
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

Summer 2024

An immense world: Prairie Dog's Summer Reading List 2024

*I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us.
—Franz Kafka, 1884-1924*

Black AF History by Michael Harriot

Kafka would approve of this book's main thesis: "The criminal enterprise called America is nothing but a self-perpetuating white supremacy machine."

Even if you already know that white supremacy is the defining characteristic of America's policies, Harriot will enlighten you on how the successful slave revolt of 1804 in Haiti was immediately sabotaged by the US and Europe (and continues to this day). He also points out that reparations have already been paid by the US – to wealthy South Carolinians as compensation for the loss of their slaves!

The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future by Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway

To comply Governor Reynolds' education plan that requires the teaching of Western Civ in Iowa schools, all Iowa social studies teachers should include this futuristic science fiction novel in their curricula.

It's 2393. The 300th anniversary of the Great Collapse is being

commemorated in the Second People's Republic of China. A scholar recounts how free marketeers and political leaders of "advanced" nations ignored or denied the climate changes that eventually led to the catastrophic reconstruction of the world order.

Read it in a couple of hours, think about it for months.

Remarkably Bright Creatures by Shelby Van Pelt

Marcellus, a giant Pacific octopus living out its brief life in a small-town aquarium, observes and sometimes narrates the intergenerational lives of people who have little in common but their loneliness. Despite his initial disdain for their lower order of intelligence, Marcellus ingeniously brings them together. Remarkably believable.

King by Jonathan Eng

Using newly available FBI files and recently discovered correspondence, Eng portrays the human side of MLK rarely seen beyond his family and inner circle. He also shows the balancing act King performed as competing forces jockeyed for his attention, the skill with which he negotiated with them, and the

complex planning and compromises behind every protest, march, and political campaign.

All This Could Be Different by Sarah Thankam Mathews

This debut novel at first seems like a run of the mill coming of age story revolving around twenty-somethings worried about sex, love, workplace traumas, and paying the rent. But this one is deeper than most, layered with the struggles of a recession-riddled economy, the problems faced by children of immigrants, and the trials of finding good Indian restaurants in Milwaukee. Mathews' empathy for even her less likable characters can make the most cynical reader care about their destinies.

An Immense World by Ed Yong

Do you think you know what your dog smells, what your cat sees, what your goldfish experiences? You're probably wrong.

Neighbors and Other Stories by Diane Oliver

In 1966, weeks before graduating with an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Diane Oliver was killed in a motorcycle accident. She was

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Adding insult to injury

A single mom works as a CNA in a hospital. One night, she is assigned to give a shower to a patient who has dementia. As she starts to shower him, he growls. He calls her a Nazi. She tries to calm him. He calls her a Nazi again and louder. Without warning, he puts a hand on her throat and begins to squeeze; with his other hand, he seizes the showerhead and beats her in the face. The worker is pinned in and tries to scream. A nurse walks in. Instead of helping, she says, "I'll go look for help." The attack ends only when the dementia patient stands up and walks stark naked out into the hallway. In the ensuing months, the CNA attempts to return to work. She is watched closely. The employer reprimands her if she clocks in one minute late. The employer reprimands her for going to the bathroom too often. She is harassed by management until she has a breakdown.

A middle school band teacher spends 30 years working for her school district. One August, her principal asks her to coach 7th grade volleyball. The teacher responds she does not know anything about volleyball or coaching and is not certified. The principal tells her if she does not agree to coach, they simply will not have a team. So, she agrees. The school serves a low socio-economic community. This is the first volleyball experience for many of the kids. They lose a lot. In the last match, they face a team from a wealthy school. This is not the first volleyball experience for the wealthy kids. The match is not competitive. Kids lose their tempers and some refuse to take the bus home. When the bus arrives home, a mob of angry parents is waiting. As the band teacher exits the bus,

a mother steps up and punches her in the face, knocking her to the ground. The school suspends the teacher. After an investigation finds no wrongdoing by the teacher, the school district threatens to fire her if she does not agree to sign their resignation forms. This is how her career ends.

Both of these attacks on workers are workers' compensation events. In Iowa, an employer and its workers' compensation insurance carrier are required to pay all costs for all physical and mental healthcare stemming from a work injury.

