

## TOPICS OFFERED FOR SPRING 2014

***Please note that the books listed for each course are only possible candidates. Do not buy any until the pre-meeting and a decision on the common reading is made.***

***Classes start January 2<sup>nd</sup> and end April 30<sup>th</sup>.  
Holiday periods are adapted to by individual class voting.***

### **1. (ARR) AMERICA'S RAILROADS**

Every American town, great or small, aspired to be connected to a railroad and by the early years 1900s, almost every American lived within easy access of a station. Soon the country was covered in a latticework of more than 200,000 miles of railroad track.

This study/discussion group will learn how America was made by the railroads. Promoted by visionaries and built by the biggest corporations in the land, the American railroad network exceeded Europe's in every sense. It united far-flung parts of the large country, boosted economic development, and was the catalyst for America's rise to world-power status. In recent years, the car, truck, and airplane have eclipsed the railroad in people's minds. But, industry still heavily relies on them.

Suggestions for research presentation: earliest railroads, technology of engines/fuels, impacts on Civil War, rail barons, transcontinental railroad, tunnels and bridges, car types/service, refrigeration, train stations, train terminals, control and safety, time/schedules, hobos, train museums, scenic train tours, etc.

Our goal is to gain an understanding of the role of railroads in the development of America.

**Common Reading:** *The Great Railroad Revolution*, by Christian Wolmer (Sept. 2012)

### **2. (CHN) CHINA'S LONG MARCH INTO THE 21ST CENTURY**

How did a nation, after a long and painful period of dynastic decline, intellectual upheaval, foreign occupation, civil war, and revolution, manage to burst forth onto the world stage with the dynamism of China today? The class will consider this question by examining the lives of influential officials, writers, activists, and leaders whose contributions helped create modern China. The proposed text suggests eleven who have met the criterion and proposes to show the common goal that unites these disparate figures is their determined pursuit of fuqiang, "wealth and power." Presentation topics might include other leaders beyond the eleven, an examination of the limits of present day China's "wealth and power," and key historical events such as the Japanese Occupation and the Treaty of Nanjing.

**Common Reading:** *Wealth and Power: China's Long March to the Twenty-First Century*, by Orville Schell & John Delury (July 2013)

### 3. (CIV) THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

A look back at Huntington's "A Clash of Civilizations": How well or poorly did his predictions work out. P. Huntington has postulated a new model for international interactions after the end of the Cold War. The important entities are "civilizations," not nations. Example civilizations include: The West, Islamic, Sinic (China+), Hindu, etc. Common blood, history, values, religion, language and geographic bases define these civilizations. Peoples not in one's own civilization can be seen as potential or real enemies.

Reading this 1996 publication after 9/11/2001, the onset of the War on Terror and the US experiment in "regime change" and "nation building," one cannot but be amazed at the accuracy of its prognostication and the degree to which its advice was not heeded. The basic thesis of the book is that it is impossible to impose Western political, religious and cultural values on non-Western countries. This model provides an important perspective for assessing current world events, and hopefully, aiding in avoiding future calamities.

Possible subjects for research/presentation: Is the West really in decline? Are the Balkans a "world in miniature" from this perspective? Should we embark on future wars of intervention: e.g., Iran, China vs. Taiwan, or the Middle East, and if so, under what conditions? Have we learned anything from our present "wars of intervention Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya What is the "Davos Culture," and how does it relate to "Globalization" and "Anti-Globalization?" How might expanded education and the expanded role of women affect the course of civilizations and their clashes? How does the UN fit into this new world model? What is "multiculturalism" in the USA, how does it fit with Huntington's model, and what are the potential good and bad effects of it? What are the commonalities and points of conflict and what are the lines of communication between civilizations. Our goal is to gain a new perspective from which to assess, evaluate, and perhaps understand the lessons of the past thirty years.

