

Summer Reading Discussions Take Over Campus



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On Friday, September 8, after an inspiring convocation address by Will Speers, teachers and students gathered in small groups to discuss the 2017 summer reading books. This year's summer reading assignment asked students to read three books from a list of texts, both fiction and non-fiction, from a wide range of subject areas, recommended by faculty members. (In addition, all students were also [required to read the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead](#); Whitehead will visit St. Andrew's in the spring of 2018.) "It was a fun, relaxing, and lively way to celebrate the opening of the school year and our lives as readers and ongoing learners," said Dean of Teaching and Learning Elizabeth Roach. Here are some testimonials by both students and teachers:

Discussing the books that I had chosen to read with my classmates was an incredibly valuable experience. Because we had read whichever books most intrigued us and had not been given specific discussion questions, we were able to discuss the books completely freely. Everybody in the discussions was invested and interested, and each person brought their own perspective and interpretation of the books. My favorite moment of that afternoon took place in a discussion about the graphic novel *Persepolis*, which discusses the Islamic Revolution. A completely new layer was added to the meaning of the book when two of my classmates—one who had grown up Muslim and one of Iranian descent—shared their perspectives based off their personal

experiences. Their insight helped the rest of us to understand a new dimension of the book and to more deeply understand the personal struggles communicated in the novel.

-Macklin Fishman '19

This year's book discussion was a real treat for me. The experience of getting to choose a book [[*Home Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*](#)] that was fun for students to read and discuss, that covered material with lasting implications for student's college and career goals, and that had implications for the ultimate purpose and meaning of all of their lives, was deeply gratifying. Our students will be entering a world that seems alien to me and the rest of my generation. It is perhaps impossible to predict the economic opportunities and pitfalls in a future where super-intelligent algorithms and machines make short work of all of the jobs that have kept humanity so busy; where next generation nano- and bio-technology transform death into a treatable disease; where the narratives that we have used to construct and organize our intersubjective reality become superfluous. But, I cannot think of a more capable, more invested group of scholars with whom I'd rather do this work!

-Harvey Johnson, Science Department Chair

The summer reading book discussions this year were such a great experience! I loved being able to pick what to read over my summer based on my interests, and also loved discussing books that I was passionate about, which made me delve much deeper into the conversations. One of the books that I read did not have a faculty present to discuss, but I had been so interested in it that another student, Sylvia Reed, and I, decided to lead a session by ourselves! To our surprise, over 30 students showed up, all just as interested in our book as we were. The conversation was a success, with the help of Mr. Speers, because everyone wanted to be talking about these incredible books. I am so happy we got to discuss these books and look forward to talking about them more in the future!

-Wilder Berl '19

I was involved in two discussions: [*All the Light You Cannot See*](#) was the first—it was a student-run discussion initially, and then I was asked to join to help steer the thinking a bit. I was really impressed with the thinking the students were doing. There were about 25 students, across all grades. The juniors and seniors made the younger students feel completely a part of the discussion, especially when we got into a challenging question about how the book ended, and what the title meant.

My second one was [*The Sound and the Fury*](#), with six students. I was really impressed with their thinking on this complex novel—how much they actually understood in their understandable confusion. Again, they helped each other when they were lost; they knew the novel; they began to piece it together perceptively. We ended after 30 minutes, but then two of the students returned a minute later because they were still so interested in this novel and wanted to keep talking about it, which we did for another half hour.

My overall sense of the afternoon is that for the first time in my career, I felt we had worthwhile summer reading. Students chose the books they wanted to read, and then were invited to a

discussion with a faculty member. Instead of obligatory book reports or brief essays, students were able to discuss, question, learn, share with teachers and students from across the community. It was a tremendously exciting afternoon of reflecting.

-Will Speers, Associate Head of School

For our summer reading, we had the opportunity to select from a list of books recommended by each teacher in the school. I enjoyed getting the chance to choose books that covered topics I was either interested in, passionate about, or had always wanted to read. When we returned to school, the book I had wanted to discuss was not having a session, so another student, Wilder Berl, and I got permission to run a talk ourselves. While our discussion was definitely not the most organized, I loved listening to so many people's ideas on a book that we had all obviously enjoyed, especially because I was able to hear from all different grades, something we don't usually get to do in our everyday English classes.

