

Book bag: Suggested reading

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

There are Beach People and Non-Beach People. Most summers I spend a week—or two or three—at the beach. Friends sometimes ask, “What do you do there?” Anyone who asks that question is not a Beach Person.

You don’t do anything at the beach, or at least not much. You look at the ocean, walk beside it, swim in it, maybe build a sand castle, take a bike ride.

What I do at the beach most of all is read. During the year I accumulate a pile of books. There are enough of them to fill a suitcase, and sometimes I ship them ahead. After I’ve looked at the ocean in the early morning for a quiet half hour or so, I retreat to a table and dive into the stack. Serious reading and study come first. As the morning proceeds, the reading lightens a bit. By late morning I’m reading biographies or novels.

Here is a portion of this year’s list: Joan Chittister’s memoir *Called to Question* is a great way to begin every day, reading a chapter at a time. Yale’s David Kelsey has written a provocative but demanding little book, *Imagining Redemption*, which discusses critical theological questions in the context of a heartbreaking situation. Chris Hedges, a journalist and foreign correspondent with a degree from Harvard Divinity School, reflects on the Ten Commandments and modern American culture in *Losing Moses on the Freeway*. Joseph Ellis’s *His Excellency* is a fine biography of George Washington, whose role in the formation of the Republic is often overshadowed by that of Franklin and Jefferson (the book is a perfect follow-up to David McCullough’s [1776](#)).

Wendell Berry’s new book of poems, *Given*, is one of his best and includes some new Sabbath poems. It led me back to *Remembering*, his 1988 novel. Earlier this year I read Ian McEwan’s novel *Saturday* and loved it, so I tried to catch up on McEwan, who writes beautifully and engagingly. I found *Atonement* and *Amsterdam* to be satisfying, interesting, fascinating.

A grandson had to read Bill Bryson's *A Walk in the Woods* for school, so I read it with him, laughed and learned a lot about hiking the Appalachian Trail and about the National Park Service, trees and bears. William Sloane Coffin's *Letters to a Young Doubter* is an accessible and short compendium of passionate wisdom. Having recently read Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, I read her first novel, *Housekeeping*, written over 20 years ago, which is intriguing and beautiful. Thomas Friedman's [The World Is Flat](#) is a book about globalization that everybody should read. One of the selections for Chicago's annual citywide reading initiative is *The Ox-Bow Incident*, written in 1940 by Walter Van Tilburg Clark. It's a great American novel with an almost biblical analysis of the human condition.

Lingering in my mind from this summer's reading is a passage from one of Wendell Berry's Sabbath poems. It's about lambing time, but it could apply to any special time: "There is no happiness like this. / The window again welcomes in the light. / The river in its old groove. . . . / The flowers again brighten. / This then may be the prayer without ceasing, / This beauty, this gratitude, this moment."