**Common Reading:** *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, by Samuel P. Huntington (August 2011)

### 4. (CKD) COOKED

*Cooked* is based on the book by Michael Pollan, the author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, which was a popular Omnivore class several years ago. It describes Michael Pollan's adventures in learning to cook (believe it or not he didn't cook before this). The book is divided into four sections: Fire, which examines cooking with fire, in particular barbecue techniques in North Carolina; Water, which covers cooking with water, boiling, braising, and poaching; Air, in which the author learns to bake bread and other goodies; and Earth, which delves into the mysteries of fermentation, including beer and pickles among other foods. It's a fascinating

book which explores many of the more mysterious aspects of food preparation. There are multiple opportunities for presentations in this course, for example, different types of regional barbecue, the history and evolution of stews, ethnic breads, and other pickling techniques not described in the book.

**Common Reading:** *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*, by Michael Pollan (April 2013)

## 5. (CON) REWRITING THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

Suppose you could rewrite our Constitution. What would you change? What would you add? Should we adopt a parliamentary form of government to attempt to reduce gridlock in Washington or perhaps elect the president directly? How would we change or clarify the Bill of Rights – add a right of privacy, allow or not allow gun ownership, modify the 10th Amendment to require the federal government to fund mandates?

Class members will present their proposed changes for discussion and class vote. Optionally two members may present two sides of a proposal. Presentation topics could also include the Federalist Papers, the Articles of Confederation, or the historical background for issues like presidential election by electors or for key amendments, such as direct election of senators, women's right to vote, or the right against self-incrimination.

**Common Reading:** The Constitution is available on-line and bound copies are widely available for one to five dollars.

## 6. (CRP) CORRUPTION IN WASHINGTON

We all “know” that the US Government is functioning badly. Many people think that what is going on is the fault of one of the two major political parties – different people pick different sides. But, do we have an accurate picture. This S/DG will investigate such topics as: the extent of gerrymandering to provide “safe seats” (nearly all of them), the revolving door by which members of Congress become lobbyists with access to members of Congress, etc. Hopefully, we will come up with realistic suggestions for improving the situation

**Common Reading:** *This Town: Two Parties and a Funeral...*, by Mark Leibovich (July 2013)

## 7. (CTY) CITIES: HOW THEY MAKE US RICHER, SMARTER, HEALTHIER & HAPPIER

This class shatters myths about city living. Did you know that New Yorkers, for instance, live longer than other Americans? Or that heart disease and cancer rates are lower in NYC than in the nation as a whole.? Or that city dwellers use 40 percent less energy than suburbanites? Curious about why Detroit is dying while

other old industrial cities like Chicago, and Boston thrive? Join us and learn what's really happening in the big city. The author of our suggested text "makes an impassioned case for the city's import and splendor. " What does he know that we don't?

**Common Reading:** *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* by Edward L. Glaeser (February 2011)

## 8. (DTA) BIG DATA

Today's technology allows us to collect, store and instantly analyze billions of pieces of information each day. The information flows in from everywhere: climate sensors, social media postings, cell phone signals, purchase transaction records, digital photographs, and countless other sources. Analyzing all this data allows us to answer questions such as:

Which paint color is most likely to tell you that a used car is in good shape? How can officials identify the most dangerous New York City manholes before they explode? How can Google searches predict the spread of flu outbreak?

The book used in this class will explain how our ability to search and analyze massive amounts of data (such as airline ticket prices or the texts of millions of books) is causing an "information revolution," which has implications for business, healthcare, politics, education and scientific innovation. We will also explore the downside of "big data," which includes loss of privacy and societal implications of the ability to predict behavior.

**Common Reading:** *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*, by Viktor Mayer-Schonberger & Kenneth Cukier (March 5, 2013)

## 9. (ECN) THIS WEEK IN *THE ECONOMIST*

The British publication *The Economist* is known for its informative and thought-provoking reporting on political and economic developments around the world. In this S/DG, we will discuss articles selected from four key areas (America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa) plus the occasional "Special Report" of the last two issues as catalysts for informed and lively discussion on the burning topics of our time. The Economist is available as a magazine subscription, a web site, or as Apps for your I Pad or smart phone. All Articles selected are easily accessed online at no cost at [www.theeconomist.com](http://www.theeconomist.com).

