

Sarah McConnell: Hopefully you're on a beach somewhere soaking up the sun and catching some waves or maybe you're exploring a new city, sightseeing and people watching. Or if you're like me, you're making the most of your summertime in your own backyard. But wherever you are or wherever you're headed soon, don't forget to bring a book. From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, we've got summer reading recommendations for you whether you're packing for the beach or the front porch.

Sarah McConnell: There's a lot going on in the news, a lot to keep track of. But sometimes it's okay to put aside the news and just take out a good book. Our first guest is Inman Majors. He's an author and professor of English at James Madison University. We asked him for his recommendation and a good summer book, but first we talked about his own latest novel.

Sarah McConnell: Inman, your latest novel is Penelope Lemon: Game On! Tell us a little bit about Penelope Lemon.

Inman Major: Penelope Lemon is a small town mother who's just been divorced for the second time at 40. She's now living in her mother's basement with her eight year old son and back in the workforce. She was comfortably in the middle class, and now she's finding out that it's going to be tough to stay there.

Sarah McConnell: What did you, what made you think of Penelope? Is she modeled on someone you knew?

Inman Major: Well, a lot of people. I've spent half my life in small towns, all in the South. Everywhere I would go, go to bank, the bank teller, I was like, "Man, she should be president of the bank." It'd be some young gal, 23-24, probably hadn't finished college or, but he never started college, and just sharp and savvy. I thought, "These people aren't being represented in books, TV and movies." That got me going. Then I coach my son's baseball team in Waynesboro. Half the kids had moms who were single, working moms. They may have two or three kids. Somehow they got their daughter or son to practice. They didn't seem put upon. They didn't act like life was unfair. They were good humored. This was life. Sometimes you have to switch jobs. Sometimes you have to scramble, get somebody else to take your son to practice. Sometimes you have to be at three places at one time. That's life. They were just tough. I like the toughness. Thus was born Penelope Lemon.

Sarah McConnell: I've heard you call her the R-rated Mary Tyler Moore.

Inman Major: Maybe PG-13. I grew up watching I Love Lucy and Mary Tyler Moore and Carol Burnett, Gilda Radner. I've always liked funny women. I'm trying to do maybe a rural Bridget Jones, an R-rated Mary Tyler Moore meets a risqué Andrew Griffith's show.

Sarah McConnell: Give me a taste.

- Inman Major: All right, so this is the very first chapter.
- Inman Major: Penelope Lemon sat in the bleachers at her son's baseball practice. Wondering if she'd still be married to her husband if she had never seen him in his yellow kimono robe. The robe in question was a short little matronly number that came just to his knees and no farther. It wasn't actually a kimono of course. It was shorter for one, much shorter and made not from silk but from the same poly-satin as most of her own undergarments. James was a tall, pale man with knobby knees, and she thought, then as now, that it was an odd sartorial choice for someone hoping to entice a woman into sexual dalliance.
- Sarah McConnell: She's a funny character.
- Inman Major: She is funny characters. She'd be Ethel in I Love Lucy. You could always talk her into doing something. I'm satirizing being a middle aged person and the challenges and absurdities that that entails.
- Sarah McConnell: This sounds like a fast, fun read. I understand you're serializing it.
- Inman Major: Yeah. I'd like to write about 10 of these things.
- Sarah McConnell: You have written about women characters before, and you're good at it. Where do you get that?
- Inman Major: I hope I'm good at it. People have asked me that question. If I do do women well, I don't think, "Oh, I need to think like a woman." I just think, "What would I think right then?" I don't try to do anything differently. How would a person in this situation think. That's how I do it. I mean, there's a lot of me in Penelope. There's probably more of me than anyone else. I don't know if I'm in touch with my feminine side or what. I just think as a human being.
- Sarah McConnell: I'm curious, are you reading anything now yourself?
- Inman Major: I read Player Piano by Kurt Vonnegut recently, which is his first novel. Of all his books, I think it's the best dystopian novel. I think it's the most prescient yet. It predicts a universal wage, a time in America where the only people with jobs are scientists, engineers and the military. You've got a whole group of people who want to work, and there's nothing for them to do. This is written in the 50s. It's his first novel, Player Piano by Kurt Vonnegut. I have to be careful about what I read. I don't want to read something that's going to be too similar to what I've read before. I love Babbitt. I backtrack. Vonnegut, it's obvious Kurt Vonnegut read Babbitt.
- Inman Major: My early comedies for sure are influenced a P.G. Wodehouse who is the greatest comic wordsmith in the English language. He's the guy that did the Bertie and Jeeves series. You got the rich, trust fund English guy who's dumb and always gets into these silly jams and then his smart, trusty butler who gets