-Sylvia Reed '19

It was such a wonderful experience to discuss Edward P. Jones' [The Known World](#) with a terrific group of students who chose to tackle it this summer. It's an enormously challenging book—certainly not a beach read!—sprawling in scope and wrestling with some of the worst tendencies human beings have. But on that beautiful afternoon as we sat outside on my patio to discuss it, it was clear from the students' great insights and questions that they had thought deeply about the book, and we were able to range widely over a lot of the issues most central to it. One member of the group had come to our discussion because he was interested in the book and hadn't read it—one of his book discussions was unable to convene so he joined us instead—and he left determined to read the book in the months to come. I'm excited for us to do this again in the future!

-Emily Pressman, History Department Chair

All of the students who chose to read [The Score Takes Care of Itself](#) showed up to our discussion with a lot to talk about from what they had taken away from the book. I had a couple sections of the book I wanted to point out myself, but never really got around to it when I opened up the floor to the students about anything in the book they found interesting or that they may have had experiences with in the past. Although the book is written from the perspective of a football coach, all the students were able to pick out different themes from their life, whether in sports, class or everyday life that were relatable to themselves. With the different examples they read about in the book, many of the students felt they could incorporate some of the values and lessons learned to better themselves and their own lives if and when those situations were to occur again. Overall, I feel the students really grasped the material in the book and walked away more confident after reading the book on how to better themselves as leaders in different aspects of their lives.

-Patrick Moffitt, Head Coach, Saints Varsity Football

Personally, I thought the summer reading book discussions were very thoughtful and collaborative. I was able to see many different perspectives about how other students and faculty interpreted different parts of books we discussed. Surprisingly, I also saw differences with how others read the book to when they vacationed on the beach to when they were up late at night in bed reading the book. I remember one discussion so vividly about the book [Steve Jobs](#), by Walter Isaacson. What made this discussion so lively was the connections our group made to our world's current use of technology. Our discussion leader brilliantly contrasted today's use of technology to when Apple wasn't the big brand it is today. Overall, this experiences allowed me to learn so much from my peers and proctors that I didn't see on my own while reading.

-Lamar Duncan '20

The book meeting last Friday helped me better understand the context of the book. We talked about how Siddhartha thinks that wisdom cannot be passed down but learned. We discussed Siddhartha's religious beliefs and how he came up with his own set of beliefs due to the fact that he did not believe that wisdom could be passed down. We talked also about how Siddhartha experimented with different belief systems.



-Jesse Tuglu '20

Toward the end of [Siddhartha](#), the title character claims, "Wisdom cannot be passed on. Wisdom which a wise man tries to pass on to someone always sounds like foolishness." Later he explicitly rejects "following teachers." We tested this claim, producing different arguments about what teachers can and cannot do, what they should and should not attempt to do, and what students should or should not seek from teachers. As part of this conversation, students presented differing definitions of "wisdom" to help them evaluate under what definitions they would agree with Siddhartha. Students raised examples from St. Andrew's classrooms and from Mr. Speers' talk about productive confusion.

-Terence Gilheany, Religious Studies Department Chair

Emily St. John Mandel's [Station Eleven](#) is extremely hard to categorize. It is a book about a traveling orchestra and Shakespeare troupe that explores civilization after the apocalypse. It is also a book about the effects of the deadly disease that wiped out most of the human population. The book effortlessly switches between describing people in the modern world and deserted museum of a world, how people adapt to change, and how the survivors cling onto the art and humanity that we take for granted.

-Cierra Martinez '20

Our discussion of Dale Ray Phillips's [*My People's Waltz*](#) proved to be an inspiring way to kick off the new year. The collection, which came into my life during a turbulent transition from finishing grad school to finding my first teaching job, is a novel-in-stories closely focused on charting the emotional life of Richard, a good-hearted but flawed Southerner trying his best to understand himself--as a father, as a son and as a husband. In our discussion, I asked students to read from their favorite passages, and I was heartened to see how enthusiastically they responded. Each reading, whether it came from a story about Richard as a boy helping his father fix motorcycles in North Carolina or as a middle-aged grifter in the seedy Texas Gulf Coast, brought forth great talks on the book's overarching themes of family love and connection, identity, self-awareness, exploration, shame and pain. Students responded, too, to Phillips's skillful craft and the line-by-line beauty of his prose. In all, my group agreed that the collection was at once a pleasure to read but deeply complex and worthy of careful parsing and consideration. I was so happy to share this collection my students, and I was even happier to hear their responses.

-Will Torrey, English Faculty

What I most enjoyed from the book discussions was hearing the different perspectives from students. It is always so eye-opening to hear how a classmate interpreted the book. To hear what they had to say and how they made sense of the passages they read really helps you to see the book in many different ways, rather than just the way in which you interpreted it.

