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What Books Are Philanthropic Leaders Reading? Here Are 21 Great Picks From IP Interviews

Mike Scutari | January 11, 2023



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ALENA OZEROVA/SHUTTERSTOCK

I was recently chatting with First Nations Development Institute President and CEO [Michael Roberts](#) when I came to a question that I like to ask in every Q&A — what’s the last great book you read?

Roberts cited “[Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own](#),” by Eddie Glaude Jr., noting that he “dogeared and underlined so many different passages, more so than any other book in probably five or six years.”

It was at that point a tiny light bulb went off in my head. I’ve been asking this question of dozens of philanthropic leaders over the last two years, and just about every time I get a pretty fascinating answer, not to mention a solid recommendation for my own reading list. What if I pulled all these titles into one place?

While few of these books are actually about philanthropy, such a list could offer a certain amount of insight into the many authors and ideas that are shaping the sector’s own thought leaders as they wrestle with the world’s most challenging issues. And surely others in the sector would want to nab a few great picks from their distinguished peers to add to their nightstands.

I ran the idea by Roberts, and he liked it. A couple of weeks later, I mentioned it to the David Rockefeller Fund’s new CEO [Lourdes J. Rodríguez](#). Not only did



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she approve; she went so far as to suggest calling it “The IP Book Club.” It *does* have a nice ring to it.

That was all I needed to hear. So without further ado, here’s a list of the last *great* books philanthropic leaders have read, along with some select commentary.

“The Culture Code,” by Daniel Coyle

Recommended by Amy Freitag, New York Community Trust President

“A grantee recommended it to me, and I found it very motivating because it talks about building a rapport with people so the team can be greater than the sum of the parts. I think it’s especially important at this moment when people are coming back to the office and we’re all trying to rekindle that sense of connection.”

“Red at the Bone,” by Jacqueline Woodson

Recommended by Jamie Bennett, Former Head of ArtPlace America and United States Artists

“In 2002, I joined a book club that was for people who lived in New York City and we only read books about New York City. I live in Toronto now, but because of Zoom, I was able to rejoin that book club, and we read ‘Red at the Bone,’ which is a beautiful, multigenerational family story about Brooklyn. So even though I couldn’t physically be in Brooklyn, it was wonderful to be reconnected with my borough.”

“Gods of Jade and Shadow,” by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Director

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Recommended by [Alberto Mejia](#), outgoing National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures Deputy Director

“It’s about a young girl living in a Mayan village whose family is mestizo and she comes across this ancient Mayan god of the underworld, and they go on this adventure through 1920s Mexico. I just finished it and it’s incredible.”

“What it Means When a Man Falls from the Sky,” by Lesley Nneka

Recommended by [Alesha Washington](#), Seattle Foundation President and CEO

“Arimah is an African author who, in the spirit of Octavia Butler, tells really wonderful stories about the position of Black folks in the frame of Afrofuturism. That’s been a topic that I’ve really been intrigued by as of late in the context of my work, so I keep coming back to this book.”

“Saving Our Own Lives: A Liberatory Practice of Harm Reduction,” by Shira Hassan

Recommended by [Sage Cump](#), National Performance Network Program Specialist

“[It’s] brilliant. We can talk about harm reduction in so many important ways, including our relationship to philanthropy.”

“Leonardo da Vinci,” by Walter Isaacson

Recommended by [Donald Cooke](#), Alford Group Vice President (former McCormick Foundation Senior VP of Philanthropy)

“It’s a brilliantly structured book that’s a biography, but sprinkled throughout are long, interesting treatises on his masterpieces. I also found it fascinating that da Vinci never finished anything — it was always on to the next project.”

“Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being,” by Kevin Quashie

Recommended by [Jeffreen Hayes](#), Threewalls Executive Director

“I’ve been rereading it in our efforts to center the humanity of artists, and more specifically, ALAANA or Black Indigenous people of color. We need to think about what it means to support this notion that folks are much more than a negative stereotype. In the case of Kevin Quashie, his argument is that so much of Blackness, Black lives, Black culture is read through the lens of death, but there’s so much more, that Black humanity can exist within a Black world where you just get to *be*. This idea informs the work that we do at Threewalls and our efforts to honor Black aliveness or livingness, rather than always kind of focusing our energy on death.”

“Gordo: Stories,” by Jaime Cortez

Recommended by [Judilee Reed](#), United States Artists President and CEO

“It’s a book that’s situated in a migrant worker community in California. It’s the story of a young boy who comes of age in a family that is both documented and undocumented that works on a farm. It’s just an exquisitely built novel and a wonderful read.”

“All the Light We Cannot See,” by Anthony Doerr

Recommended by [Ronn Richard](#), Cleveland Foundation President and CEO

“It’s an incredibly well-written novel, but the reason why I love it is that by talking about how Hitler came to power, it’s so pertinent to our times. I think right now, the world is suffering from a real resurgence of authoritarianism, which is very shocking and scary. Sometimes, things are better conveyed in a novel, and I think every American should read that book.”

“What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing,” by Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey

Recommended by [Celeste Smith](#), Pittsburgh Foundation’s Arts and Culture Senior Program Officer

“When you think about the nonprofit sphere where people are addressing the ills of the world, a lot of times, resilience and healing are needed to actually do the work. I didn’t read the book in terms of my own work. I did it for my self-worth and to understand my circumstances and relationships. And then I thought, ‘We need to have a family meeting every week and

study a chapter.’ It really was that impactful, because a lot of times, we don’t look at how trauma has impacted ourselves and others before we make decisions and how we move forward with other people.”