them out of it. I think they've been serialized. There's a TV show or some audio books. Very British, very funny, very smart. He's the master of hyperbole and understatement. He'll describe a hangover as if it's the D-Day invasion. I really learned a lot from P.G. Wodehouse.

Inman Major: I'm interested in how writers are influenced by other writers. What books ... I'll read a book and say, "how [inaudible 00:06:33] write this?" I read James Agee, *Death in a Family*, it's like he's from Knoxville, I'm from Knoxville. I said, "Where did this come from? I've never read anything like it." Then I read Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel* and I was like, "Oh now I see. Agee had to have read Wolfe. I'm interested in ... The books I love, where did they come from?"

Sarah McConnell: You brought a couple of books in that are like that. Ones that you would recommend to others that you're not reading now that you found a surprising consilience between.

Inman Major: I think the best American novel is *The Great Gatsby* by Scott Fitzgerald. Again, it's one of those books that's like, "Where did it come from?" It's so lyrical. It's so pretty. The structuring's so interesting. Then I had professor Don Noble at the University of Alabama, American Lit, who had us read *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, which came out about seven years before *The Great Gatsby*. I was like, "Oh." Just the language itself sounded just like Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, lyrical, romantic, nostalgic, very concerned with the American dream, the American ideal, very good at writing setting. Both have first person narrators. In *The Great Gatsby* it's Nick Carraway, but he's writing about the title character, Jay Gatsby. Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, you have first person narrator, Jim Burden, writing about the title character, Antonia. Both are striving, are looking for something that they can't find in their own lives. They find them in these title characters. Let me read the last page of each and see if you can hear the similarities in language.

Inman Major: This is the last bit of Willa Cather. Jim has come back to the scene of his youth, and he's feeling out of sorts. He's thinking back romantically and nostalgically to his upbringing in Nebraska.

Inman Major: "I took a long walk north of the town, out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks. Out there I felt at home again. Overhead the sky was that indescribable blue of autumn; bright and shadowless, hard as enamel. To the south I could see the dun-shaded river bluffs that used to look so big to me, and all about stretched drying cornfields, of the pale-gold color I remembered so well.

Inman Major: As I wandered over those rough pastures, I had the good luck to stumble upon a bit of the first road that went from Black Hawk out to the north country; to my grandfather's farm, then on to the Shimerdas' and to the Norwegian settlement. Everywhere else it had been ploughed under when the highways were

surveyed; this half-mile or so within the pasture fence was all that was left of that old road which used to run like a wild thing across the open prairie, clinging to the high places and circling and doubling like a rabbit before the hounds.

Inman Major: This was the road over which Antonia and I came on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children, being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings of that night were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Antonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past."

Inman Major: The last word is past. Here's Gatsby, last page. He's back at the scene of the crime just like Jim Burden, Nick Carraway is. Gatsby's dead.

Inman Major: "And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes, a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

Inman Major: And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Inman Major: Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter, tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther, and one fine morning ...

Inman Major: So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Sarah McConnell: Other than the word, the past, and that lyrical style, do you even see other ways in which he borrowed from Willa Cather?

Inman Major: Yeah, she mentions the old road that you can sense the buffaloes. He mentions the past before the first settlers got there. Whereas in this one, he imagines the Dutch sailors first seeing New York. They're both trying to connect the present

moment, how am I here, standing here and how am I connecting with the past, what this land was before I was here or white settlers were here.

Sarah McConnell: Now I'll ask for you to sum up who should read these two books, My Antonia and The Code of the Woosters.

Inman Major: I think if you love the Great Gatsby, you should read My Antonia if you want to know where it came from, who he learned from. I think you should read any of the Bertie and Jeeves books by P.G. Wodehouse if you want to hear the greatest comic wordsmith in the English language and just get a break from the news.

Sarah McConnell: Oh gosh. Inman Majors, thank you for talking with me on With Good Reason.

