

THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

May 2025

Singing the truth: Prairie Dog's Summer Reading List

*A poem cannot stop a bullet. A novel can't defuse a bomb. But we are not helpless.
We can sing the truth and name the liars. —Salman Rushdie*

Apologies to *Prairie Progressive* readers hoping for a raft of lazy beach books on this year's list. The times require plenty of serious ammunition if we are to live up to the words on our masthead, words that have guided and inspired our paper-and-ink newsletter for nearly forty years.

They Called Us Enemy

by George Takei

Imprisoning people without criminal charges or due process is nothing new in the land of the free. The incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II is particularly painful as seen through the eyes of a child, with evocative graphic art by Harmony Becker.

1984 by George Orwell

Eric Blair's prescient masterpiece should be on every reading list, every year, for as long as books are read.

The Great Gatsby

by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Another book you read in high school, as relevant and poignant as when it was first published one hundred years ago. The wealthy racist blowhard Tom Buchanan, breaking with impunity everything he touches, will be uncannily familiar to today's readers.

The People are Kind: A Religious History of Iowa by Bill Douglas

Religion, yes, but much more. Douglas, a longtime political

organizer, chronicles immigration patterns, social movements, interfaith fighting and feuding, and the many colorful sects that careened through Iowa for centuries. What could have been a dry textbook is a droll and often hilarious depiction of preachers and pastors striving to gain a foothold in a diverse land, with references ranging from Henry Wallace, the Meskwakis, and Mark Twain to Maharishi, the Mother Mosque in Cedar Rapids, and Iris DeMent. A free subscription goes to the first *Prairie Progressive* reader who names the location of the first synagogue in Iowa.

Show Don't Tell by Curtis Sittenfeld

The Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate delivers another collection of short stories packed with quirky but believable characters and the dilemmas – mostly of their own making – they find themselves in. Campus politics, middle-aged dating and its attendant doubts and confusion, sex (both good and not so good), lots of over-thinking, and plenty of surprise endings.

Thunder on the Prairie

by Jerry Harrington

Former Iowa Governor and US Senator Harold Hughes was a towering figure in the sixties and early seventies. The recovering alcoholic, ex-truck driver, and army veteran could have been President, had he not told the Des Moines Register in 1971 that he was in communication with his brother, who happened to be dead. Harrington delves into his life and career in detail, including a famous battle over Amish children attending public schools, creation of the state's community colleges, and reform of the Democratic Party's backroom politics following Hubert Humphrey's insider nomination for President in 1968. Watch for cameos by legendary Iowa politicians like Robert Ray, Bill Sueppel, and Roxanne Conlin.

Strike: Labor, Unions, and Resistance in the Roman Empire by Sarah Bond

In 2023, 160,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild and American

cont'd on Page 6

Let's get stubborn

I'm a physician-scientist affiliated with the university, but I'm speaking in my own personal capacity today. I'm supposed to speak about science, but I'm going a little rogue because this is so much bigger than science. They are coming for all of us in every sector of this country.

They have been trying to distract us by getting us riled up every Friday at five with their newest cuts to this program or that program or this scientific word or that one. But they're not after a specific scientific subject or word. They're after knowledge itself. They're after free speech and they're after our minds. Dictators and autocrats don't an educated, free-thinking citizenry that can be critical of what they're doing. They are after absolute power and absolute control. Do not be fooled. These are not normal times. It might be nice out here, we might be having some music, but this is some scary shit.

Remember this moment. Here, in this country, in Iowa City. At the moment the revolution really begins. As Ezra Klein said in The New York Times, the emergency is now. The emergency isn't tomorrow. The emergency isn't in one week, or a month, or six months. It is now.

We've all heard about a man driving his car in Maryland with his 5-year old son. Kilmar Armando Abrego Garcia. He's lived in this country for ten years. He gets pulled over and suddenly told: your immigration status has changed. No phone call, no lawyer, gone. To a foreign country, and not to any old foreign country. He got put into one of the world's worst prisons, a mega-prison. A concentration camp for suspected terrorists

with no evidence whatsoever of him being any such thing. The administration tried to say this was an administrative error. What kind of error is it to take somebody and put them in a prison where you get no exercise, no education, you eat some slop with your hands. It's a cage for human beings sitting on a metal plate, naked. A reporter got in there and it was silent. You ever been to a prison that was silent? What kind of shit has to go on in there for you to be silent?

