

Some books this summer

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Instead of all those holiday reading lists before you go away, here's a selection of mine now the summer is almost over. I've not included the media research books.

Robert Louis Stevenson – *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped* – You've read them as kids but read them again. This is writing of the highest order. It has incredible narrative drive and stylistic innovation on every rapidly-turned page. His imagination creates palpable characters, tangible atmosphere and a compelling moral dialectic. The greatest popular writer of all time?

Hans Fallada – *A Small Circus* – black comedy written in the 1930s set in a rural small German town that describes how a party like the Nazis might come to power while barely mentioning Hitler

Al Alvarez *Pondlife* – readers (both of them) of [my wild swimming blog](#) know I am obsessed by Highgate Ponds – this book by one of greatest contemporary writers is an irascible, joyous, atmospheric personal diary of his long-time habit of swimming on Hampstead Heath

Blair Worden – *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England* – I love this period but the main reason for reading this dense scholarly work is the revelation that Milton was a journalist and even his most poetic work was influenced by a fantastic character called Marchamont Needham, who was a 17th tabloid hack.

Andrew Adonis – *Five Days In May* – As we head into the election end game I thought it would be good to catch up with how this government was formed. Fascinating insights, surprised at how furious mild-mannered Adonis is with the Lib Dems which confirms my prejudice that they are neither liberal or democratic anymore.

Charles Emerson – *1913: The World Before The War* – This is a fascinating tour of what Brits would call the Edwardian Era as it ends around the world. The snapshots of cities around the world on the eve of a Great War that few people think will happen is a stunning reminder that most futurism is mistaken and that we all ignore the most likely next Bad Thing.

Vasily Grossman – *An Armenian Sketchbook* – I don't like travel writing generally but this is a bit of history and it's not really about Armenia – it's about Vasily – poetic, grumpy- self-obsessed, genius journalist/writer who has been rejected by the Soviets and seeks consolation with Armenian peasants.

Arthur Koestler – *Scum Of The Earth* – More of my obsession with that ugly middle period of 20th century European history. This is a poignant and dramatic memoir of his escape from the German invasion of France where the soon to be Vichy establishment locked up all the anti-fascists in a kind of concentration camp. Written in 1940 in the darkest hour it is remarkable for the surprise expressed that Britain fought on instead of doing a deal with Hitler.

Roman Dallaire – *Shake Hands With The Devil* – Finally got around to reading this memoir of the UN's top man in Rwanda at the time of the 1994 genocide. A flawed person and a difficult narrative, but a valuable and timeless reminder of the limitations of idealism and the indifference of the so-called International Community in the face of deliberate political mass murder. Read this and then read the news about Syria.

Alan Davidson – *North Atlantic Seafood* – bought this classic food bible on holiday in Uist where you can eat what he writes about fresh from the sea. Not just a great recipe book but more importantly a gorgeously illustrated catalogue that describes these beautiful (and tasty!) sea creatures and their lives in the ocean as well as their nature on the plate.

Alan Johnson – *This Boy* – An utterly gripping and honest personal memoir of a politician's early life. Barely

mentions politics but it reveals a lot about how his moral and intellectual character was formed. This is an evocative, realistic history of the grinding poverty for London's working class after the war. It raises fascinating issues such as the first race riots but above all it is a portrayal of two extraordinary women – his mother and sister – who suffer but are immensely strong.

Anthony Painter – *Left Without A Future* – worthy run through of options for social democracy in the UK – a sensible attempt at an ambitious but realistic programme for Labour

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