Inman Major: It was a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Sarah McConnell: Inman Majors is a professor of English at James Madison University and the author of Penelope Lemon: Game On!

Sarah McConnell: Our next batch of recommendations is for listeners who've been following the #MeToo movement closely. They're shared by Erin Devine, joining us all the way from India.

Erin Devine: I'm Erin Devine. I'm an artist and a writer based in the DC area. I teach at Northern Virginia Community College as an associate professor in art history. My book recommendation for this summer is Rachel Middleman's Radical Eroticism: Women, Art, and Sex in the 1960s. This book looks at the growth of what we would categorize as erotic art in the feminist art movement. Most of erotic art that we, the way that we would conceptualize it in the history of western art up until this point. It's your traditional lounging, nude female and the [inaudible 00:14:10] and the Venuses that have been painted for centuries that we just took for granted. It was in the 1960s that more women artists started to question where that viewpoint was coming from and who it was constructed for.

Erin Devine: For instance, Carolee Schneemann. One of the most famous films that she did from this period was a film called, a film series really, called Fuses, recordings basically of sex with her partner at that time. She would take the film. Then she would paint on it. She would scratch on it. She would leave it exposed to the weather to give it colors and textures. She would also take the camera and turn it at these different, odd angles, setting it on a couch or something and these closeup shots that lent it this sense of intimacy. She wanted to explore sex as something that is an everyday occurrence.

Erin Devine: I think one of the things that these artists were also doing is a strategy that's called, that we think of as appropriation, which is the recycling of an existing image. Then by using it in a certain way, it makes us, the viewer, call into question where these constructs actually come from.

Erin Divine: Marjorie Strider, for instance, was a pop artist appropriating images of the pinup. She was doing these large scale images of women with their mouths open, maybe with a lollipop that was half hanging out. From her viewpoint as a female artist in the large scale and also the fact that she would exaggerate the breast and in a way where they were coming off of the canvas, you know, almost constructed three dimensionally, so they were jetting into the viewer's face. Suddenly when you're ... This image that we've taken for granted for so long as an image of sexuality, we then have to question its artificiality, the mode from which it's come to us from.

Erin Divine: I think you should read this book if your really calling into question lately, the relationships between men and women. What these women were doing was 50 years ago, and so much of what they were calling into question is still something I think that we grapple with today.

Erin Divine: Also, in thinking about relationships between men and women on an intimate scale, I always recommend Still Life with Woodpecker by Tom Robbins. The premise is very fantastical. There are aliens. There are red heads. There are pyramids. There's just this fantastical plot that goes through the entire story, which is about really the romantic relationships that we have and how those can consume us and whether or not that's a good or a bad thing.

Erin Divine: Again, I think you should read this book if you're really interested in relationships between men and women, and the relationship with your own solitude, the kind of, I think, almost this sense of solitude, individuality versus being in the world, being with another person and where those conditions rub up against each other, if it's possible to have a romance with another person and also have a romance with the self. If you're wrestling with these issues about partnership, it is a wonderfully exploratory, I think, sort of tutorial almost about the nature of intimate relationships.

Sarah McConnell: Erin Devine is a professor of art history and humanities at Northern Virginia Community College.

Sarah McConnell: For some people these hot months are a chance to catch up on the politics of the year. Sharon Jones is a professor at Radford University. She's spending her summer reading about the country and the presidency of Donald Trump. Sharon, we've been asking people to share with us what they're reading or planning to read this summer. I heard that you're spending the summer reading books that help you understand white poverty. Is that right?

Sharon Jones: Yes. I've been in this field trying to better understand the misunderstood. It seems like for the past few years there has been a pocket of people who've been saying, "We are not being heard, thus this is how we're going to vote to make sure that our voices are finally heard."

Sarah McConnell: Where you live in teach, Redford University, is near one of the stops on President Trump's campaign.

Sharon Jones: Yes, yes. He came here campaigning. It was very interesting. He came. It was a huge uproar in our school systems. He was given ... Tickets were available online. Children were actually given the day off from school as an excused absence if they wanted to go hear the candidate. It was interesting, because that was one of the early campaign rallies that he had where there was actually some shoving and pushing with some of the media. I almost feel like that media circus almost started here in Radford. I don't have any social media. I don't do it. It was interesting, someone also pointed out to me that they thought they saw my son in the area. Could that be him? No, it wasn't my child. If it was, what would that mean? There were people there for Black Lives Matter and where we affiliated? No, we weren't.

