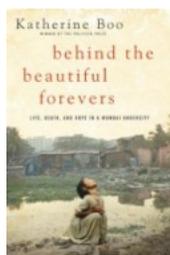
***Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazi Rise to Power* by Andrew**

**Nagorski**

*Hitlerland* is the story of Hitler's rise to power through the eyes of Americans in Germany. Some of the spectators to this historical tragedy are familiar, like journalist William Shirer. Others are more improbable, like the daughter of the American ambassador, who experiences the new regime through a succession of Nazi lovers and brushes off early incidents of anti-Semitic violence. Dorothy Thompson, Ed Murrow, and an array of other journalists watch with concern and alarm as the Nazis consolidate their power and the catastrophe unfolds, providing a fascinatingly intimate account of history.

—**Anne-Marie O'Connor** is a writer for the *Washington Post* based in *Mexico City* and the author of *The Lady in Gold*.

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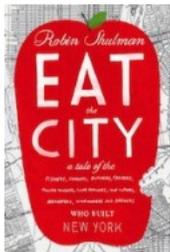
***Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* by**

**Katherine Boo**

I enthusiastically recommend *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, which is about an obscure incident that got no attention whatsoever—the self-immolation of a woman inside a Mumbai slum. But this book encompasses a whole society. Boo is one of the only American journalists who write seriously about poverty, and here she trains her gaze on one tumbledown community at the margins of India's economic boom. This is a book of Tolstoyan scope that will make you angry before it makes you laugh. All the way, it will make you think.

—**Tom Zoellner** is a professor of English at Chapman University and the author of five nonfiction books, most recently *A Safeway* in Arizona, with *Train: Smoke, Iron and the Invention of the Modern World* forthcoming in 2013.

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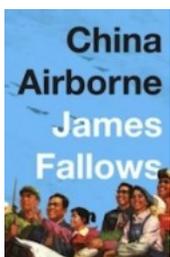


***Eat the City: A Tale of the Fishers, Foragers, Butchers, Farmers, Poultry Minders, Sugar Refiners, Cane Cutters, Beekeepers, Winemakers, and Brewers Who Built New York* by Robin Shulman**

Don't skip this smart, dogged tale of the true roots of New York City's artisanal food movement. Long before backyard chickens and foraging were hip, the vacant lots throughout the five boroughs were home to food gardens and livestock, sugar cane and honeybees. Shulman breezily chronicles both iterations of New York foodies—and reaches even further back, to Manhattan's agrarian roots. Bonus: *Eat the City* is rife with tales perfect for making small talk.

—**Tracie McMillan** is the author of *The American Way of Eating* and is a fellow at Brandeis University's Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism.

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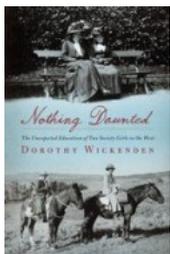


***China Airborne* by James Fallows**

Fallows compares China's Herculean efforts to modernize its creaky aerospace industry to the building of the Transcontinental Railroad in the 1860s. Yet the book's larger narrative is about how China's economic growth is affecting its deeply traditional society, one in which physical mobility has long been needlessly difficult. Meticulously reported and gorgeously written, *China Airborne* is an essential read for anyone keen to understand how China's dysfunctional politics might undermine its global aspirations, as well as how transportation can alter a nation's psyche.

—**Brendan Koerner** is a contributing editor at *Wired* and author of *Now the Hell Will Start*.

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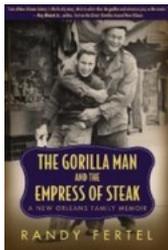


***Nothing Daunted: The Unexpected Education of Two Society Girls in the West* by Dorothy Wickenden**

*Nothing Daunted* is the tale of two well-educated young New York women, one of whom was Wickenden's grandmother, who in 1916 abandoned their regularly scheduled lives—which for a young woman of the time, basically meant marriage—to spend an adventurous year teaching school in northwestern Colorado. In addition to being a lively portrait of life on the frontier, it's a tale of female friendship and a look at how women managed to find an interlude of freedom in lives that were otherwise circumscribed. Poignantly, the women would later describe that single year as the best of their lives. One can imagine them, departing the settlement to take up more conventional destinies after their adventure was over, saying to one another: "We'll always have Elkhead."

—**Liza Mundy** is the author of *The Richer Sex* and a staff writer for the *Washington Post*.

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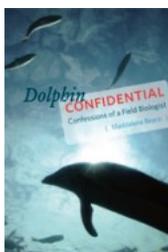


***The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak: A New Orleans Family Memoir* by**

**Randy Fertel**

My favorite stories involve families, food, and the City of New Orleans—and they’re all wrapped up in *The Gorilla Man and the Empress of Steak*. Inside that odd title is the story of Fertel’s parents: his father inherited some money, which allowed him to indulge frivolities such as running for mayor on the promise that he’d buy two gorillas for the New Orleans Zoo (he lost but bought them anyway). Fertel’s mother, Ruth, took over a local eatery called Chris Steak House—and thus was born the legendary Ruth’s Chris Steak House. They divorced early; Randy had a love-hate relationship with his dad and an acrimonious one with his mom. How much so? Well, he worked for the restaurant for many years and ended up suing her. It’s a colorful tale that’s best read over a big, juicy steak and a stiff cocktail.

—*Oscar Garza* is news editor for KPCC, Southern California Public Radio.



***Dolphin Confidential: Confessions of a Field Biologist* by Maddalena Bearzi**

You’ll meet the amazing dolphins who live in the so-called metropolitan waters off Los Angeles—as well as plenty of colorful characters of the human variety—in the lively, informative *Dolphin Confidential*. Marine biologist Bearzi is an appealing literary companion. Her narrative is charming and accessible, full of fun scientific facts and beautifully observed detail. Still, as easygoing as the story may be, Bearzi doesn’t shy away from challenging, big-picture issues: wildlife conservation, animal cognition, and the shared health concerns of animals and humans. *Dolphin Confidential* is the perfect beach read: you can look up from its pages entertained and infinitely more knowledgeable about the marine habitat before your very eyes.

—*Kathryn Bowers* and *Barbara Natterson-Horowitz* are co-authors of *Zoobiquity*.

\*Photo courtesy of [Stewart Black](#).

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1. *David kipen* says:

[May 29, 2012 at 5:18 am](#)

So that’s the publishing universe to you guys? Pink-jacketed novels and glossy embossed thrillers on one side, nerdy nonfiction on the other? Your events don’t avoid fiction enough, you have to make your pollees avoid it too? Wake up! There’s lots of lousy nonfiction out there, like, I don’t know, Ann Rule, and plenty of good fiction without color-coding. Remember Sturgeon’s Law: 95% of everything is crap. But Theodore Sturgeon was a fiction writer — science fiction, actually — so you may not have heard of him...

Harrumph,

David Kipen

Book critic, The Madeleine Brand Show

2. *Zócalo* says:

[May 29, 2012 at 10:33 am](#)

OK, we’ll grant Mr. Kipen that we’ve heard of this non-pink-jacketed fiction of which he speaks.