**Reading Materials**

This document provides information about the reading materials for this theme, including a complete list of available titles, as well as book summaries and author information for each.

**Complete Book List**

Included below is the complete list of books which have been vetted and recommended for this theme, and which are available in inventory from the ICfL.

* *Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk,* by Ben Fountain. Published 2012, 320 pages.
* *The Best We Could Do,* by Thi Bui. Published 2018, 344 pages.
* *Frank: Sonnets,* by Diane Seuss. Published 2021, 152 pages.
* *Bury My Heart at Chuck E Cheese’s,* by Tiffany Midge. Published 2019, 222 pages.
* *Freshwater,* by Akwaeka Emezi. Published 2018, 240 pages.
* *Verge,* by Lidia Yuknavitch. Published 2021, 208 pages.
* *The Only Good Indians,* by Stephen Graham Jones. Published 2020, 336 pages.

**Book Summaries & Author Information**

Included below are the detailed summaries of each book available for this theme, as well as background information about the author.

**Billy Lynn’s Long Halftime Walk**, by Ben Fountain. Published 2012, 320 pages.

*Billy Lynn’s Long Half-time Walk* by Ben Fountain follows eight soldiers who find themselves central to a glitzy, media-heavy “Victory Tour” sponsored by the Pentagon with hopes of regenerating waning public support for the Iraq war. Celebrated for being the survivors of a brief but intense exchange with Iraqi insurgents, which was caught on tape by an imbedded Fox News crew, the men are to be part of the half-time show at a Dallas Cowboys’ football game on Thanksgiving Day.

The focus is on Billy Lynn, a 19-year-old Army Specialist from a small Texas town, alongside a well-known producer who schmoozes uber-wealthy Cowboy fans and owners as he attempts to negotiate a film deal for Bravo Squad. During the long, alcohol-fueled day, Billy finds himself torn as he falls for a born-again cheerleader and is barraged by his sister’s chatter as she tries to persuade him that he has done his duty and should refuse to go back and fight again. He and his fellow soldiers discover behind the scenes treachery and betrayal beyond what any of them experienced in war. This satirical novel presents “never-ending” war as a defining characteristic of the American zeitgeist. Its use of fragmented structure underscores the disconnect between the soldier’s actual experience of war and the way quick but nonstop media representations—a hallmark influence of the 21st century—reduces public understanding of war to a form of entertainment and emotional spectacle.

Author Information

Ben Fountain was born in Chapel Hill and grew up in the tobacco country of eastern North Carolina. A former practicing attorney, he is the author of *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara* and the novel *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, winner of the National Book Critics' Circle Award and a finalist for the National Book Award. He lives in Dallas, Texas.

**The Best We Could Do**, by Thi Bui. Published 2018, 344 pages.

*The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* by Thi Bui is a critically acclaimed example of the graphic novel form, which has risen in popularity in the 21st century, perhaps reminding us of the surreal nature of contemporary life. Using beautifully minimalist lines to depict her scenes, Bui tells a very personal story that explores the anguish of immigration and its lasting effects. She casts a bright light on our present refugee crisis by humanizing people who are regularly generalized by mainstream media. Bui documents her family’s daring escape after the fall of South Vietnam in the 1970s and the difficulties they faced building new lives for themselves.

Family history coincides with Vietnam’s history as she learns of the trauma her parents experienced as children and young adults in the years before and during the war. She comes to understand the impacts of her father having witnessed the executions of political prisoners on his behavior and uncovers significant events stretching from the turn of the last century through Vietnam’s bloody attempts at liberation from France, Japan, and the United States. Bui presents these in the order she learned about them, rather than the order in which they originally occurred, reminding us that all historical memory is situated in individual personal chronology. These tragedies are revealed as Bui adjusts to life as a first-time mother and learns what it means to be a parent, while also coming to understand the strength of family, her drive for individual identity, and the meaning of home.

Author Information

Thi Bui was born in Vietnam and came to the United States in 1978 as part of the "boat people" wave of refugees fleeing Southeast Asia at the end of the Vietnam War. Her graphic memoir, *The Best We Could Do* won an American Book Award and made over thirty Best of 2017 book lists. With her son, Hien, she co-illustrated the children’s book, *Chicken of the Sea*, written by Pulitzer winner Viet Thanh Nguyen and his son, Ellison.