Sharon Jones: It was just interesting to watch what was happening in all the pressure that was happening just within our city around that. Where we live, people vote primarily Republican. Someone hugged my husband. He had on a red Radford shirt when he was going to vote, and someone hugged him and said, "Oh, I didn't think about wearing red today."

Sharon Jones: In the area where I live, it's a small rural area of southwest Virginia. Coming from Brookline, Massachusetts, the primarily Democratic state where JFK was born, it's very different for me. We've lived a million places, because my husband's a college basketball coach, so we've moved a ton. I've lived in places where we've had very high class areas, very affluent areas. One of the most shocking things to me when we lived out in Oconee County, Georgia was that we had PTA meetings during the day times. At that point, it was interesting to see the fast change when we moved here where there definitely are hungry children. I figured I need to find a better way to understand the folks around me.

Sarah McConnell: How would you describe your own upbringing? Would you say that you were from a black, middle class or a black affluent family?

Sharon Jones: I definitely was affluent. It's funny, a lot of times I think in our society we try to say we are all the same. We're all middle class, but the reality is we're not all middle class. I grew up in Brookline, Massachusetts. My mother was a psychologist. She taught at Harvard. I knew from an early age I didn't want for much nor do my children. It's been interesting to watch the differences from Massachusetts, Georgia. We lived in West Virginia. I lived in South Carolina. And really just given me an idea of who the folks are in the United States. I think I really went from affluent Georgia, I grew up in affluent Massachusetts at Brookline, and then I went to Howard University in DC, which was predominantly black, which was definitely a different experience for me going from Jewish Catholic neighborhood to all black college for four years, which was unbelievably great, but different.

Sharon Jones: You have to get to know the people you live with. Peggy McIntosh has been writing about understanding privilege, white privilege for years. Right now it's become common language. It's funny, I read it back in the 80s. It's become part of my work for the past 20 years that I've been in higher ed. Now it's becoming a common article that people are reading for the first time. What she's saying is you have to understand the privileges that we do have. People get angry the minute you say the word privilege. I have privilege of class. I could walk around and say to the people who I interact with in these towns, "Pull yourselves up. Get yourselves together." That's not going to help us. There are hungry children around us.

Sarah McConnell: What is your mission? You have been trying to read books that help you understand better white poverty, all poverty, but white poverty in particular. What books are you reading?

Sharon Jones: I've been interested in this area because this is what I do for a living. I teach diversity. I teach cultural competence. For me, there've been a few books that have been really exciting. There's been a whole uproar over the past couple years about the controversial book, "A Hillbilly Elegy," and enough so that his comments about people just pulling themselves up was a little bit troubling for me. I don't think you just expect people can pull themselves up. Some people don't have boots to pull themselves up, which is tough. You don't need straps. You don't even have boots. Let's just start with there. I wanted to know that perspective even though I would not invest in his book, so I got some coffee, sat at Barnes and Noble. I'm a very quick reader, fast reader. I sat there and read it, so at least I could be involved in the conversation and then read some of the followup articles that people talked about, because he limits in his book the understanding of women and what it means to be an impoverished white woman needing a hand up or a person of color.

Sharon Jones: I understand it was his memoir, but I think one of the only times in the book he even talks about color and how that would impact his family was with regards to Tiger Woods. I giggled when I read that, because I said that's the reality of what I teach. I teach students who say, "I have never had to interact with people of color until I had you, Dr. Jones." I am still so many students' first professor of color as a graduate student.

Sarah McConnell: Isn't that fascinating.

Sharon Jones: That was one of the books I started off reading, so at least I wanted to know the perspective. Another one's called The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander, basically tried to get a better understanding of generational poverty, what that looks like, understanding how early Jim Crow laws still have an impact today, because a lot of times when I talk to even poor whites, what they say to me was, "Slavery was forever ago. It has no impact on today." I don't think folks understand the lasting implications for generation that it has.