Both of these workers suffer from some combination of depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Both relive their experiences in nightmares and with particular every-day triggers.

Injured workers like these two often find twin antagonists: their employer and the insurance company. The employer often treats its injured workers like enemies. The workers may be put under a microscope, receive discipline as a form of harassment, or simply not be allowed to return to work. Workers often leave unpleasantly and are made to feel guilty for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

To add insult to injury, there is the workers' compensation insurance company. Though required under law, mental health care is typically not provided at the outset. The worker must request it. The insurance company may ignore requests for care – maybe for months, maybe for years. Next, the insurance company will want to send the worker to a psychologist for an evaluation. There is a cottage industry of people with degrees in mental health who make themselves available to insurance companies to provide the opinions

sought. Assuming the person with a degree plays their expected role and finds the worker is exaggerating symptoms, malingering or suffering from a pre-existing condition, that likely closes the books on providing care.

Occasionally, though, the facts are so stark the insurance company cannot figure out a way out of providing mental healthcare.

But if it takes one or two years before the employer or insurance company fulfills its legal duty to provide care, there is no financial penalty. The injured worker suffering from PTSD after a work injury cannot recover anything for pain and suffering. And in the worst-case scenario, if someone suffering from untreated mental illness stemming from a work injury takes his or her own life, the insurance company is off the hook from having to pay anything.

When there is no penalty for noncompliance with the law, when there is no accountability, the results are predictable. Ignore. Delay. Deny. Shame the injured worker and try to make them go away. These are the trademark characteristics experienced by Iowans hurt on the job and needing mental health care. It is a gauntlet that only those who are courageous, and probably a bit lucky, will successfully navigate.

—Nate Willems practices law in Cedar Rapids and lives in Mount Vernon.

Hold the mayo

To my knowledge, the *Prairie Progressive* has never had a food critic. It's had sports reporters, small town and foreign correspondents, fabulous reading lists, but never a person to critique food in Iowa. Let this be the first article on food.

Most people coming to Des Moines want to eat at some exotic, fine, well-known eatery in central Iowa. However, take one of my recommendations for hometown food. Not only has the food been delicious, but several of the following locations have served some very famous people in the past.

Years ago, Prairie Dog joined me to dine at George the Chili King, a greasy spoon drive-in close to the corner of Hickman Road and Merle Hay Road. The namesake chili is a menu item I tried once. It may have been simmering slowly and easy for the flavors to meld, but you shouldn't have to peel off the crusty layer to get to the smudge that could have been burnt at the bottom of the pot. I was told that I was there on the wrong day. However, I stopped several times, and each must have been the wrong day. The décor was from the 1950s and so was the dust. But if you could get past the gloveless counter employees wiping their hands on their shirts, the tenderloin and fries were great! The aura of overused fryer oil permeated the air and stuck with you for the rest of the day, sort of like the meal.

The owners died and the dive closed. Recently, the sign was sold and removed from the partially-damaged roof. It looks like we're not going to enjoy George's menu items any longer.

George was an economic and environmental leader as he transformed the deep fat fryer's

grease into fuel for his modified pickup engine. I believe in supporting a business that is into recycling. This business' famous visitor was Guy Fieri of *Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives* in 2014.

At one time, a burger at Kelly's Little Nipper on East Grand Avenue in Des Moines was one of the best in Iowa. This establishment, founded in 1940, was once filled at noon with legislators and lobbyists trying to find a booth or table amongst the regulars. Most patrons enter through the back door since the best parking is across the street in a bumpy dirt lot. It's not fast food by any measure, but the burgers and grinders are the best in Des Moines. The food is moderately priced and plentiful.

One afternoon, the place was so full, my guest and I had to sit at a small table by the door because even the bar was packed. There is a large round table by the front door. That day, eight of the nine Iowa Supreme Court justices were dining around the large oak table. You know the place is on the high end of Des Moines eateries when the Iowa Chief Justice and seven of his associates were having a fulfilling meal. If you attend the Iowa State Fair, the saloon is not too far out of your way, or right on the way if you happen to drive down East Grand Avenue.

