

Chuck Klosterman. (2009) . Eating the dinosaur. 256 pages.

Klosterman is a well-known pop culture and media philosopher and humorist; Eating the Dinosaur is his most recent collection of previously unpublished essays. While marginally more serious and philosophical than some of his other efforts (ie. Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs and Chuck Klosterman IV: A Decade of Curious People and Dangerous Ideas) , Klosterman still maintains his boldly funny approach as he deconstructs media, consumption and pop culture from time travel to Kurt Cobain and David Koresh, or from ABBA to the advertising strategies of Madmen and PepsiCo, always forging unexpected and amusing connections. Eating the Dinosaur consists of 13 fun, wryly-written essays that will appeal to readers of pop culture and media criticism and humour; fans of Klosterman will appreciate this volume, as will fans of other humorist writers such as David Sedaris or mass media and culture critics like Neil Postman.

Peter Nowak. (2010) . Sex, bombs and burgers: How war, porn and fast food shaped technology as we know it. 384 pages.

Nowak, a former editor and writer for The Globe and Mail, writes about the North American cultural penchants for pornography, war, and fatty foods, and where these obsessions have landed us. As the title suggests, Nowak ties the development of technology to these primary vices, and traces many of our most popular and innovative technologies (now permanent fixtures of middle-class existence – microwaves, Tupperware, hand-held cameras, silly putty) back to the porn, military, and fast food industries. Clever and well-researched, informative and insightful, Sex, Bombs and Burgers offers an entertaining overview of the possible sociological and cultural roots of technology. Newark, a science and technology journalist and blogger, was originally intrigued by the bizarre success of Paris Hilton's leaked sex tape that bolstered her career as a media personality; on examining the tape more closely, he made some fascinating and even humorous connections that led him into a more detailed exploration of industry, technology, and popular culture. This book is well-suited to readers who like technology but are unfamiliar with its roots and history, and for readers who enjoy learning as they read but are also looking for some entertainment value.

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PSY427 Media Psychology Leisure Reading Guide



Fiction

A.N. Wilson. (2005) . My name is Legion. 506 pages.

Set in modern-day London, this satirical novel features a fictional tabloid journal called The Daily Legion and its crooked publisher, Lennox Mark. The tabloid is secretly funded through Mark's partnership with a corrupt slave-owning African government, a fact that is discovered by a monk/missionary who attempts to out the government through the tabloid. To save his magazine, Mark hires a young boy to discredit the monk; unbeknownst to any of them, Mark, the boy, and the monk are connected in unforeseen ways. The boy, Peter, exhibits multiple personalities, each a manifestation of some facet of British contemporary culture that Wilson's narrative critiques. My Name is Legion is a story about sensationalism, gossip, shady reporting, and manipulation. Fans of rich, multifarious characterization (particularly of those characters of questionable moral integrity) will enjoy Wilson's careful development of numerous characters. An amusing, irreverent, and ruthless satire of modern England, celebrity gossip, and trash journalism, this is not a warm or hopeful novel, and is likely to appeal to readers who appreciate detached and analytical satire, particularly as it pertains to journalism (perhaps fans of Warren Ellis's Transmetropolitan comic book series) .

Joyce Carol Oates. (2008) . My sister, my love: The intimate story of Skylar Rampike. 592 pages.

Oates' 36th novel, My Sister, My Love, is set in a 1990s' upper-middle class American suburb where status, appearance, reputation, and social conquests give meaning to the lives of its inhabitants. Inspired by the JonBenét Ramsey tragedy, the novel follows the story of Skylar Rampike, whose six year-old figure-skating prodigy sister is found murdered in their home. The Rampike family is thrust into what Skylar refers to as 'Tabloid Hell,' where they are subjected to media dissection and reinvention. Oates' narrative explores vanity, privilege, family dysfunction, tabloidism, and the sexualizing of children; these concepts are filtered through the eyes of a damaged and rarely reliable narrator who is just as much a tabloid casualty as his celebrity sister. On one level, this novel is a fast-paced and compelling whodunit; on the other hand, the deeply affected and child-like narration gives the novel a stylistically disturbing feel, while the subject matter is handled both brutally and satirically. Readers who enjoy very stylized and unsettlingly intimate first-person narration may appreciate this novel, and the exploration of the social forces present in true-life crimes (and their highly publicized aftermath) like the JonBenét case will appeal to readers with an interest in the sociology of crime and mass media.