Sharon Jones: Then which this spring that I was listening to NPR, and they were recommending another book called *White Working Class* by Joan Williams. That one really caught my attention, because I said, "That's the folks who are around me." I'm doing this work in the cities schools here in terms of helping schools become more culturally competent. It's this three year program that I do. This group of folks really say they are being ignored, white working class. I just said, "I want to know more about this. These are the people I'm working with. These are people who I feel are being lost, are not being heard. So I want to know who they are." Again, one of the reasons they are not heard, I think, is because we all say we're middle class. We're not all middle class.

Sarah McConnell: Do you think they're right? People aren't seeing us, they don't understand what we're going through.

Sharon Jones: in a sense, yes. I don't think folks understand poverty. Michelle Alexander's book and some of the others led me to understand, want to know class better basically. We are having changes demographically because of race. In addition, we're having ... really class is what's going on for us here we're having to change. I agree, we do have race and class and the intersect of both. It led me to figure out how in the United States have we even talked about class, which led me to read a book by Michael Harrington that's been around since the '60s. It's a classic book. It's called *The Other America*.

Sarah McConnell: This is the book that in part inspired Lyndon Johnson to create the Great Society.

Sharon Jones: Exactly. One of the lines that just jumped out at me, he said, "Society must help them, the poor, before they can help themselves." I think that's a reality. First of all, we have to see that they're there. Another great thing from the book, it talks about as a country, the United States, it's harder for us to identify our poor, because we have places like dollar tree or things of that nature where you can still buy things or clothing companies that charge a little less for things, so we blend in. Definitely when it comes to children, folks are hungry schools. School lunch numbers tell you a ton right there. One of the things he asked in the book is how long shall we look the other way while our fellow Americans are, are fellow human beings are suffering. I feel that every day. How long are we going to look the other way? I feel like we've done it with race. Right now we're doing it with the whole group of people. We can't look the other direction. I feel like now, because of social media, folks are showing us how their lives are playing out. We can't continue to do this and expect to change. We still had segregation and we still had Jim crow laws, so we still didn't get all those benefits of the new deal. We still operate at a step behind as people of color.

Sharon Jones: These books do a good job talking about class, but unlike Jim Vance's book, he also talks about how the intersect of race plays out, how the intersect of gender plays out because as women, as we all know, we make less on the dollar. That's

just our reality. Put them all together, the intersex of race, class and gender. We have a lot going on for some of us.

Sarah McConnell: Sharon Jones to say professor of counselor education at Radford University. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

Sarah McConnell: Welcome back. We're continuing our round up of the best summer reading recommendations from the With Good Reason universe. Up next we turn to poetry of the natural world.

Kamariah, S. O.: My name is Sheikh Omar Kamariah. I am a professor and chair of the Department of Languages and Literature at Virginia State University. I recommend readings from two great poets. Selected Poems by William Wordsworth and A City Without People: The Katrina Poems from Niyi Osundare, a Nigerian poet.

Kamariah, S. O.: As we all know, this is summer. This is the season of warmth, the peak of human activity. People adventure outdoors and they have come back with fond memories. There's a time of life. Well, in Wordsworth's poems like Tintern Abbey, like a Rainbow are poems that transcend time. They talk about the beauty of nature, and the need for man, the human being to interact with nature in a very healthy way, so that what we see in the rivers and the waters and the plants and the meadows and all of the other components of nature are actually part of us and we're part of them. For him, nature is the medium through which he sees the essence of things in the world. For William Wordsworth, nature is life.

Kamariah, S. O.: Now, I wanted to read some lines from the poem that is normally called or shortened to Tintern Abbey. This is a poem that's also been what is called the romantic era in poetry.

Kamariah, S. O.: It says, "These beautiful forms through a long absence have not been to me as a landscape is to a blind man's eye, but oft, in lonely rooms and 'mid the din of towns and cities, I have owed to them in hours of weariness, sensations sweet felt in the blood, and felt along the heart."

Kamariah, S. O.: He's talking about the beautiful forms, the landscape around Tintern Abbey. He's talking about looking at landscape. He's been there five years before. He's coming back five years after. They're still the same. They've always been there. He's been passionate about these forms, that is the natural landscape. That's a poem that is worth reading in the summer, because it brings us back to nature. You should read Selected Poems by William Wordsworth if you are a lover of the beauty of nature.