They whisk this guy away and try to say it was an accident. The Supreme Court said no, you need to bring him back. You gotta facilitate his return. Are they doing that? No, he's still there. In any other time, our government would have had this guy back in 24 hours. He's still there. Not only is he still there, but the government is using your tax dollars, 15 billion dollars, to pay for him to stay there. We don't know even where this money is coming from. 15 billion to pay El Salvador to cage our people with no due process.

If that doesn't hit home, doesn't resonate with you, just know that if it can happen to this person, it can happen to you. It can happen to me for saying these words right now because Trump has made himself the judge, jury, and executioner. He gets to decide if he doesn't like what I'm saying, which he probably doesn't. Tomorrow morning I might wake up and there might be masked men outside with an unmarked car and away I go. I can be disappeared. That's the world we live in today.

What does this tell us? It tells us a couple of very important things. One, the courts are not going to save us. I keep hearing this from everybody everywhere. Just wait, it'll all work itself out in the courts. It's not gonna

work itself out in the courts. They found a loophole in our government. The founding fathers thought we were smart enough to not put a lunatic in the highest office in the land, but somehow we did and he's gonna disobey the court's orders. There's nothing we're going to be able to do about that.

I've also heard: let's just wait till the elections come. We'll vote 'em out! I don't know that we're gonna have elections. I'm not here to fear-monger, but someone's gotta say this. I don't know that we're gonna have elections. The courts aren't gonna save us. The elections are probably not gonna save us, because even if we have them, they're probably gonna mess around with them, I have a feeling. So who's gonna fucking save us? (Crowd: "We are!") Right! We're going to save us. They want us to be afraid. And it works. There are a lot of people not here today because they can't be here, which is why people with privilege, it is our duty and our obligation to stand up and speak out.

We ain't gonna be afraid, right? This isn't the time to get scared, this is the time to get smart. I come from a sports background where it was: you gotta know your opponent's playbook. You gotta go scout these people. Guess what? They gave us their playbook. Project 2025. We know what they're doing. They're doing exactly what they said. We shouldn't be surprised. We know exactly what they plan to do. It's only gonna get worse from here.

We have our own playbook, however. Y'all are probably already familiar with Timothy Snyder, but there's a couple other people you might not be as familiar with: Maria Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, who wrote the book "Why Civil

Resistance Works.” We have some lessons from this book. They studied different governments from 1900 to 2006, and they said, what works? Nonviolent resistance or violent resistance? Over twice as effective was nonviolent resistance. Why? One answer is the moral argument—not everyone is willing to take up arms and go kill people. Probably good, right? Two, it takes a lot of strength and effort to go fight a fuckin’ war. If we can get many more people to join a nonviolent movement, we can get much more creative with our strategies.

Read this book while you still can and teach it to others while we still can. We can’t keep having the same people that think like we do show up here. We need different pillars of society to get involved. We need religious leaders, business leaders, professionals, labor unions, universities, you name it. We need everybody to get involved with this. What is Donald Trump other than a child throwing a tantrum in one of the most expensive bedrooms in the country? The only way he has power is if we do what he says. He loses all his power if when he says, “go dig the ditches and put the bodies in,” we don’t go. Or if he says, “pick him up and take him to El Salvador,” no one’s gonna fly the plane. This is the level of involvement we’re going to need.

There’s two ways to do this. We’re doing the first one right now, which is sort of centralized organization: protest publicly. But mark my words, they’re coming for this kind of thing, and soon. If you remember the George Floyd protests, they turned the United States military on its citizens. That’s coming. But when that happens, there are dispersion tactics. You go home, and we do

boycotts, and we do sit-ins, and we do walk-outs, and we just get in the fuckin’ way. We call this collective stubbornness. We know how to do this, Iowa. We’ve been kids before. Your mom tells you to go to bed. No! I’m not going!

We have examples from history how to do this. You’ve heard that today is the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution, but what we don’t know or hear about often is that there was about a decade of nonviolent resistance before the Revolutionary War. We were actually independent from Britain before that war really even started. We had the most effective boycotts in the history of the world. 90 to 98 percent of people participated. We said we’re not buying anything more from Britain. We’re not paying any more taxes. We’re making our own rules. They couldn’t govern us anymore. Autocrats are much weaker than they appear, and the people are much stronger than they know.