Zombie Burger in the East Village is a favorite of many visitors to Des Moines. My favorite sandwich, the Undead Elvis, is a burger with peanut butter, fried bananas, bacon, American cheese, a fried egg, and mayo. I'll have to request holding the mayo from now on. I think it gives me heartburn. The famous people at this establishment often

includes a few legislators and lobbyists, sipping martinis during a noon break in the daily action at the Capitol up the street.

Another place on my list is halfway between Des Moines and Iowa City. The Best Burger in Iowa Café is a small establishment near the Kellogg exit on I-80. Be sure to order fries with your burger.

My final recommendation is the Capitol cafeteria at the Statehouse. Governor Branstad used to frequent the cafeteria during the noon hour and speak with diners on occasion. He never chose to sit with me. When Mark Cady was the Chief Justice, he would bring an associate along with him and sit in the cafeteria to hear what any Iowan had to say about the courts. They didn't get much company, but I sat with them when no one else would.

One so-called famous person you won't see in the Iowa Capitol cafeteria is Governor Kim Reynolds. How could her conscience allow her to be seen eating in public after turning down \$29 million of federal funding that would have provided a low-income family \$40 per month "to help with food costs" during the 3-month break in the school year.

—*Marty Ryan is the Restaurant Critic for The Prairie Progressive.*

Iowa Press or Iowa Parody?

There's a parody Twitter account that posts daily tweets about how the NY Times, the media in general, and Republicans twist everything to cast shade on Biden and Democrats. To give you an idea, if you don't follow NYTimes Pitchbot @DougJBalloon, they all go something like this:

"Joe Biden has had the most successful presidency for passing popular legislation since FDR. How will this hurt Democrats?"

"Is the Biden economy creating too many jobs?"

"Eighty years ago today, brave Americans stormed the beaches of Normandy as they began their valiant liberation of Europe. Here's why that's bad news for Joe Biden."

These are satirical but the point is, they are meant to expose the absurd degree of Republican-friendly bias in the media.

I was reminded of this when I watched *Iowa Press* this past June 7th and spotted examples of this similar type of bias by the program's panel interviewing Rita Hart, Iowa Democratic Party Chair. I'm not smart enough to be a satirist so I can't turn these into something funny, but I can recognize a pattern.

For example, the panelists could have asked if Trump's recent felony conviction by jury might be a drag for Republicans and help Democratic chances in November. Or they could have asked if Biden's infrastructure projects that have helped Iowa might improve Democratic prospects in November. Instead, Brianna Pfannenstiel asked Hart: "President Biden has a historically low approval rating. It's 29% in Iowa right now, according to the last Iowa Poll. Are you worried that's going to be a drag for Democrats in Iowa?"

Then the same question from Erin Murphy, in case Hart missed the point: "Do Iowa Democrats have to sell Joe Biden...or try to avoid talking about the President and focus on their own races?"

Why should Democrats avoid talking about a successful Democratic president who is NOT A FELON? It's Republicans who should want to avoid talking about their nominee, convicted felon Donald Trump. And that's exactly where Rita Hart went with it.

Hart: "The contrast here is pretty stark. I think the American people and Iowans recognize that we are looking at a Republican party struggling to get behind their nominee because it's hard to see that we could have a president who is a convicted felon...who has the potential to actually be elected from jail, who is morally compromised...I could go on about all the reasons why it doesn't make sense to elect this guy to the most respected office in the country. And so we're going to keep talking about that, how there is a clear contrast between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, who is working to lower costs for Iowans...on improving health care for Iowans and Americans, somebody who is on a much different path working for common working Americans, rather than tax cuts to billionaires and millionaires."

Slam dunk, I'd say. Well, it's easy when they ask the same question of every Democrat.

Could Biden's Iowa approval rating be related to facts not breaking through in our media environment? Or to the hostility the GOP trifecta heaps on Democrats and the press?

When *Iowa Press* has a Democrat on the program, they pull out their good old Low Biden Approval question. State Representative Jennifer Konfrst was asked the same question last month.