**Common Reading:** Current issues of *The Economist*.

## 10. (EDU) REIMAGINING EDUCATION

Education is a hot topic in the news -- from testing programs, magnet schools, charter schools, costs, teacher evaluations, and whether we get the resulting

quality for the costs involved. The author of the referenced common reading, Salman Khan, is the founder of Khan Academy. He offers one perspective on this major topic and his thoughts on what could be done to improve learning from both the student and teacher's viewpoint.

Possible presentation topics might cover: historical review of education, testing in schools; economics of public and private schooling; home schooling; teacher qualifications; involvement of parents; multi-lingual issues in schools; etc.

**Common Reading:** *The One World Schoolhouse: Education Reimagined* by Salman Khan (October 2012)

## 11. (EXP) THIS EXPLAINS EVERYTHING

Every year, the website Edge.org—a sort of online round table where experts in various fields trade ideas—asks its contributors a specific question. The 2012 Edge question was, “What is your favorite deep, elegant, or beautiful explanation?” (A beautiful or elegant explanation is one that reduces a complex puzzle to a simple set of principles or assumptions.) The responses Brockman, founder of Edge, received range from the obvious (Darwin’s theory of natural selection; DNA’s double helix shape; the principle of inertia) to the obscure (the Higgs Mechanism, for example, or the Faurie-Raymond hypothesis). The more than 100 responses have a couple of things in common: they are clearly written, and their authors are enthusiastic, in some cases downright passionate, about selling their response as the one true answer to the Edge question. It’s an eclectic collection of contributors, too: famed theoretical physicist Freeman Dyson is here, but also actor and writer Alan Alda; noted psychologist Susan Blackmore weighs in, as does musician and producer Brian Eno. A thought-provoking collection that should appeal to both general readers and trained scientists. Unfortunately this is the (current and) last book edited by Brockman. He passed away before he could pose the 2013 question. BTW the 2011 book: *This Will Make You Smarter*, is also excellent. Current contributors include: Nassim Taleb, Jared Diamond, Steven Pinker, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Richard Thaler, Martin Rees, and many many more.

This study/discussion group would focus on these great thinkers and their ideas combining research and lively discussions by our great Omnilore thinkers.

**Common Reading:** *This Explains Everything: Deep, Beautiful, and Elegant Theories of How the World Works*, edited by John Brockman (January 2013)

## 12. (FBI) ENEMIES: A HISTORY OF THE FBI

This class about the FBI, one of our most mysterious institutions, will be based on the newly published book by Tim Weiner, winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. (Both the Wall St. Journal and the New York Times give this book high praise.) Come learn about the FBI's 100-year history of domestic

surveillance, and about how the Bureau has served presidents from Teddy Roosevelt through George W. Bush. Presentation topics can cover what role the FBI played during the "Red Scares", World War II, the Cold War, the Civil Rights era, and up through the present day drone surveillance.

**Common Reading:** *Enemies: A History of the FBI*, by Tim Weiner (February 2012)

### 13. (FUT) ABUNDANCE: THE FUTURE IS BETTER THAN YOU THINK

A powerful antidote to today's malaise and pessimism, our common reading, *Abundance*, describes practical solutions to such pressing concerns as overpopulation, food, water, energy, education, healthcare and freedom. Innovative small teams are now empowered to accomplish what only governments and large corporations once achieved. The results could be the most transformative and inspiring period in human history. Presentations can cover the keys to the coming era of abundance, replacing eons of scarcity.

One author, Peter Diamandis, is a polymath, with degrees in molecular genetics and aerospace engineering from MIT and an MD from Harvard Medical School. He is the founder of two universities and more than a dozen high-tech companies. The second author, Steven Kotler, is an award-winning journalist whose writings have appeared in many periodicals, including the *New York Times Magazine*, *Discover* and *National Geographic*. Come join the discussion of the future direction of our global society.

