

The Seattle Times

Summer reading: 10 nonfiction books to last the season

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Ben Macintyre's "Double Cross," Amanda Foreman's "A World on Fire" and eight other books are on Seattle Times book editor Mary Ann Gwinn's summer recommended-reading list.

By Mary Ann Gwinn

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Some people like their summer reading light, easy and made up. For myself, I like to wend my way to the *chaise longue* with a lemonade in one hand and ... not a novel, but a well-written book of nonfiction in the other. Why? Something to do with uninterrupted concentration — there's nothing quite so blissful as being able to read and absorb, watch a swallowtail do a dippy-doodle over the daisies, then regroup the old brain cells for another go at a story that *really happened*.

Here's a shortlist of books that will keep you enthralled throughout the summer:

By Ben Macintyre

Ben Macintyre, a Brit, has made his name by writing real-life stories that read like fiction — crisply written, humorous and suspenseful. My favorites are his books set during World War II. The first, 2007's "**Agent Zigzag**," is a true story of a career British criminal/con man arrested by the Germans on the island of Jersey. Given the choice of becoming a spy or going to a concentration camp, Eddie Chapman chose the former. Trained and parachuted into Britain, Chapman promptly and patriotically reported to the British Secret Service, which used him to transmit bogus information to the Germans. "**Operation Mincemeat**" (2010) is the story of how the Brits floated a dead body onto a Spanish beach with a briefcase full of fake documents, thereby altering the course of World War II. Macintyre has a new book, "**Double Cross: The True Story of the D-Day Spies**," out in August. I can't wait.

Civil War history

"A World on Fire: Britain's Role in the American Civil War" by *Amanda Foreman*. Just out in paperback, Foreman's tome is an absorbing chronicle of the British and their diplomatic high-wire act with the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War. Foreman has a gift for sketching character (almost 200 are featured in the dramatis personae) and a wonderful ear for gossip and intrigue. "A World on Fire" was voted one of the 10 best books published in 2011 by The New York Times Book Review.

By John Barry

John Barry, a historian at Tulane University, has written two enthralling books about historic events that shook our nation. One, 1997's **"Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America,"** tells the story of the 1927 disaster and its effect on the nation, particularly the South. The other, 2004's **"The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History,"** is a wrenching account of the worldwide flu epidemic of 1918.

Biographies

"John Adams" by *David McCullough* and **"John James Audubon: The Making of an American"** by *Richard Rhodes* are two of the most absorbing biographies I've ever read. Published in 2001, McCullough's portrait of the Founding Father and second president is now legendary (it's the basis for the fabulous HBO series of the same name); 2004's "John James Audubon" is not as well known but deserves a wide readership — Rhodes not only chronicles the life of an artistic genius but transports you back to an age of wonder, when this country was a bountiful natural paradise.

Memoirs

Two of my favorites are **"Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight"** by *Alexandra Fuller*, and **"Stuart: A Life Backwards"** by *Alexander Masters*. Fuller's 2002 book is the vivid, funny and unrelentingly honest story of her childhood in 1960s-'70s Rhodesia and her life with her highly eccentric mother and her farmer-soldier father. "Stuart," published in 2008, tells the story of a homeless man befriended by British homeless advocate Masters. Starting with Stuart's death and working backward, it shows how easily human potential can be derailed. Both these books are humorous and sad, entertaining and tragic. Real life, indeed.