Ten percent of Republicans polled said they would not vote for Trump if convicted. Forty percent of Iowa Republicans rejected Trump in the caucus, opting for Nikki Haley or Ron DeSantis. Despite this erosion of Trump support, these facts were not raised as possibly disadvantageous to Republicans during this election year.

The *Iowa Press* panelists brought up topics that in their view would make things bad for Democrats. They seem to have no idea what non-Republican voters in Iowa are worried about regarding extreme Republican policies.

How about this one? I love Hart's answer.

Pfannenstiel: "RFK Jr. was somebody who has said that he has made it onto Iowa's ballot in November. Do you have any concerns about his candidacy and whether he takes away votes from Joe Biden in November?"

Hart: "I think that the results on our presidential preference cards made that clear...we did not have one delegate for RFK Jr. I think that kind of speaks for itself."

Because we couldn't possibly leave out the tragic RFK Jr. development, a true bummer for Democrats regardless of who it ends up helping or hurting politically. And some pollsters suggest his candidacy will hurt Trump more than Biden.

Finally, Kay Henderson asked:

"On June 15th, your party will have a state convention. Do you anticipate a platform fight over the Israel Gaza war, the Israel Hamas war?"

I really wish Rita Hart would have answered, "at least we have a platform."

If you don't believe me, see for yourself at iowapbs.org.

—Trish Nelson administers blogforiowa.com where an earlier version of this article first appeared.

Legislative stupid rolls on

This summer in Iowa, the legislative stupid just rolls on. In the last week, we have watched in bemused wonderment as lawmakers, restaurant owners, and lobbyists had a meltdown. Why? Because the feds are enforcing child labor laws – even though Iowa’s GOP passed a state law contravening them, and the lobbyists told the business owners it would all be just fine. Turns out it is not just fine. Illegal staffing has been alleged against some businesses relying on the new state law. Numerous instances are being assessed by the federal government for violations. Penalties could be stiff. As they should be.

Contrary to the belief of Iowa’s GOP legislators, we are not living in a movie production of *David Copperfield*. It is not what we want as citizens; it is not allowed under federal laws. The fact that so many under the Capitol dome blithely went along with hurtling children into the wayback machine, ever closer to 1800s London, is astonishing. Industry excuses, hurriedly composed and articulated this week, are beyond that.

As a vortex of publicity erupted, Iowa’s Restaurant Association began hearing from business owners in their organization who received visits and communications from federal regulators about practices they had adopted upon passage of the new law, SF 542.

Turns out many felt, and documentation appears to confirm, that the Association at the very least downplayed the risks of adopting the new state law rather than hewing closely to federal guidelines with employees under the age of 16.

In www.bleedingheartland.com Laura Belin gives the best overview of the bill, its passage, its implementation

and how it was communicated to restaurant owners. There are moments when I read her communication from the Association’s President & CEO Jessica Dunker, where I feel sorry for owner/employers trapped between amped-up GOP lawmakers, their own lobbyists, and the feds. But when you distill it all down to its essence, it appears this is what happened:

Said lawmakers, high on multiple conservative “wins” across federal, state and local governments, went to work to undermine protective child labor laws. They passed their bill and were jubilant about the prospect of clearing so much ‘obstruction’ from the pathways of young people seeking ‘a meaningful work experience.’

The bill was signed by our Governor, always eager to clear obstructive bureaucratic protocols out of the way of ‘common sense’ approaches to government or labor and working conditions.

As the bill was communicated to business owners, it appears – and Belin shows the work on this – information on how and where the new state law might contradict federal law, and thereby create major trouble for them as employers, was not well done. There were print materials, but none with a simple side-by-side of federal and state regulations. There was a statement about following federal law whenever that is what “gives the most protection.” It appeared in a section titled “Federal Labor Law.” Prior to this, Belin cites language that appears to wholly ignore tensions between the two sets of laws on the association’s “Legislative Wins” page.

In short, it would have been terribly easy for a busy employer to miss out on the few, obscure signals that using the Iowa law as a polestar might

cause serious trouble. Now, some owners fear closure as it appears the federal law will be enforced with significant strength.

This boondoggle was created by a political party drunk on its ascension to ever greater power, aided by a statewide association eager to tout a giant legislative “win” to its membership.