Kamariah, S. O.: I also recommend City Without People: The Katrina Poems by Niyi Osundare. Osundare is a Nigerian poet, currently the most celebrated of contemporary poets from Africa. In 2004 and 2005, [inaudible 00:32:18] brought to parts of

Asia and Americas a set of devastating tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes that secured for themselves a permanent space in global memory. In the City Without People: The Katrina Poems, Niyi Osundare makes an eloquent, poetic testimony to the multiple human rights challenges disasters do create, such as an equal access to assistance and forced relocation, loss of documentation, property and so on. Let me read just one of two lines from some of the poems in this collection.

Kamarah, S. O.: It says, " So many horses of pain have galloped through these shores, each with it's own aftermath. None have left hoof prints as deep and wide as Katrina's scars."

Kamarah, S. O.: In another poem, "The Lake Came to my House," he captures the gradual buildup of Katrina, which starts as a whisper among the lees and ends up sweeping the poor house away. We hear him say that, "The pit, pat, pit, pat, bing, bang, bing, bang of the hooves of the trampling rain. My [inaudible 00:33:46] roof, my wounded house in Katrina's diaspora." The reader or listener would notice the displacement and dislocation of the people of New Orleans [inaudible 00:33:59] by Katrina. Quote, "Dad was bused off to Albuquerque while mom found herself in Utah. First daughter was black hawked to Ashtabula. The second son, hitch hiked to Walla Walla." When members of a family are forced to live in different parts of the world, sometimes without knowing where each is, there's an urgent need to reintegrate. You should read the City Without People: The Katrina Poems by Niyi Osundare if you care about the implications of the destruction of the environment. These poems bring us close to the suffering that people go through when the environment is violated and when the levees can no longer hold the rage of nature.

Sarah McConnell: Sheik Kamarah is a professor of languages and literature at Virginia State University.

Sarah McConnell: Sometimes summer reading is about escaping the news. Other times it's about making sense of it. Brent Hierman is a professor of international studies at Virginia Military Institute. I spoke with him about taking a deep dive on one of the topics that hasn't left the headlines in years. Brent, you've got some book recommendations for us today. They all have a certain theme. What is that?

Brent Hierman: Yeah, so I'm very curious, and it's actually my area of study, about US-Soviet relations, US-Russian relations. The books I'm recommending all involve trying to understand this really complicated relationship that we've been dealing with for the past 20 years. It's in the news every time you turn on the news now. You see pictures of Vladimir Putin. You see images of Russia right now. My recommendations are all involving that.

Sarah McConnell: The books that relate to Russia that you brought with you and that you recommending we read, what would you start with?

Brent Hierman: I'm going to start with the most recent book called From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador In Putin's Russia. It's by Michael McFaul. His selection as the ambassador by Obama was because he was someone who seemed like he could help negotiate that famous reset.

Sarah McConnell: Does he explain in this book why he thinks we got that wrong?

Brent Hierman: He does. He's looking at how naive he was, how naive we often were in making these engagements. He criticizes himself, but ultimately he blames Putin and the people around Putin for ending the reset. However, he does think that maybe we made some rather naive choices along the way.

Sarah McConnell: Your own research focuses on countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union. Tell me a little bit more about what you look at that's not Russia.

Brent Hierman: My specific focus is on the Central Asian states. These are the "Stans." Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and I said that non-alphabetically. These were all former constituent parts of the Soviet Union. They had actually equivalent status as Russia did within the Soviet Union. But upon the breakup of the Soviet Union, they all became independent states, despite the fact that none of them really wanted to be independent states. They all would have preferred to be part of the Soviet Union. It involved all sorts of complications as you try to go from being a constituent part of, for instance, a larger national economy to having your own economy where you have to manage everything internally. Their role within the Soviet Union was to generally produce raw materials that would be sent to other parts of the Soviet Union for processing.

Sarah McConnell: What happened to those collective farms of the communist era in those countries?

Brent Hierman: The way agriculture worked in the Soviet Union was such that you couldn't have private property, you couldn't have private land. They were all collectivized. Well, add independence and suddenly you have pressures from international community as well as the desire for economic efficiencies. These collective farms are no longer the way to go. And so there was pressure, encouragement, legal changes to break them up. However, lots of people were reliant on these farms, lots of elites, and a lot of efforts were taken to try to preserve these collective farms at the local level.

Sarah McConnell: What about the system of support for people that worked on collective farms, people who weren't the elites? What was the bargain for them?