**Frank: Sonnets**, by Diane Seuss. Published 2021, 152 pages.

When we hear the word sonnet, most of us think of one person: William Shakespeare. We might groan or cringe when we think about being assigned as students to interpret or construct fourteen lines of rhyming iambic pentameter to please our English teachers. Created for Italian aristocratic sensibilities, sonnets are often a vehicle for love poems. The classic form is controlled, beautiful, and musical—but excessively restrictive. The sonnets in Diane Seuss’ latest collection, frank: sonnets do what we all longed to do: adhere to the fourteen-line requirement—*maybe—*but not much else. Her line lengths are even but don’t try to follow iambic pentameter (or attempt ten-syllable meter), and the rhyming presents as sound echoes or internal rhymes rather than perfect end rhymes. Nor does she bother with titles, which serves as a boundary removed. Her formula gives us poems that feel wide open, personal, vulnerable. The images are tangible, accessible, and because the subject matter is often gritty and relatable to anyone who has lived any amount of time, they come across as familiar.

You know you are in for a ride when the very first poem speaks outright about a male reproductive organ and has her persona urinating on the side of the road. From her working-class childhood in rural Michigan to the dangers of New York City and back again, to AIDS and addiction, farm animals, poverty, Christ, and motherhood, Seuss’s collection, a sort of implied memoir, shows us what we can offer the world, even when we think we are down to nothing left to give.

Author Information

Diane Seuss was born in Indiana and raised in Michigan. Seuss is the author of the poetry collections *Still Life with Two Dead Peacocks and a Girl*; *Four-Legged Girl*; *Wolf Lake, White Gown Blown Open*, and *It Blows You Hollow*. Her work has appeared in *Poetry,*the*Georgia Review, Brevity, Able Muse, Valparaiso Poetry Review,*andthe*Missouri Review,*as well as *The Best American Poetry 2014*. She has been a Pulitzer Prize finalist and has taught at Kalamazoo College since 1988.

**Bury My Heart at Chuck E Cheese’s**, by Tiffany Midge. Published 2019, 222 pages.

*Bury My Heart at Chuck-E-Cheese’s* by Tiffany Midge dismantles the essay form, using fractured narratives, short snippets, and brief narratives to create an iconic collection that explores urban-indigenous and female identity in 21st century America. She pokes fun at the mainstream cultural landscape, chastising hipsters for abusing pumpkin spice, justifying her distaste for pussy hats, dissecting “pretendians” for their counterfeit adoption of Native identity, and, as the daughter of a white man, confessing her struggles with privilege. Midge delights with puns and silly renderings of pop-culture tropes: “Gag me with a coup stick” opens the book; an exchange with her mother gives us the title as she plays on Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*; her mother later references a well-known quote by Chief Joseph when she says, “I will fight no more about putting the toothpaste cap on, forever.” Laughter, Midge explains, is a way of thumbing a nose at death and the dominant culture.

When her essay “Thousands of Jingle Dress Dancers Magically Appear at Standing Rock Protector Site” was accepted as truth and went viral on the day of the 2016 election results, she followed immediately with a piece in *Indian Country Today* titled “Satire Article Goes Viral on Day of 2016 Presidential Election Results,” which also appears in the book. She calls white women on the table for reacting strongly to the fictional “Handmaid’s Tale” on Hulu while forgetting about the Native children who were torn from their families and sent to boarding schools, the rape and murder of Native women, and scores of other abuses perpetrated upon indigenous people, and she drives this solemn truth home by making readers giggle about their own thoughtlessness. In his foreword to the book, Geary Hobson writes, “Native American people have generally been portrayed by the dominant culture as being entirely without the least vestiges of humor . . . [but] Indian humor . . . grows more potent and deadly with each generation.”

Author Information

Tiffany Midge is the author of *Guiding the Stars to Their Campfire, Driving the Salmon to Their Beds*, *Outlaws, Renegades and Saints: Diary of a Mixed-Up Halfbreed*, *The Woman Who Married a Bear*, winner of the Kenyon Review Earthworks Prize for Indigenous Poetry; and the children's book *Animal Lore and Legend: Buffalo*. Midge is an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. She is of Hunkpapa Sioux and German ancestry and grew up in the Pacific Northwest. She lives in Moscow, Idaho.

**Freshwater**, by Akwaeka Emezi. Published 2018, 208 pages.

*Freshwater* by Akwaeka Emezi is a defining example of an emerging genre known as the African fantasy novel. Part fairy tale and Igbo myth, part treatise on mental health and split identities, the story moves in nonlinear fashion and is told from the perspective of a collection of god spirits living inside “the Ada,” a young Nigerian girl. These god spirits cause her to behave in such a way as to create deep concern for her family. After witnessing a horrible accident for which she feels responsible, she becomes increasingly volatile and splintered. When she moves to America for college, the group of selves within her grows in power and ability to control her actions. After Ada suffers an assault these alternate selves crystallize, sending her spiraling into a dark and dangerous direction.