**Common Reading:** *Abundance: The Future Is Better Than You Think*, by Peter Diamandis and Steven Kotler (February 2012)

### 14. (GAR) GARBOLOGY

What is America's largest export, most prodigious product and greatest legacy -- the biggest thing we make? Answer our trash. On average, we Americans toss 102 tons of garbage each in a lifetime, averaging 7.1 pounds a day, every day. We roll to the curb our collective body weight each year -- eighteen times over. Our disposable plastic alone outweighs the entire U.S. Navy -- and it costs us hundreds of billions of dollars. However, there are families, companies and whole communities who are finding a way to reduce waste, and profiting in the process. Through a compellingly human, at times absurdly humorous trash travelogue, Edward Humes reveals how government cooks the books to conceal the severity of our trashy ways, how the consumer economy is hijacked to encourage our costly love affair with waste, and how a new generation of waste-weary men and women are just saying no -- and finding that our biggest roadblock to restoring prosperity and our planet just might be our trash cans. Humes book, *Garbology, Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash*, is a prime candidate for this S/DG. Presentations can include topics such as: recycling vs. banning polystyrene;

where do all those plastic water bottles end up and how much does that cost?; are we running out of holes/land to bury garbage in?; can we get other countries to take our garbage?; how big are those giant ocean garbage gyres and can they be mitigated?; is the mafia involved in garbage collection?.

**Common Reading:** *Garbology, Our Dirty Love Affair with Trash*, by Edward Humes (March 2013)

#### 15. (HWW) HARDBOILED WOMEN WRITERS

Decades before Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton topped the best seller list with what was described as hard boiled fiction, there was a group of women writers who probed the hell in the human heart. Those authors wrote such things as “Laura” and “Strangers on the Train” and were favored by Alfred Hitchcock. They did not write English cozies or “chick lit” but serious probes of evil. Patricia Highsmith, Vera Caspary, Margaret Millar (Ross MacDonald’s wife) and Shirley Jackson were among those published between the 1940s and 1970s. Millar was published long before her famous husband and Caspary was criticized for her realistic writings of morality in the 20s and 30s that seem laughable in today’s world. Sara Weinman has collected stories written by these women in a new anthology that is as appealing today as when they were published, some in pulp magazines.

**Common Reading:** *Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives*, edited by Sara Weinman (August 27, 2013)

#### 16. (IMP) CALIFORNIA IMPRESSIONISTS

Nearly everyone knows the art of the French Impressionists; not so of California. The work of late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century California impressionists is characterized by colorful, light-filled canvases, memorializing the beauty of California’s landscape and coastline. Well-known artists such as Childe Hassam, William Meritt Chase, George Bellows, and George Innes came here to paint.

We are fortunate to live near the Irvine Museum which has permanent as well as traveling exhibits of the finest collection of Southern California impressionists, including Payne, Bishoff, Rose, Wendt, Redmond, Brown and Wachtel.

Meetings could focus on an overview of various periods or individual artists, with possible field trips to the Irvine Museum and Laguna Beach and/or the Los Angeles Art Museum.

**Common Reading:** *California Impressionists*, by Susan Landauer (July 1996)

#### 17. (MAT) WHAT YOU DO MATTERS: MODERN SCIENCE’S AFFIRMATION OF ANCIENT WISDOM

Do you ever wonder if what you do really matters one way or another? Why do material acquisitions and power not bring happiness? How is one to reconcile the

teachings of ancient wisdom and religious traditions with modern science? Using Jonathan Haidt's book we will explore together what clinical research has shown about our rational and not so rational behaviors. We will learn about the sources of meaning, why too many choices can lead to unhappiness, and how a different attitude changes everything. We will explore examples of the positive uses of adversity, see the biological roots of hypocrisy, and come to understand why virtue is its own reward. We will do exercises to experiment with Haidt's findings and gain actual experience in knowing that what we do matters.

