



Nonfiction Book Group

Reading List: January – June 2022

January (1/10/22, 7 p.m.)

[Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism](#), Amanda Montell

What makes “cults” so intriguing and frightening? What makes them powerful? The reason why so many of us binge Manson documentaries by the dozen and fall down rabbit holes researching suburban moms gone QAnon is because we’re looking for a satisfying explanation for what causes people to join—and more importantly, stay in—extreme groups. We secretly want to know: could it happen to me? Amanda Montell’s argument is that, on some level, it already has. Through juicy storytelling and cutting original research, Montell exposes the verbal elements that make a wide spectrum of communities “cultish,” revealing how they affect followers of groups as notorious as Heaven’s Gate, but also how they pervade our modern start-ups, Peloton leaderboards, and Instagram feeds.

February (2/14/22, 7 p.m.)

[Bad Blood: Secrets and Lies in a Silicon Valley Startup](#), John Carreyrou

In 2014, Theranos founder and CEO Elizabeth Holmes was widely seen as the female Steve Jobs: a brilliant Stanford dropout whose startup "unicorn" promised to revolutionize the medical industry with a machine that would make blood tests significantly faster and easier. Backed by investors such as Larry Ellison and Tim Draper, Theranos sold shares in a fundraising round that valued the company at \$9 billion, putting Holmes's worth at an estimated \$4.7 billion. There was just one problem: The technology didn't work. For years, Holmes had been misleading investors, FDA officials, and her own employees. When Carreyrou, working at *The Wall Street Journal*, got a tip from a former Theranos employee and started asking questions, both Carreyrou and the *Journal* were threatened with lawsuits. Undaunted, the newspaper ran the first of dozens of Theranos articles in late 2015. By early 2017, the company's value was zero and Holmes faced potential legal action from the government and her investors. Here is the riveting story of the biggest corporate fraud since Enron, a disturbing cautionary tale set amid the bold promises and gold-rush frenzy of Silicon Valley.

March (3/14/22, 7 p.m.)

[Sapiens: A Brief History of Mankind](#), Yuval Noah Harari

One hundred thousand years ago, at least six different species of humans inhabited Earth. Yet today there is only one—homo sapiens. What happened to the others? And what may happen to us? Most books about the history of humanity pursue either a historical or a biological approach, but Dr. Yuval Noah Harari breaks the mold with this highly original book that begins about 70,000 years ago with the appearance of modern cognition. From examining the role evolving humans have played in the global ecosystem to charting the rise of empires, *Sapiens* integrates history and science to reconsider accepted narratives, connect past developments with contemporary concerns, and examine specific events within the context of larger ideas.



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April (4/11/22, 7 p.m.)

[Hallucinations](#), Oliver Sacks

Have you ever seen something that wasn't really there? Heard someone call your name in an empty house? Sensed someone following you and turned around to find nothing? Hallucinations don't belong wholly to the insane. Much more commonly, they are linked to sensory deprivation, intoxication, illness, or injury. Here, with his usual elegance, curiosity, and compassion, Dr. Sacks weaves together stories of his patients and of his own mind-altering experiences to illuminate what hallucinations tell us about the organization and structure of our brains, how they have influenced every culture's folklore and art, and why the potential for hallucination is present in us all, a vital part of the human condition.

May (5/9/22, 7 p.m.)

[The Constitution of Knowledge](#), Jonathan Rauch

Disinformation. Trolling. Conspiracies. Social media pile-ons. Campus intolerance. On the surface, these recent additions to our daily vocabulary appear to have little in common. But together, they are driving an epistemic crisis: a multi-front challenge to America's ability to distinguish fact from fiction and elevate truth above falsehood. In this pathbreaking book, Jonathan Rauch reaches back to the parallel eighteenth-century developments of liberal democracy and science to explain what he calls the "Constitution of Knowledge"--our social system for turning disagreement into truth. By explicating the Constitution of Knowledge and probing the war on reality, Rauch arms defenders of truth with a clearer understanding of what they must protect, why they must do--and how they can do it.

June (6/13/22, 7 p.m.)

[Fentanyl, Inc.](#), Ben Westhoff

A deeply human story, *Fentanyl, Inc.* is the first deep-dive investigation of a hazardous and illicit industry that has created a worldwide epidemic, ravaging communities and overwhelming and confounding government agencies that are challenged to combat it.

About the Nonfiction Book Discussion Group

The non-fiction book group is tailored to curious readers who are interested in expanding their general knowledge of topics, writing styles, and forms across a variety of subject matters that include, but are not limited to: investigative journalism, technology, environmentalism and the outdoors, politics, science, and psychology. The group meets on the second Monday of each month at 7 p.m. All are welcome to attend.