Brent Hierman: Yeah, there was direct social contractors or a social bargain that you had where you wouldn't have private property, but you'd be working in a village. In that village, you'd have access to healthcare. You'd have education for your children. You'd have, obviously, a job. You'd have food on the table. You couldn't become

wealthy. You couldn't become rich, but you would survive. You would be part of the system. You'd be part of a larger global superpower. You'd be a citizen of a global superpower. That was the deal. If you worked in a collective farm, your life was hard. However, you had this welfare system that took care of you.

Sarah McConnell: How is that now for them?

Brent Hierman: Well, in some locations, collective farms have broken up. In some other locations, they have not. Where they have not broken up, you no longer have that same contract. You no longer have that same bargain. You have people who are working and living on the collective farms. There's still often a school in the village, but it's often underfunded. You don't have the same healthcare assurances. Unfortunately now, you're not getting paid. Most of the farm workers I've been in contact with on the collective farms have indicated that they're not paid money or currency for their work. At most, they're going to get cotton seed oil or cotton stalks, which they can use to burn in the winters. They're working for work for the most part. They're not working for actual profit.

Sarah McConnell: You also brought a book that you've been reading you think may help us understand it a little better. This one's a novel.

Brent Hierman: Yes, so I have this great book, and I really mean it. It's a wonderful book. It's called Red Plenty by Francis Spufford. When I describe it to you, you might think, "There's no way this could be a fun book to read." It's a book about Soviet central planning. It's a fictional history, I would say. I've been trying to think of what the best way to describe it. If you know movies by Robert Altman, it's sort of like that in that it has a variety of different characters. It follows these characters over a multiyear period, mainly in a 10 year period. It's trying to tell the story or it does tell the story, actually really brilliantly, about how the Soviet central planning system went from a period of tremendous promise, positive utopian vision of the future, and then traces these individuals as they start to become more disillusioned by the system. It's told in a series of vignettes.

Brent Hierman: I would describe it almost as a science fiction story. I say this because it opens up in the mid '50s. That was a time in which a lot of the actors, the elites in Soviet system had this belief that they could solve all of the issues of economic planning. They could solve poverty. They could make it so everyone could live well and happy. This was an honest belief for many of them. It starts with that opening promise, right? In that way, it's very similar to a science fiction story like Star Trek, right? This utopian vision where you could have this plethora of goods for everybody and everyone can enjoy. It traces some of the justification for that belief.

Brent Hierman: But then all of the issues that come about and the difficulty of trying to plan this massive economy, and it shows you not just deletes, like Khrushchev is a key player in this book, but also some of the lesser individuals, like you get to know

some people on the black market who have to make the deals to make sure all the goods get where they're supposed to get and try to ensure that the different areas that are supposed to get, for instance, we'll say cotton, that the factories that need the cotton that are supposed to be delivered. Well, the problem is the system wouldn't give them enough cotton, and so you have to go through the black market to get all the cotton you need. It traces those individuals as well. It's really, it's just a wonderful, I would say a fun book, even though it's about Soviet central planning.

Sarah McConnell: I wonder. Sum it all up for us. If people want to dive into these two books about Russia, one a novel, one nonfiction, who would be most interested do you think?

Brent Hierman: Sure. The Red Plenty book by Francis Spufford, that is a book that I think provides a tremendous insight for anyone who's curious about how did anyone actually believe in communism, right? This is a system that, of course, failed. And so why did anyone believe it? This provides insight into people's real beliefs into it as well as the problems that that system produced. It's a beautifully written book. It is. He's just a wonderful writer. It helps explain in a way that a nonfiction book can't, the promises of the communist system, the communist state and the problems of the communist state. It also, because you're following these individuals, it helps gain insight into how people who, I guess for people who only know our system, how others could just believe so deeply in a very different economic rationale. It's not because they were foolish or because they were somehow tricked or duped, but they truly believed they had mathematically figured out these magic formulas. It helps to provide insight into both the problems of those magic formulas, but as well as how and why people believed it and the realness of that belief, I would say.

Brent Hierman: In terms of the Michael McFaul book, this is the From Cold War to Hot Peace, the memoir by the ambassador. This was a book I think of interest to anyone who's curious about contemporary dynamics between the US and Russia and wants to dive a little deeper and try to figure out how did we get where we are now a and why we have so much problems and are these new problems or are they in long lasting dynamics?