**Common Reading:** *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom*, by Jonathan Haidt (2003)

#### 18. MEL) MEL BROOKS

Mel Brooks has produced 11 films and been connected to many TV shows, such as Sid Caesar's Show of Shows, Blazing Saddles, and Young Frankenstein. Many are satires on other productions and are very topical, dealing with societal taboos. Presenters can pick a movie and provide insight into its making and lead class discussions of the elements of comedy combined with social impact. One question the class could explore is the likelihood of these movies being produced in today's Politically Correct atmosphere.

**No Common Reading.**

#### 19. (MMA) MYSTERIES OF THE MIDDLE AGES: THE RISE OF FEMINISM, SCIENCE AND ART FROM THE CULTS OF CATHOLIC EUROPE

This course provides an interesting human and historical look at the rise of the West from the so called "Dark Ages". Given the wide range of characters and ideas in the book further research should result in numerous presentations which can be easily chosen.

By deliberate choice, the books in Cahill's "hinges of history" series concentrate on individual people and their positive contributions to the world, playing down wars, pestilence and cruelty. Hence, rather than providing a comprehensive history of Europe from the 6th through the 14th centuries, "Mysteries of the Middle Ages" presents a series of individuals — Hildegard of Bingen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Peter Abelard, Francis of Assisi, Giotto, Dante — whose lives provide a vivid and sympathetic picture of these nine turbulent centuries.

His introduction proves that feminism, science and art arose just as plausibly from the cosmopolitan haunts of Alexandria as they did from the cults of Catholic Europe, and an equally strong case might be made for the Egypt of the pharaohs. So, too, his story of Cleopatra (in the introduction) shows plainly that Eleanor of Aquitaine (Chapter 2) was not, in fact, the first woman to take charge of her own political and sexual life. Most storytellers revel in exaggeration; it is what gives stories the point that both history and daily life so evidently lack. Cahill loves to

spin out a yarn, and his personal asides seem to add to this intimate, old-time atmosphere. His familiarity with ancient languages allows him to treat titans like Plato and Thomas Aquinas on a human scale, as fellow spinners of tales; he notes with touching acuity that Aquinas, for all his monumental reputation (he was both famously prolific and famously fat) died at 49.

**Common Reading:** *Mysteries of the Middle Ages: The Rise of Feminism, Science and Art from the Cults of Catholic Europe*, by Thomas Cahill (Oct. 2006)

## 20. (MUS) THE REST IS NOISE (Bob Bragonier coordinator)

When many of us listen to contemporary music, how do we react? Do we associate it with cacophony, dissonance, chaos? Do we make an effort to understand it, or do we simply ignore it and avoid it whenever we can?

For those of us who would like a better understanding of twentieth century composers and their works, Alex Ross, the music critic for *The New Yorker*, has written a readable and enlightening book which juxtaposes history and graphic arts with the musical compositions of the last century. This book gives a comprehensive and detailed tour of music beginning with Vienna before World War I, Paris in the Twenties, Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia and New York in the 60's and 70's. It includes the influence of jazz, bebop, folksongs and other genres. We learn about many of twentieth century's most acclaimed composers (including some of the *avant garde* ones), beginning with Mahler and continuing with Debussy, Schoenberg, Duke Ellington, Alban Berg, and John Cage, among others. An analysis of John Adam's opera *Nixon in China* appears in the final chapter.

The book has 15 chapters, and the S/DG will be spread over two trimesters, Spring and Summer 2014. This course, which has been offered two times previously to enthusiastic participants, provides wonderful opportunities for lively discussion and presentations featuring many musical samples. It will likely explore new areas for lovers of Western art music.