Based on in the author's own reality—a form of novel writing known as autobiographical fiction or *autofiction*—*Freshwater* delves into the metaphysics of identity and is as much about learning to live with our demons as it is about the futility of trying to exorcise them. The book explores the realm between genders, the impacts of trauma, and the experience of living with a fractured self, causing us to question what we know about the science of mental illness and its manifestations, while also challenging our ideas of the novel as a form—particularly coming-of-age novels—and what happens when we disrupt our Western point of view by equipping a single character with multiple viewpoints and voices. A tapestry of spiritual, analytical, historical, and cultural thought, *Freshwater* leaves a thought-provoking, irreversible imprint on the reader.

Author Information

Featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* as a Next Generation Leader for the memoir *Dear Senthuran*, Akwaeke Emezi is an artist and writer born in Umuahia and raised in Aba, Nigeria. Other books include *The Death of Vivek Oji,* and *Pet*. Her novel *Freshwater* was a New York Times Notable Book as well as a 2018 *New Yorker* Best Book of the Year by the New Yorker, NPR, the Chicago Public Library, and Buzzfeed. Emezi was photographed by Annie Leibovitz and profiled in the February 2018 issue of *Vogue Magazine*.

**Verge**, by Lidia Yuknavitch. Published 2021, 208 pages.

The strange stories in Lidia Yuknavitch’s *Verge* are testimony to the many levels of vitality, ingenuity, and resilience we humans experience during impossible times. These are depictions of people at the margins of the modern world, living lives foreign or unimagined by most of us. We see an eight-year-old central European courier of black-market human body parts. A middle-class woman in the U.S, a former addict, buying a prostitute’s time—to give her an hour’s break from her career. A teenage girl gazing out her attic window at a nearby prison, manufacturing a way inside. A swimmer escaping a war-torn country by swimming across a great body of water alongside a capsizing raft with her sister aboard.

*Verge*is realistic to the point of discomfort, pulling us solidly into the experiences of our own bodies—these stories are impossible to read without feeling their impacts physically—each is a punch in the gut, because we see something of ourselves in these at times unwatchable moments. Yuknavitch uses exacting, unexpected, and juxtaposed metaphor and beautifully lyrical language to accomplish this, creating for the reader a sort of spell in which we see a revised view of what inequality is and what is otherness. Her stories leave little room for argument in terms of which camp she wants to place us: every character, no matter what we might think of them and their relationship to what we accept as reality and “good people,” presents a beautifully fallible human self, worthy of having their stories told.

Author Information

Lidia Yuknavitch is the nationally bestselling author of the novels *The Book of Joan*, *The Small Backs of Children*, and *Dora: A Headcase*, and the memoir *The Chronology of Water*. She is the recipient of two Oregon Book Awards and has been a finalist for the Brooklyn Public Library Prize and the PEN Center USA Creative Nonfiction Award. She lives in Portland, Oregon.

**The Only Good Indians**, by Stephen Graham Jones. Published 2020, 336 pages.

Stephen Graham Jones merges horror, poetry, and history in *The Only Good Indians*, giving a fresh depiction of the ways old traditions and modern living collide in the lives of contemporary Native people in the U.S. The story focuses on four Blackfeet men and their families who are being tracked by an entity bent on violent revenge in response to the men, in their youth, having breached traditional practices by hunting one snowy night on land that was reserved for tribal elders. The boys slaughtered a herd of elk, nine in all, including one that refused to die until they had shot it more than once. As they began field dressing the animals, they realized the one who had been hardest to kill had a live calf inside of her. In the end, the boys are found out, and the meat—enough to get their community through the winter—is wasted as authorities confiscate it. A decade later, the elk returns to terrify all involved. The scenes are violent, disturbing, atmospheric, and haunting, woven with themes of revenge and sorrow, creating a narrative that explores identity and the risks embraced when one breaks from tradition. Graham-Jones’ monster presents as a metaphor for two things: the unchecked use of natural resources and the way nature lashes back when natural systems are out of balance. The book also looks at the nature of guilt, presenting it in such a way that it is nearly a character itself, which, alongside grief, pain, and desperation, feeds monsters of the past to the point that they are alive in the present.

Graham-Jones’ work is a fresh and insightful entry into the horror cannon following the recent movement to center brown and black characters in a genre that traditionally placed them on the periphery (think “Get Out” directed by Jordan Peele, the series “Lovecraft Country” on HBO and “Them” on Amazon Prime). By centering these characters and their stories, our definitions, expectations, and experiences of fear shift in significant and surprising ways.

Author Information

Born and raised in West Texas, and a Blackfeet Native American, Stephen Graham Jones is the best-selling and prolific author of nearly thirty novels and collections, ranging in genre from horror to experimental short story. He has received numerous awards, including the NEA Literature Fellowship in fiction and the Independent Publisher Book Award for Multicultural fiction. He now lives in Boulder, Colorado, with his wife and children where he teaches at the University of Colorado, Boulder.