Now, the association is crying foul. Dunker argues the kind of enforcement being undertaken in Iowa has not happened in the 19 or so other states where power-drunk GOP legislatures have similarly vivisected child labor laws. I cannot weep for them on this point. We don’t get to tell the IRS that we know dozens of people in dozens of states who have failed to declare a, b, or c and were never penalized. That’s just not how life, regulatory structures, tax codes, or basic laws work or have ever worked.

In addition, prior to the bill’s passage, federal regulators chimed warnings to Iowa that the impending law would be “inconsistent with federal child labor law in several respects.”

With warnings, time to spare, and any ‘common sense’ at all, the debacle being faced by some Iowa restaurant owners could have been avoided. It should have been. Their legislators let them down. Their association also appears to have some explaining to do. Meanwhile Iowa and its child workers, for now, appear safe from a slide back into a very off-off-Broadway production of *Little Dorrit*.

—Kim Painter migrated to Iowa in 1981.

A dagger in the back of tax fairness

Perhaps the greatest damage to Iowa's civic culture is coming in the same package that will cause the greatest damage to public services: a drive to cut taxes by any means, by any amount, in any form, no matter the cost – without any explanation, no matter how nonsensical.

Iowa took great strides down that low road again in 2024 with (1) an acceleration and expansion of tax cuts passed in 2022; (2) a first step toward a constitutional amendment requiring two-thirds supermajorities to pass any income-tax rate increase for individuals or corporations; and (3) a first step toward another constitutional amendment requiring income taxes to be set at a single rate, outlawing progressivity in income taxes.

Each step is indefensible on either fiscal responsibility or equity grounds, and each is a good bet for further action in 2025 and/or 2026, with other damaging ideas lurking.

Each carries great opportunity costs. Each pads bank accounts for the wealthy and diminishes public investments that would otherwise make Iowa stronger. Each thrusts a dagger in the back of tax fairness. And each denies us the opportunity to create better tax policy than what existed even before a Far-Right Republican trifecta launched its drive to the bottom in 2018 with the first of four major income-tax bills.

It's hard to even think about a stronger Earned Income Tax Credit, a substantial Child Tax Credit or corporate tax-credit reform – let alone a wealth tax – when all the power in the Legislature put a concerted effort behind destructive tax cuts for the wealthy with no negotiation, curiosity, or transparency. But that's where we are.

Recall that Iowa until recent years had a nine-rate individual income-tax structure that was marginally progressive. It taxed high incomes at a higher rate than lower incomes. But it was nowhere close to a structure that would offset the regressive impacts of sales and property taxes.

Loopholes in corporate income taxes, meanwhile, augmented rampant use of tax credits and other subsidies, further limiting revenue to the state General Fund as spending on education and other important services stagnated or even fell in real terms.

This combination set us up perfectly for the mess crafted in Des Moines by the last three General Assemblies.

The real impacts of tax bills in 2022 and 2024 are not well-understood or explained by Republican legislators. But their fundamental, long-term impacts are clear: lower revenues and fewer services. Only better policy choices can change it.

The Legislative Services Agency, working with the Department of Revenue, does a nice job laying out what we can expect from these bills. That's a challenge when deals are hatched behind closed doors and rammed into law, barely unwrapped.

As of next year, all Iowans no matter what their income will pay a 3.8% single rate on whatever is taxable. Without a graduated rate – which Iowa had since the beginning of an income tax in 1934 – the balance will tip further in favor of the wealthy, who pay a lesser percent of their income in sales and property taxes than do low- and middle-income taxpayers. Despite exemptions previously in place, taxes are now totally off retirement income and next year off all inheritances.

Revenue will drop by nearly \$2 billion a year compared with what would have been the case before passage of the 2022 cuts – and two years sooner. That's over 20% of the current budget. Temporary surpluses will for a time mask the impact, but they will vanish and blast a gaping hole in future budgets. The anti-tax legislators and lobbyists don't admit this.

The latest report promoted by the pro-business lobby, one you'll hear quoted often in the coming months, promotes a faulty trickle-down analysis that claims we can sustain the current, unacceptable levels of services. Yet it largely misses the 2022 tax-cut bill impacts.