**Common Reading:** *The Rest is Noise*, by Alex Ross (October 2008)

## 21. (ORD) ORDER OUT OF CHAOS

At the heart of the universe is a steady, insistent beat, the sound of cycles in sync. Along the tidal rivers of Malaysia, thousands of fireflies congregate and flash in unison; the moon spins in perfect resonance with its orbit around the earth; our hearts depend on the synchronous firing of ten thousand pacemaker cells. While the forces that synchronize the flashing of fireflies may seem to have nothing to do with our heart cells, there is in fact a deep connection. Synchrony is a science in its infancy, and Strogatz, author of our common reading, is a pioneer in this new frontier in which mathematicians and physicists attempt to pinpoint just how spontaneous order emerges from chaos. From underground caves in Texas where a French scientist spent six months alone tracking his sleep-wake cycle, to

the home of a Dutch physicist who in 1665 discovered two of his pendulum clocks swinging in perfect time, this fascinating book spans disciplines, continents, and centuries. Engagingly written for the nonscientist, *Sync* is a tour-de-force of nonfiction writing and lends itself to picking topics for further investigation as presentations.

**Common Reading:** *Sync: The Emerging Science of Spontaneous Order* by Steven H. Strogatz (March 2003)

## 22. (REN) THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The Harlem Renaissance lasted only a very short time (from about 1920 through the early 1930s). Yet in this brief period there was a flowering of African-American literature, art, and music, especially jazz. Among the writers of the period are Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Claude McKay, Carl Van Vechten, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Marcus Garvey, Alaine Locke, and A'Lelia Walker Robinson. In addition, we shall be introduced to the black artists of the period and investigate the flowering of jazz in Harlem of this time. Any of these people or subjects would be possible presentation topics. Our common reading will give us the historical and sociological background of the period and introduce us to the main figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

**Common Reading:** *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, by David L Lewis (1997)

## 23. (SHK) SHAKESPEARE: ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

The Omnilorean New Globe Theater plans a January-April season featuring one each of the Bard's Comedy, and Tragedy, and History plays. With players standing and with a few props, we propose to do reading walk-throughs of 3 of the Bard's great plays to be selected by the pre-meeting in December.

In this SDG you will learn how to research all perspectives of Shakespeare's works — sources of each play upon which the Bard builds rich characters and enhances the plots, how to play each character "in character," themes, symbols, images, motifs, commentary on issues of the day, and all manner of *rhyme and reason*. Class members each serve on one play's Board of Directors, responsible for casting roles for the repertory and leading discussions based on the research — optionally adding videos, music, and costumes. For a glimpse of how we live the Bard in this S/DG, check out <http://omnilore.org/members/Curriculum/SDGs/13c-SHK-Shakespeare> to view the Fall Shakespeare class's website of links to references relevant to our plays and downloadable organizing artifacts.

There are no prerequisites, theatrical or otherwise. You will find that the Bard of Stratford-on-Avon will teach us, just as he's taught others for four hundred years. With plenty for the novice as well as the veteran, it is a *foregone conclusion* members will leave this class with a fuller understanding of the masterful story

construction, realistic characters with depth and humanity, and the rich, evocative language which have earned William Shakespeare the title of greatest writer in the English language.

**Common Reading:** Selected Plays

#### 24. (SOC) THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

Rousseau, founder of the Romantic Movement, arguably the most influential philosopher of the 18th Century, who, according to 20th Century philosopher Isaiah Berlin, 'beheaded the Enlightenment with a single blow', published his small essay *The Social Contract* in 1762, at the pinnacle of his fame.

It is a remarkable document in that it contains all the key ideas that form the political foundations of all modern democracies, arguing from history, philosophy and experience. Its ideas influenced both the America Revolution, an Enlightenment revolution; and the French Revolution, a Romantic Revolution (which happened the year after his death) which lead inevitably to the guillotine.

Besides working our way through this small, dense text, there are literally hundreds of potential subjects for presentations, from Rousseau himself, to the dozens of authorities he cites, to the detailed structures of modern societies and governments, including our own, and where his ideas can be found in the contemporary world.

