Books

6 Fabulous Books to Read this Winter

By
Rebecca Shapiro
|
Winter 2020-21



Collage by Len Small

She Come By It Natural

By Sarah Smarsh ’05SOA

For decades, Dolly Parton was for many people more of a punch line than an icon. But for Sarah Smarsh, who grew up in rural Kansas, country music was “how we talked to each other in a place where feelings aren’t discussed.” And Dolly Parton reigned supreme — particularly among the tough, hard-working women in Smarsh’s life. Smarsh was a National Book Award finalist for her first book, *Heartland*, an incisive look into the rural working class. With her new book, she takes a deep dive into Parton’s cultural contributions to communities like her own, paying homage to the ways the singer gave a voice to so many women otherwise overlooked.

The Glorious American Essay

By Phillip Lopate ’64CC

With the country deeply divided and new questions about the future of democracy arising every day, there has never been a better time for an anthology that looks at the American experiment through some of its greatest thinkers and writers, from the Founding Fathers to the present day. For this new collection, editor Phillip Lopate — a prominent essayist and professor of writing at Columbia’s School of the Arts — sifted through three centuries of American essays beginning in the Colonial period, seeking a diverse selection to represent the complicated history of a nation. The result is an eclectic and engaging mix, with authors as wide-ranging as George Washington and Zadie Smith, Frederick Douglass and Dorothy Parker.

Critique and Praxis

By Bernard E. Harcourt

With the overlapping tensions of a global pandemic, a national reckoning on race and policing, and a fraught presidential election, 2020 was a year of unparalleled turmoil. In his new book, Columbia Law School professor Bernard E. Harcourt — a

longtime social-justice activist — uses critical theory to help readers strategize about becoming more engaged citizens during this unique time. The most important shift in mindset, Harcourt argues, is thinking specifically about what each of us can do as individuals rather than what broad changes need to be made in society.

Loved and Wanted

By Christa Parravani ’03SOA

Christa Parravani was forty years old when she found herself unexpectedly pregnant with her third child. The news was not welcome — Parravani’s marriage and finances were both shaky, and she was about to start a new job as a creative-writing instructor at West Virginia University. Parravani wanted to end the pregnancy, but there was little access to abortion in West Virginia, and by the time she found an alternative — hours away in Pittsburgh — it was too late. Parravani’s memoir about her pregnancy and the choices that she was forced to make is candid, eye-opening, and heartbreaking. In addition to telling her own story, she paints a broad picture of how decreased access to abortion correlates directly with problems like infant mortality and child hunger.

Tiny Nightmares

Coedited by Lincoln Michel ’09SOA

A story doesn’t have to be long to have staying power, especially if it’s as terrifying as the selections in this horror anthology, coedited by Lincoln Michel, a writing instructor at Columbia’s School of the Arts. None of the forty-two “flash fiction” entries are more than a few pages long, but all are inventive, surprising, and often downright blood-curdling. Michel includes original work from fellow Columbia alums Selena Gambrell Anderson ’10SOA, Theresa Hottel ’18SOA, and Hilary Leichter ’12SOA (also a Columbia writing instructor), whose story about a witch casting a spell on an unsuspecting hipster couple is a standout.

The Story of Evolution in 25 Discoveries

By Donald R. Prothero ’82GSAS

Geologist and paleontologist Donald R. Prothero is an expert at explaining complex scientific breakthroughs in easily digestible forms. In the previous three volumes of his “25 discoveries” series, Prothero tackled rocks, fossils, and dinosaurs. Now he turns his attention to evolution, chronicling twenty-five major moments that advanced our understanding of our place in the history of the universe. As always, Prothero is an entertaining, informative guide.

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