Sarah McConnell: Brent Hierman is a professor of international studies at Virginia Military Institute.

Sarah McConnell: Next we move to women making their mark on Mormonism in the United States, plus a little sci-fi to round out our list.

S Richmond: My name is Stephanie Richmond and I'm a historian of abolition and women's rights in the United States and Great Britain at Norfolk State University. I've been reading Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's House Full of Females, which is about plural marriage and women's rights in the early Mormon church. It looks at Mormon women who were active in the Mormon community between 1835

and 1870 right during the time period where the Mormons began to embrace plural marriage, so multiple wives. There are some diaries and some letters and some other documentation that illuminate what these women thought about their husbands taking on multiple wives and what their lives were like through this time period. Mormon's were very severely persecuted and some Mormons were actually killed by mobs that attacked them in Illinois and elsewhere on the east coast.

S Richmond: Ulrich documents a really interesting women's organization in the very early Mormon Church that was originally sanctioned by Joseph Smith and then Brigham Young. After Joseph Smith died, Brigham Young, the second leader of the church, disbanded it and said that Smith never authorized this women's group, because the group had come out against plural marriage. That was the group that raised a lot of the money to build the first temple in the community of Nauvoo. They did a lot of work in the community to also help women whose husbands were out on mission, and they were left behind in the community without a provider. It was a really important group for women's survival in Illinois, which was still the frontier in the 1830s and '40s. It also challenged the leaders of the Mormon church on the question of plural marriage.

S Richmond: The word feminist is ahistorical for that time period. Feminism really doesn't ... people don't start to call themselves feminists until the second half of the 19th century, not really in the United States until the early 20th century. I certainly would say they were advocating for women's rights. Those rights might not be the kind of rights we think about today with the right to vote or the right to have equal pay with men. They certainly were advocating women's rights to speak out on issues that mattered to them in the community and women's rights to be secure in their marriages and secure in their church in the role that the community decided women should have.

S Richmond: There's a lot of primary source material included in the book, but Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, who is a Pulitzer Prize winning historian writes for multiple audiences and is published by Knopf, which is not an academic publisher. It's a long book, but the personal stories of these individual Mormon women are really compelling. It's in many points of really sad book. Women's life expectancy and the life expectancy of the children is very, very low, so there are a lot of women mourning the loss of infants and toddlers who didn't make it, which is at times hard to read, but also helps to understand why these Mormon women were so focused on the afterlife, because they had lost so many people they cared about from their families and in their communities.

S Richmond: I'll usually have multiple books going at once. Usually one or two nonfiction works that are related somehow to my own scholarship or teaching and then a fun read. I read a lot of mysteries and a lot of science fiction, so the science fiction sometimes crosses over in between. Sometimes those tend to be a little more serious.

S Richmond: I did read one other book actually last week that was really interesting, which is a Afrofuturistic. It was really good. My husband recommended it to me. I think he just found it at the library. We're both big science fiction fans. It's set in this world where there's this planet that has a lot of African elements. The series is called Binti. I think there are three of them out now, but they're really short. It's just amazing intricate world and storyline in this 75-80 page novel.

S Richmond: My husband recommended to me. I think he just found it at the library. We're both big science fiction fans. There's a young woman from a community that paints their skin with soil and paints their hair with soil. She is some genius at creating some technology that requires manipulating energy. She gets accepted to the universe's university there, and so she goes. In the process, that spaceship she takes is hijacked by aliens. She winds up, in order to save her own life, they kill everybody else in the ship. To save her own life, she ends up helping them. It's really interesting, the African elements, the traditional tribal African elements with this very futuristic and also very socially relevant storyline that looks at ethnocentrism and racism and genocide. It's really interesting.

Sarah McConnell: Stephanie Richmond is a professor of history and the program coordinator for history at Norfolk State University.

Sarah McConnell: Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuireWoods. Support also comes from the University of Virginia Health System connecting doctors and patients through telemedicine to deliver high quality care throughout Virginia, the US and the world, UVAhealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Elliott Majerczyk and Cass Adair. Jeannie Palin handles listener services. Special thanks this week to Jonathan Benfield of WVRU in Radford. For the podcast go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.