**Common Reading:** *The Social Contract*, by J.J. Rousseau (*Reprint January 2012*)

#### 25. (VIO) THE VIOLINIST'S THUMB

Scientists can now read, for the first time, the lost tales buried in the human genome. Did the human race almost go extinct? Can genetics explain a crazy cat lady's love for felines? How does DNA lead to people with no fingerprints, or humans born with tails? And how did the right combination of genes create the exceptionally flexible thumbs and fingers of a truly singular violinist?

Unraveling the genetic code hasn't always been easy—from its earliest days, genetics has been rife with infighting, backstabbing, and controversial theories—but scientists can now finally read the astounding stories inscribed in our DNA. As we make advances into DNA mapping and modification, genetics will continue to be the hottest topic in science, shaping the very makeup of our bodies and the world around us.

Sam Kean untangles the secrets of our genetic code, explaining how genetics has shaped our past, and how DNA will determine humankind's future.

This course will expand your knowledge of the work done on the human genetic code while providing many areas to be explored in presentations.

**Common Reading:** *The Violinist's Thumb: And Other Lost Tales of Love, War, and Genius, as Written by Our Genetic Code*, by Sam Kean (July 2013) by Steven H. Strogatz (March 2003)

**26. (WSH) GEORGE WASHINGTON – THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF OUR FIRST PRESIDENT**

What was it like being born in 1732, growing up in the American colonies, and then becoming the father of your country? This S/DG will study the life of George Washington and his accomplishments. He was a dominant personality in three of the most critical events in the founding of the United States: as winning general in our Revolutionary War, as the presiding head over the Constitutional Convention, and as leader of the first national administration – our first Presidency. He kept together a rebellious, inexperienced band of patriots to defeat the then largest superpower in the world - always lacking sufficient funds from a Congress that could often barely muster a quorum. He kept the course presiding over a secret convention of Congressional delegates that were committed to factions that needed to compromise to accomplish their true purpose. He could have become Emperor - but unlike many power-seeking presidents of the past century – simply chose not to, retiring in beloved obscurity to Mount Vernon. We will learn why they called him "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." The assigned text will be supplemented by presentations on various aspects of his life so that we may appreciate the interplay between the man and the period. Topics for presentation might include: Washington's early life, his experience in the French – Indian War, running Mount Vernon, leading the Revolutionary War effort, His private life after the War, his role in the Constitutional Convention, being the 1<sup>st</sup> US president etc.

**Common Reading:** *George Washington, The Founding Father*, by Paul Johnson (2005)

**27. (WTS) WILLIAM TREVOR SHORT STORIES**

William Trevor, KBE, (born 24 May 1928) is an Irish author and playwright. Over the course of his long career he has written several novels and hundreds of short stories. He is best-known for his short stories.. He has won the Whitbread Prize three times and has been nominated four times for the Booker Prize, most recently for his novel *Love and Summer* (2009). Tim Adams, a staff writer for The Observer described him as "widely believed to be the most astute observer of the human condition currently writing in fiction." "Trevor is probably the greatest living writer of short stories in the English language..." - The New Yorker.

Trevor has written several collections of short stories that were well-received. His short stories often follow a Chekhovian pattern. The characters in Trevor's work are usually marginalized members of society: children, old people, single middle-aged men and women, or the unhappily married. Those who cannot accept the

reality of their lives create their own alternative worlds into which they retreat. A number of the stories use elements of the Gothic convention to explore the nature of evil and its connection with madness. Trevor has acknowledged the influence of James Joyce on his short-story writing, and "the odor of ash pits and old weeds and offal" can be detected in his work, but the overall impression is not of gloominess, since, particularly in the early work, the author's wry humor offers the reader a tragicomic version of the world. He has adapted much of his work for stage, television and radio.

You will find that one reason that short story S/DGs are so popular is the fascinating differences in interpretation by your presenters and classmates.

**Common Reading:** *William Trevor: The Collected Stories*