George Saunders. (2006) . In persuasion nation: Stories. 240 pages.

Saunders' stories are set in a potential, not-so-futuristic American dominated by advertising and consumer culture. Although his stories are short, satirical bites, Saunders treats his characters tenderly; while critiquing a media-drenched culture, he both displays and evokes a high level of sympathy for the characters trapped by the distressing distractions of that world. The stories in this collection explore a family trip marred by intruding advertisements, the sale of orphans for market research, the efforts of a public relations rep in concealing a crisis, live junk food products, and more. Saunders uses his characters to explore how true humanity survives within a context of media and mass market coercion and manipulation. The satirical yet human characteristics of Saunders' writing will appeal to readers of Kurt Vonnegut, while his postmodernist slant will be of interest to readers of David Foster Wallace or Donald Barthelme.

Dana Spiotta. (2011) . Stone Arabia. 256 pages.

Set in 2004 Los Angeles, Stone Arabia explores the contemporary need to document and/or fabricate our lives. The story describes would-be musician Nik Kranis's efforts to 'self-curate' and carve a place for himself in history. Although Nik never fulfilled his dreams of becoming a famous musician, he creates just such an existence for his alter-ego Nik Worth. The Chronicles of Nik Worth's make-believe life are comprised of 30 years worth of recordings and fake reviews, set lists, liner notes, and newspaper clippings. Nik's invented history inspires his sister, who has begun to (a) sentimentalize breaking news' stories that have nothing to do with her, and (b) fear for her own susceptibility to their mother's dementia, to document her own painstakingly true story, and his 20-something niece to plan a documentary based on Nik's made-up reality. Stone Arabia's linked plots examine empathy, fame, isolation, and mediated experience in a digitized world, and the backdrops to these themes are sibling devotion and rock music. Fans of music writing will be impressed by Nik's contribution to the narrative. Although complexly plotted, Stone Arabia is fast-paced and relatively brief.

Jennifer Egan. (2001) . Look at me. 415 pages.

Recent Pulitzer Prize winner Jennifer Egan's earlier novel, Look at Me, takes place in contemporary America. This multilayered novel centres around a model named Charlotte whose face has been rendered unrecognizable by reconstructive surgery following a car accident. While Charlotte struggles to match her sense of self with her new physical identity, her story becomes interwoven with that of a teenaged girl by the same name whose secret life involves sexual exploits with older men. The parallel stories, and the mysterious connection of the two Charlottes to a man named Z and to a new Internet experiment where identity is tradable and commodifiable, explore reality and identity in a franchised world dominated by consumerism. The story is moving, yet haunting and hard-edged; the unexpected and almost surreal intertwining of plots is reminiscent of David Lynch, though the story is in the end more dramatic than fantastical. Also unlike Lynch, Egan reveals the underlying structures of her story but withholds them long enough so the tale unfolds like a mystery.

Nonfiction

Christopher E. Bell. (2010) . American Idolatry: Celebrity, commodity, and reality television. 232 pages.

This book uses the reality TV show American Idol to examine the concept of celebrity as a manufactured product. Bell positions reality television as the ultimate triumph of the culture industry: entirely revenue-centred, manufactured, and requiring little to no cognitive participation from viewers. The book also demonstrates how the goal behind American Idol and other reality programming is to expand the American Dream to include celebrity, and the possibility for the average, everyday American to attain celebrity status, however temporary. The popularity of shows like Idol lies in the producers' insistence to their at-home viewers that the contestants are just like them. Bell's book is well-researched and highly readable; theoretical concepts are employed eloquently and accessibly. The result is a fun, fast-paced and informative read that simultaneously reveals Idol's seamiest and most manipulative aspects while celebrating its success in mining the zeitgeist of American mass consumer culture and creating an exemplary product.