Republican leaders have not ruled out their ultimate goal: to eliminate the individual tax in either 2025 or 2026 and get them to the ballot in 2026. They just haven't found a way to make it work for even the severely limited public services they accept. Long-lasting damage to revenues, equity, and democracy are in both constitutional amendments that passed last session.

Corporate income taxes are also steadily coming down. Watch for more cuts there.

This is all merely an overview. Digest it, explore it further, and spread the information. When people don't want to talk about taxes, it's easy to fool them. The Right is counting on that. We need to do better before we lose what once made Iowa an attractive place to live.

—Mike Owen is deputy director of www.commongoodiowa.org and a devoted Chicago Cubs fan.

Prairie Dog's Summer Reading List cont'd from Page 1

twenty-two years old. Her short stories depicting the daily injustices experienced by southern Blacks in the Jim Crow era heralded a great talent; her recently rediscovered book is more haunting than ever.

—*Prairie Dog, with thanks to Marty Ryan, Bob Mulqueen, and Prairie Lights Books.*

The End of Reality by Jonathan Taplan

Taplan argues in this 2023 book that four very powerful billionaire “Technocrats” (Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, Marc Andreessen, and Mark Zuckerberg) are part of a broad anti-democratic authoritarian turn within Big Tech; they are engaged in projects that, if funded, will keep their monopolies unchallenged and their fortunes secure from higher taxes while undermining the longer-term viability of democracy. Required reading for prairie progressives!

Zuckerberg imagines his proposed Web3 (The Metaverse) to be a virtual world in which people will spend eight to ten hours a day wearing Virtual Reality helmets, which will enable them to have all their business meetings, travel, sex, and so on in virtual reality. Taplan fears it would be immersive and addictive and would become the new opiate for the masses.

Andreessen is the most important venture capitalist in the world and the most important backer of crypto currency. Crypto currency would sucker late investors into a pyramid scheme in which early investors dump their tokens when prices rise. He also is the U. S. military's largest supplier of “autonomous weapons.”

Musk's fantasy of enabling humans to travel to and colonize Mars (and beyond) would require trillions of dollars of funding from the federal government. Thiel is also a venture capitalist who, with his firm Palantir, has largely perfected “surveillance capitalism.” He supports “transhumanism,” the notion that the human and the computer will eventually merge” and that wealthy people will be able to upload their consciousness into a computer and be able to live forever. In Taplan's view, this “combination of untraceable crypto wealth, space colonies on Mars, and the ability to live forever is a perfect summation of the fantasy world the Technocrats think they can manufacture.”

Taplan argues that the billionaire Technocrats' technological utopia is one of two visions for the future. In historian Timothy Snyder's words, theirs would be one in which “if nothing is true, then all is spectacle.” The other vision is a world shaped by “regenerative economics” and the use of states and towns as laboratories of innovative democracy, which together seek to repair our land and spirit. Taplan concludes by forthrightly expressing his fear and hope: “That is my greatest fear: that enchanted by the magic of the Technocrats' ‘immutable money, infinite frontier, and eternal life,’ we will sleep through a rightwing revolution and wake up to find our democracy gone and our children being turned into Meta cyborgs. Let us wake up and resist the end of reality.”

—*James “Red Hawk” Throgmorton patrols the parks and precincts of Iowa City.*



June 21, 1959

Lady Chatterley's Lover
banned from US mail

June 27, 1969

Stonewall uprising in
New York City

June 29, 1954

CIA overthrew Arbenz
in Guatemala

July 2, 1964

Civil Rights Act passed

July 18

Johnson Co Dems Legacy Club
Noon, Coralville Public Library
Syndicated columnist
Rekha Basu
Info: wm.gerhard@gmail.com

August 1, 1834

Slavery abolished in
British Empire

August 4, 1964

Bodies of civil rights workers
Chaney, Goodman, and
Schwerner found

August 7, 1964

Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed

August 9, 1974

Nixon resigned

August 9, 1981

Bush signed \$166B S&L bailout

August 24, 1954

Communist Control Act signed

September 1, 1939

Germany invaded Poland

September 8, 1974

Ford pardoned Nixon

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