-Josie Friedli '20

I was struck by how much students had engaged with the book I recommended—I love it, but I admit that on the face of it, it looks like a pretty heavy science book: the title [[*A Short History of Nearly Everything*](#)] belies how engaging a read it really is. All the students agreed that they were pleasantly surprised by how funny the book was—they hadn't expected that a book about science could or would be so hilarious at times! They also loved how much they learned about non-school science—for example, quarks and the Big Bang theory; concepts that students necessarily don't get a chance to learn about in Physics class. Other students commented that the book actually helped them with their class—the section on evolution really shed new light and a different perspective on some parts of their Biology course. The most frequent praise from the students, though, was how much they enjoyed hearing the human story behind so many major scientific discoveries—the rivalries, the almost-discoveries, and the sense that amazing progress could be made by *normal people*: sometimes kind of weird; sometimes pretty mundane, and almost always flawed in some way, but all intellectually curious. It made them feel that becoming a scientist and getting to discover something themselves was more achievable than they had ever thought.



-Ashley Hyde, science faculty

The book discussion on [The Alchemist](#) drew a crowd of 33 students. Yet, participants were just as lively and engaged in the conversation as they would be in a small group. We discussed topics ranging from the significance of the characters and their journey, to the deeper lessons of the book such as how our mental attitude and thoughts shape our reality. One line in particular stood out: "Most people see the world as a threatening place, and, because they do, the world turns out, indeed, to be a threatening place." This launched us into thinking how one's lens of the mind influences our experience of the world, and the idea that one has a choice about the kind of mindset we choose to live by. We began to reach the conclusion that alchemy, then, is the transformation of one's consciousness.

-Jason Kunen, Religious Studies Faculty

Certainly a different genre than the majority of books on the summer reading list, [The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up](#) was a draw for a variety of reasons, one of which is it provided strategies for those of us seeking order in our quest to function at our highest capacity. In light-hearted conversation, we shared stories about our own organizational habits and the habits of our families and friends as well as what it's like to come home from boarding school to find our rooms rearranged or purged! We re-evaluated the amount of stuff we brought to a small dorm room (is 50 t-shirts too many?) and reflected on whether anything that didn't make the cut was even necessary. I was happy to hear the students ask questions about where to go with the stuff they didn't want—donating, reusing, repurposing and recycling is always the best option! Ultimately, it was great for us all to see that we aren't alone in our quest for organization and less STUFF!



-Kristin Honsel, Associate Director of Admission

I have always been someone who loves stories. I like to dive into another world and find myself immersed in it. It is a way for me to be alone, yet not be bored because I'm entertained by location, characters, cliffhangers, and the general wonder of books. This magical experience is one that I do alone so I was a little nervous to talk books with others. Yet as soon as we started I couldn't have been happier. I found that by listening to other people we are exposed to a whole different viewpoint of the story. What was once mine alone was filled with the wonder of others and the stories started to double, triple, octuple, quattuordecuple, until they are exploding forth in countless new perceptions. To me that is addictive.

-Tad Scheibe '19

I loved this chance to chat about a good book in an informal, fun setting. My group talked about how much they liked the characters in this novel [[In the Time of the Butterflies](#)]— we connected with their bravery and passion, as well as with their everyday humanity. We also liked knowing that the real Mirabal sisters inspired the author, who used fiction to bring their true stories to light.

Many of us had no previous knowledge of Dominican history, and this book brought us into a world and a time period we knew little to nothing about. Some students in my group were inspired to read more by Alvarez. And we all said we'd recommend this novel to a friend. I think this day celebrated so well our SAS community's collective enthusiasm for reading, ideas, characters and books of all kinds.

-Gretchen Hurtt, Dean of Studies

I had the opportunity this past summer to select four books of my choice from an incredibly diverse and well-crafted list that was comprised of each St. Andrew's teacher's favorite read. I picked Mrs. Roach's suggestion: Elena Ferrante's [*My Brilliant Friend*](#). When I arrived at the follow-up discussion at the beginning of school, I was eager to share my appreciation of Ferrante's beautiful articulation, yet did not expect to unveil the larger themes of a woman grappling with her identity in comparison with the binding social constructs of her neighborhood. Sitting around the Harkness table, discussing our mutual love of Ferrante's depiction of such a real and relatable world, I realized the energy we all were demonstrating stemmed from the fact that we chose to engage in this particular book. I will continue to refer to the larger recommended list when I crave an interesting read.

-Ryann Schutt '18