Of course, you have the civil rights movement with sit-ins, freedom rides, and bus boycotts. And you’ve got the Gandhi example in India, where they also stopped buying British goods. They walked 240 miles to the sea and made their own salt, and they didn’t quit until the jails were so full they couldn’t arrest any more people. Can you imagine if we get enough people to get involved with a nonviolent, non-cooperation act in this United States, we fill the prisons with people like this, and we have a party in the prison? I don’t suggest we all go to prison, but we gotta get creative and radical here.

We just gotta put our heads together. We gotta get creative. We can boycott Tesla. We can boycott Amazon. We can do all kinds of

shit—that’s why we’re all here. We need to talk to each other. And this is a day of action. Do what you can where you are right now. Don’t think about it, just do something.

The rest of the world is watching, and they are terrified. They are depending on us to show up and stand up right now. This doesn’t just affect us; it affects the entire world. We need to let them know that fear will not live here.

—Ali Hanson is a psychiatrist and neuroscientist who lives in Iowa City.

This speech, transcribed and edited, was delivered to several hundred people rallying in downtown Iowa City on April 19 to protest the actions of the Trump administration.

Skeletons and scum

Once Governor Kim Reynolds announced that she wasn't going to run for reelection, Iowa newspapers that still sell print editions needed more paper to publish all the potential Republican candidates. This sort of free publicity keeps Republican names in the news while any Democrat running (possibly Rob Sand?) is relegated to the footnotes.

For the Democrats to achieve more newsprint, I have decided to begin my exploratory committee to run in a primary against my current favorite Iowa Democrat. I have everything it takes to be a viable candidate.

This wouldn't be my first foray into the race for a public service position. I have run for mayor and city council person—not at the same time—in a small western Iowa community of fewer than 500 residents when I was in my twenties. I lost both times. I announced my candidacy for the Iowa House of Representatives at two county conventions in western Iowa, only to withdraw when the Democratic incumbent was persuaded by the House Speaker to seek another term. Supposedly, I was too liberal for the district and defeat would be inevitable.

There was a second run for the Iowa House when I moved to Des Moines. The nomination papers were about to be filed when I met with two other Democratic candidates for the open seat in a heavily Democratic House district. At my invitation, the three of us met at a restaurant in the district to see if any of us should drop out. When two of us had been seated at a table, the third candidate came in and began at the first booth introducing himself and proclaiming his candidacy as he moved down the line to eventually introduce himself to both of us. I looked at the other potential candidate and said, "that does it for me."

The most satisfying and shortest candidacy of my life was a time when an Iowa Democratic woman representative and an Iowa Republican male state senator asked me if I would run for governor. I was so honored! Both sides of the rotunda and both sides of the aisle were interested in me as a possibility to be the head honcho in Iowa. And it was a special occasion—Dubuque Night at the Fairgrounds. Of course, I never followed through with the suggestion. I believe all three of us sobered up the following morning.

As you can see, I have extensive experience in starting a campaign. Therefore, once again, I propose to get into the race for Governor of Iowa.

I have everything
it takes to be a
viable candidate.

Of course, there are skeletons in my closet: a drunk driving conviction, a divorce, and failure to go to church over the past many years, all afflictions that once sank Democratic candidates. Those afflictions are no longer the kiss of death. Once Republicans demonstrated that they can be human and fallible, bankruptcies, affairs, and felonies were all dismissed from the list of family values, along with my sins previously mentioned. Still, the competition to the bottom of qualified gubernatorial candidates scares the bejesus out of me. Some of those considering a run for the top Iowa job might be located toward

the bottom of the barrel. But I could be situated lower.

Before I was married for the second time (hey, Reagan's candidacies were not affected), a woman I dated for a short time brought me to meet her family. Her father went on and on about how lobbyists were ruining the country. "They're the scum of the earth," I believe he affirmed. Then, he asked what I did for a living. "I'm a lobbyist." I replied. Now, that's a huge skeleton!

Like so many of the possible Republican candidates for governor, my announcement may lead to a director's position with a state agency if I can't raise the required boxcar load of money. Or, I might be chosen to be the running mate as lieutenant governor. Maybe not. After all, I might be too liberal. Department of Labor director would be comfortable for me. I once won an election to become secretary-treasurer of my local union.

That liberal label needs to be adjusted downward. I just might go to church, join the NRA, and the Farm Bureau to tone down my radical progressiveness. On the other hand, why would I want to sell my soul for a better job than the one I have? I'm retired. And I'm President of Iowans Against the Death Penalty, the only other position I was elected to besides my Labor position.

My candidacy for the Iowa House of Representatives was short-lived, just like this announcement, I will be withdrawing before I place a period at the end of this sentence.