“The Warmth of Other Suns,” by Isabel Wilkerson

Recommended by [Laura Aden Packer](#), Howard Gilman Foundation President and CEO

“I read it last year when I was on vacation because the only time I really get to read books is when I’m on vacation [laughs]. It’s a historical look at the Great Migration in America, but it’s written in such a way that it’s almost like a novel. There are so many brilliantly written characters in the book.”

“Isaac’s Storm,” by Eric Larson

Recommended by [Richard Ober](#), New Hampshire Charitable Foundation President and CEO

“It’s about the Galveston Hurricane of 1900. This book is about hubris, doubt, social justice and the limitations of science and government as they were building out what became the National Weather Service. When I read a book like that, it’s to learn something about history, but there are so many threads in that story that actually resonate with us today, including climate change and our inability to deal with the power of natural forces.”

“The Warmth of Other Suns,” by Isabel Wilkerson

*Recommended by [Ellen Alberding](#), Joyce Foundation
President and CEO*

“It’s a brilliant book that was so far ahead of its time, and it’s really important grounding for all of the conversations that have been going on and will continue to go on about race. I know she’s written ‘Caste’ more recently, but I always go back to the stories in ‘The Warmth of Other Suns.’”

“The Conversation: How Seeking and Speaking the Truth About Racism Can Radically Transform Individuals and Organizations,” by Robert Livingston

*Recommended by [Mendi Blue Paca](#), Fairfield County
Community Foundation President*

“I think that too often, community foundations have been hesitant to talk about race and racism for fear that it might turn off parts of their communities or even potential donors. But when we talk about race in ways that make it easy for people to wrap their heads around, you can transform their understanding, and this book gives us a great guide for how to do that.

“In fact, we co-hosted a conversation with our board and community members this week, and Dr. Livingston joined us, and he communicates in a simple yet insightful way. It can be difficult to pull off that combination, but it’s so powerful when it’s done effectively.”

“The Wretched of the Earth” by Frantz Fanon

Recommended by [Michael Royce](#), New York Foundation for the Arts Executive Director

“At the insistence of my son, who is 20 years old, I read ‘The Wretched of the Earth,’ and it really made me think about the history of global oppression that’s been going on for centuries and why it’s so important that we pay attention to the conversations today concerning racism.”

“Beautiful Country: A Memoir,” Qian Julie Wang

Recommended by [Diane Kaplan](#), former President and CEO of the Rasmuson Foundation

“It’s her recollection of emigrating from China to Manhattan in the 90s, the extreme poverty her family experienced, and how that played out for her as a seven-year-old girl going to public school, not speaking any English, and being worried all the time about the police and being caught because they were here illegally. It’s a very moving story, especially if you work with people in poverty and immigrant populations.”

“Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents,” by Isabel Wilkerson

Recommended by [Deanna Gomby](#), former President and CEO of the Heising-Simons Foundation

“[It’s] an eye-opening and painful book to absorb. But we should reckon with history, and we should be clear-

eyed about where we are today, and then we should work for change.”

“All About Love,” by bell hooks

*Recommended by Amoretta Morris, Borealis
Philanthropy President*

“I was pushed to read it after her death and I’m also participating in a virtual book club diving into her trilogy on love, and I’m so grateful that I did because it’s incredible. One of my spiritual teachers told me once that at our root, we are acting from one of two emotions — love or fear. I want to strengthen my skills to act from love and the book is helping me to explore that in so many realms.”

“Won’t Lose This Dream” by Andrew Gumbel

*Recommended by Bill Moses, Kresge Foundation
Education Program Managing Director*

“It’s the story of how Georgia State changed from graduating 25% of its students to becoming probably the most remarkable turnaround story in higher education right now, with its graduate rates approaching 60% and with increases in diversity and Pell Grants students. The book is a case study on how you make change in higher education.”

“Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets,” by Svetlana Alexievich

*Recommended by Joan Weinstein, Getty Foundation
Director*

“It’s about life in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of what you could call an unbridled brand of capitalism. She traveled all over the former Soviet Union and gathered first-person voices of a broad range of people.

“The book helped me understand post-Soviet Russia and the shattered promises of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras in a way I never had before. She captured this sense of longing for the Soviet days and what they saw as a period of shared sacrifice and ideals. But there is also a longing for Russia’s glory days, and bringing up ancient grievances, and we see a lot of that going on right now. Rereading it has helped me make more sense of the current moment.”

...and Many More

Recommended by [Valerie Chang](#), former Managing Director of Programs, MacArthur Foundation

“I’m one of those people that has a lot of books on my bedside table. I tend to gravitate to nonfiction, but sometimes, I’ll read novels and remember how much I enjoy them. I love ‘[Pachinko](#),’ by Min Jin Lee, and ‘[Interior Chinatown](#),’ by Charles Yu. Other books in the pile include ‘[Whistling Vivaldi](#),’ ‘[The Selected Works of Audre Lorde](#),’ ‘[Command and Control](#),’ which looks at the safety concerns of America’s nuclear weapons, and ‘[More Than Ready](#)’ by Cecilia Munoz.”

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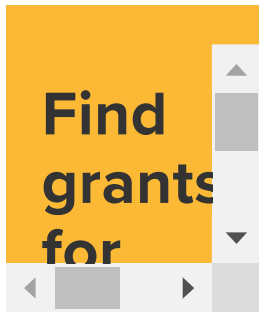
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