

Book Discussion Kits (Biography)

[Benjamin Franklin: An American Life](#)

by Walter Isaacson

Chronicles the founding father's life and his multiple careers as a shopkeeper, writer, inventor, media baron, scientist, diplomat, business strategist, and political leader, while showing how his faith in the wisdom of the common citizen helped forge an American national identity based on the virtues of its middle class.

[Born A Crime: Stories From A South African Childhood](#)

by Trevor Noah

The host of The Daily Show With Trevor Noah traces his wild coming of age during the twilight of apartheid in South Africa and the tumultuous days of freedom that followed, offering insight into the farcical aspects of the political and social systems of today's world.

[The Boys in the Boat](#)

by Daniel James Brown

Traces the story of an American rowing team from the University of Washington that defeated elite rivals at Hitler's 1936 Berlin Olympics, sharing the experiences of such contributors as their enigmatic coach, a visionary boat builder and a homeless teen rower.

[Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman](#)

by Robert K. Massie

The Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Peter the Great presents a reconstruction of the 18th-century empress's life that includes coverage of such topics as her efforts to engage Russia in the cultural life of Europe, her creation of the Hermitage and her numerous scandal-free romantic affairs.

[Dear America : notes of an undocumented citizen](#)

by Jose Antonio Vargas

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Vargas, who is Filipino, learned of his undocumented status at the age of 16, when he tried to get a driver's license. With a reporter's instinct for detail, he writes about the challenges of surviving as an outsider in America.

[The Dressmaker of Khair Khana](#)

by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

Presents the story of a fearless young woman who became a dress-making entrepreneur in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, thus saving her family and bringing hope to the lives of dozens of women in her war-torn nation.

[Einstein: his life and universe](#)

by Walter Isaacson

A narrative portrait based on the complete body of Einstein's papers offers insight into how the iconic thinker's mind worked as well as his contributions to science, in an account that describes his two marriages, his receipt of the Nobel Prize, and the influence of his discoveries on his personal views about morality, politics, and tolerance.

[Farewell to Manzanar](#)

by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston

The American-born author describes her family's experience and impressions when they were forced to relocate in a camp for the Japanese in Owens Valley, California, during World War II.

[The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#)

by Rebecca Makkai

Henrietta Lacks was a poor Southern tobacco farmer who worked the same land as her slave ancestors, and whose cells--taken without her knowledge when she was treated for cancer in 1951--have become one of the most important tools in medicine. The Lacks family did not learn of Henrietta's cells until 20 years after her death, but these first "immortal" human cells grown in culture are still alive today: they've been bought and sold by the billions and have been vital in fighting polio, cancer, and many viruses. This incredible book explores race, bioethics, scientific research, human rights, the power of family, and the question of whether we control the very cells we're made of.

[Lab Girl](#)

by Hope Jahren

An illuminating debut memoir of a woman in science; a moving portrait of a longtime friendship; and a stunningly fresh look at plants that will forever change how you see the natural world

[Leonardo Da Vinci](#)

by Walter Isaacson

Based on thousands of pages from Leonardo da Vinci's astonishing notebooks and new discoveries about his life and work, Walter Isaacson "deftly reveals an intimate Leonardo" (San Francisco Chronicle) in a narrative that connects his art to his science. He shows how Leonardo's genius was based on skills we can improve in ourselves, such as passionate curiosity, careful observation, and an imagination so playful that it flirted with fantasy. He produced the two most famous paintings in history, The Last Supper and the Mona Lisa. With a passion that sometimes became obsessive, he pursued innovative studies of anatomy, fossils, birds, the heart, flying machines, botany, geology, and weaponry. He explored the math of optics, showed how light rays strike the cornea, and produced illusions of changing perspectives in The Last Supper. His ability to stand at the crossroads of the humanities and the sciences, made iconic by his drawing of Vitruvian Man, made him history's most creative genius. In the "luminous" (Daily Beast) Leonardo da Vinci, Isaacson describes how Leonardo's delight at combining diverse passions remains the ultimate recipe for creativity. So, too, does his ease at being a bit of a misfit: illegitimate, gay, vegetarian, left-handed, easily distracted, and at times heretical. His life should remind us of the importance to be imaginative and, like talented rebels in any era, to think different. Here, da Vinci "comes to life in all his remarkable brilliance and oddity in Walter Isaacson's ambitious new biography...a vigorous, insightful portrait".

[Little Heathens](#)

by Mildred Armstrong Kalish

An evocative memoir of growing up in the heart of the Midwest during the Great Depression describes life on an Iowa farm during a time of endless work, resourcefulness, family and kinship, and no tolerance for idleness or waste.

[My Life in France](#)

by Julia Child

A memoir begun just months before Child's death describes the legendary food expert's years in Paris,

Marseille, and Provence and her journey from a young woman from Pasadena who cannot cook or speak any French to the publication of her legendary Mastering cookbooks and her winning the hearts of America as "The French Chef."

[The Orchid Thief](#)

by Susan Orlean

A staff writer for The New Yorker describes the life and times of John Laroche, a plant smuggler and orchid thief, and the eccentric world of Florida's obsessed collectors of rare plants.

[The Rainbow Comes and Goes](#)

by Anderson Cooper

A poignant correspondence between the CNN journalist and his iconic designer mother, exchanged in the aftermath of the latter's brief illness, shares a rare window into their relationship and the life lessons imparted by an aging mother to her adult son.

[Steve Jobs](#)

by Walter Isaacson

Based on more than forty interviews with Steve Jobs conducted over two years--as well as interviews with more than 100 family members, friends, adversaries, competitors, and colleagues--Walter Isaacson has written a riveting story of the roller-coaster life and searingly intense personality of a creative entrepreneur whose passion for perfection and ferocious drive revolutionized six industries: personal computers, animated movies, music, phones, tablet computing, and digital publishing. Isaacson's portrait touched millions of readers. At a time when America is seeking ways to sustain its innovative edge, Jobs stands as the ultimate icon of inventiveness and applied imagination. He knew that the best way to create value in the twenty-first century was to connect creativity with technology. He built a company where leaps of the imagination were combined with remarkable feats of engineering. Although Jobs cooperated with the author, he asked for no control over what was written. He put nothing off-limits. He encouraged the people he knew to speak honestly. He himself spoke candidly about the people he worked with and competed against. His friends, foes, and colleagues offer an unvarnished view of the passions, perfectionism, obsessions, artistry, devilry, and compulsion for control that shaped his approach to business and the innovative products that resulted. His tale is instructive and cautionary, filled with lessons about innovation, character, leadership, and values.

[Unbroken](#)

by Laura Hillenbrand

Relates the story of a U.S. airman who survived when his bomber crashed into the sea during World War II, spent forty-seven days adrift in the ocean before being rescued by the Japanese Navy, and was held as a prisoner until the end of the war.

[The Year of Magical Thinking](#)

by Joan Didion

An autobiographical portrait of marriage and motherhood by the acclaimed author details the critical illness of her daughter, Quintana Roo, followed by the fatal coronary of her husband, John Gregory Dunne, and her daughter's second bout with a life-threatening ailment, and her struggle to come to terms with life and death, illness, sanity, personal upheaval, and grief.