—Marty Ryan has been scum for over 30 years at the Iowa Capitol.

Blessings and astonishment

I have a divided mind filled with divided thoughts today. There is Iowa, where the majority in our General Assembly are set to spend just south of \$1 billion in reserve funds while still fighting over how to get themselves out the door for the year. It is a dismal scene indeed. But my eye is farther afield today.

Something is happening in Rome. It is both the final few days of official mourning for Pope Francis, whose death in an age of despots has rattled even the world's non-believers; and the start of the Papal Conclave to elect his successor. The chimney has been attached to the roof of the Sistine Chapel by Rome's firefighters. This week the Square of St. Peter's will become increasingly packed with people from around the world, waiting for the announcement "Habemus Papam!" from the balcony and their first glimpse of the new leader of the world's Catholic population.

Stepping away from the frenzied rush towards the future, now is a good time to evaluate the recent past. Pope Francis had an impact we are only beginning to see. Many Catholic faithful disdained his papacy. They were chiefly riled by his focus away from picking through the finer points of Church doctrine and enforcement towards ministering to the powerless, imprisoned and poor. It went beyond disdain to condemnation and even, in some quarters, the heretical declaration that the chair of the Bishop of Rome has been empty for Francis' entire tenure. These Sede vacantists, as they are known by the Church, pop up like nattering gophers when a current Pope veers in a direction they find too liberal. They prefer a Pope who functions as the school principal on matters of doctrine, not a globe-trotting ambassador for decency and humble

works of charity. Francis disappointed the hell out of them, and they never let him forget it.

But something else was stirred by this papacy, in a different way and to a different degree than under John Paul II or Benedict XVI. Francis moved people. JPII did also, especially as his illness progressed. But Francis – well, he did things in a way that struck the hearts of millions. He literally washed the feet of prisoners, knocked doors and paid impromptu visits to Rome's urban neighborhoods dispensing blessings (and astonishment). He even brought some homeless people back to the Vatican, giving them a home and employment to change the trajectory of their lives. Once he ordered, from Rome's premier sweets

It is forbidden to respond to terror with terror.

maker, "Mini cakes for three hundred" homeless people. He turned his perks of privilege into gifts whenever he could get away with it.

Much of this was done as quietly as a sitting pontiff could do. He was known early on for night-time forays in his Ford Focus to tend to those living on the streets of Rome. He sparred with presidents and prime ministers over policies that diminished the lives and threatened the survival of immigrants. He opposed wars and those who attempted to justify them. To Israel he said, "It is forbidden to respond to terror with terror," creating an immense wave of outrage as they responded to a heinous attack on them. Trump policies on mass

deportation were flatly termed "a disgrace." Love him or hate him, when he was right he was right.

Now he's gone, and I would argue the world is feeling the weight of his loss differently than any in recent times. Decency is on the endangered species list as a human trait. He embodied it. He's now gone home, to a home he fully believed in, with a full faith he brought many to at least consider with him, if not fully embrace. Home. A home after this life, one that surely waits for us but in no way erases our obligation to elevate this life we have as best we can manage.

There's a poem I want you to read, or read again, by John Donne. Hymne to God my God, in my sicknesse. In the wake of the illness and departure of this great and good man, it reverberates. The Cardinals of the Church have been, in a way, called home as well, to their point of origin at the Vatican. There, they'll wrestle with the job of finding that worthy successor. Donne's poem ends with a perfect summation of Francis' life, and the daunting task awaiting one of those gathered for Conclave.

"So, in his purple wrapp'd, receive me, Lord;

By these his thorns, give me his other crown;
And as to others' souls I preach'd thy word,

Be this my text, my sermon to mine own:
"Therefore that he may raise, the Lord throws down."

—Kim Painter is the Johnson County Recorder.

Prairie Dog's Summer Reading List

cont'd from Page 1

Federation of Television and Radio Artists went on a 118-day strike. To Bond, a University of Iowa history professor, this was not so different than a rebellion by the official entertainers and traveling performers around the time of Alexander the Great. Bakers, shippers, and slaves also withheld their labor for better wages and working conditions.

Equally similar were the responses of Julius Caesar and other rulers as they tried to gut professional associations and limit the right to assemble. “Reading histories from below” provides a fresh and inspiring perspective on the labor battles being fought today.

Erasure by Percival Everett

You can’t go wrong with any novel by the author of **James**; this one was the basis for the film *American Fiction*. When you finish these, move on to **Assumption, The Trees, and I Am Not Sidney Poitier**. All are biting, funny, and wildly unpredictable.

Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend by Susan Orlean

What seems like a biography of cinema’s most celebrated canine star is actually a tale of obsession. Owners, trainers, marketers, and fans comprise a colorful cast of characters, all under the spell of a nearly mythical German Shepherd who set box office records in the 20s and 30s and became a radio and TV star in the 40s and 50s.

Orlean realizes, late in the book, that she herself has become one of the obsessed. A great read for anyone who loves dogs, showbiz, and eccentric humans.

The Colony of Unrequited Dreams by Wayne Johnston

A fascinating fictionalized biography of Joey Smallwood, a socialist

organizer who door-knocked cabin-to-cabin on the remote and rugged shores of Newfoundland, on his way to becoming the first elected premier of Canada’s easternmost province. History, politics, romance, travel guide, and family drama coalesce into an extraordinarily compelling novel.

Pushing Cool by Keith Wailoo

Kool has long been the favored cigarette of Black smokers (fact, not stereotype). Learn how Big Tobacco targeted its advertising of their menthol brands to racial markets across the country. Wailoo steers medical ethics, politics, corporate power, health care, race, and urban hustles toward a startling final chapter: *Deception by Design: The Long Road to 'I Can't Breathe.'*

Liontaming in America

by Elizabeth Willis

Part prose, part poetry, 100% brilliant. The co-director of Iowa’s Poetry Workshop explores the glory, the shame, and the constant transformations of what we think of as America. Pocahontas, Brigham Young, Sitting Bull, Joe Hill, Paul Robeson, Jackie Robinson, and the author’s own family appear in “an endless sequence of themes and variations, arrivals and departures.”

Forming the Public: A Critical History of Journalism in the United States by Frank Durham and Thomas Oates

One more Iowan (Durham) makes the list. How have Americans been influenced by images used by journalists, marketers, and advocates? How have they affected the way we see the world? And exactly who is “the public?”

Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan

So, you go to *Hands Off* and *Indivisible* rallies but sometimes wonder if they do any good in the fight against American authoritarianism. This book might convince you that they do. The authors’ rigorous analysis of worldwide movements (social science at its best) concludes that participation in rallies, marches, and other forms of nonviolent protest contributes to greater resilience, strategic innovation, and civic disruption.

The Chaos Machine by Max Fisher

The effect of social media “has been to change society itself.” And it’s even worse than you thought, according to this intense account of how our planet has been destabilized by the greed and mendacity of Big Tech. Is it too late to stop or at least minimize the damage done to our minds? Maybe...but Fisher offers a ray of hope by praising the whistleblowers and journalists who have courageously exposed the “tech titans” and their promotion of anger, fear, and lies.

One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This by Omar El Akkad

El Akkad’s anguished cry for justice will make most readers squirm. “The principal concern of the modern American liberal is *what one is seen to be*. Saying the right slogans makes sense...When there are no real personal stakes, when the missiles are landing on someone far away, being seen as good is good enough.” A difficult but beautiful book of moral outrage.

—Prairie Dog

Everything eventually points into the shadow of a national lie.

—Elizabeth Willis, *Liontaming in America*

In National Socialist Germany, everybody used to make fun of certain propagandistic phrases such as “blood and soil.” Nevertheless, these appeals do not seem to have lost their attractiveness. Rather, their very “phoniness” may have been relished cynically and sadistically as an index for the fact that power alone decided one’s fate in the Third Reich, that is, power unhampered by rational objectivity.

—Theodore Adorno, *Freudian Theory and the pattern of Fascist Propaganda*

Ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.

—James Baldwin

The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

—Frederick Douglass



May 10

Johnson Co. Dems Hall of Fame
Holiday Inn, Coralville, 7:00 pm
Info: 319-400-7573

May 14, 1970

Police killed two students at Jackson State, ten days after four were killed at Kent State

May 15

Johnson Co Dems Legacy Club
Sen. Janice Weiner and
Rep. Aime Wichtendahl
Coralville Public Library
Info: wm.gerhard@gmail.com

May 18

60th anniversary of Head Start

May 19, 1925

Malcolm X born

May 22

Bleedingheartland.com
fundraiser, at Get Fresh
109 Iowa Ave., IC, 5:30

June 1

The People are Kind
reading by Bill Douglas
at Prairie Lights Books
Iowa City, 2:00

June 1, 1980

First broadcast of CNN

June 6, 1965

South Africa ended capital punishment

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