

Humanist Association of Connecticut Book Discussion – Upcoming Books 2016

Saturday, July 16: *The Social Conquest of Earth* by E.O. Wilson

Biologist E. O. Wilson's brilliant new volume, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, could more aptly be entitled 'Biology's Conquest of Science'. Drawing on his deep understanding of entomology and his extraordinarily broad knowledge of the natural and social sciences, Wilson makes a strong case for the synthesis of knowledge across disciplines. Understanding the biological origin of what makes us human can help us to build better theories of social and psychological interaction; in turn, understanding how other social species have evolved may help us to better understand the origin of our own. But the main reason that Wilson's book is successful is that he also brings into biology the best of what social science has to offer. James H. Fowler - *Nature*

A sweeping account of the human rise to domination of the biosphere, rounded out with broad reflections on art, ethics, language and religion. Jennifer Schuessler - *New York Times*

Saturday, August 20: *Good Omens: the Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch* by Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett

According to *The Nice and Accurate Prophecies of Agnes Nutter, Witch* (the world's only *completely* accurate book of prophecies, written in 1655, before she exploded), the world will end on a Saturday. Next Saturday, in fact. Just before dinner.

So the armies of Good and Evil are amassing, Atlantis is rising, frogs are falling, tempers are flaring. Everything appears to be going according to Divine Plan. Except a somewhat fussy angel and a fast-living demon—both of whom have lived amongst Earth's mortals since The Beginning and have grown rather fond of the lifestyle—are not actually looking forward to the coming Rapture.

And someone seems to have misplaced the Antichrist . . .*

“The Apocalypse has never been funnier.” – Clive Barker

Saturday, September 17: *The World Beyond Your Head: Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* by Matthew Crawford

We often complain about our fractured mental lives and feel beset by outside forces that destroy our focus and disrupt our peace of mind. Any defense against this, Crawford argues, requires that we reckon with the way attention sculpts the self.

Crawford investigates the intense focus of ice hockey players and short-order chefs, the quasi-autistic behavior of gambling addicts, the familiar hassles of daily life, and the deep, slow craft of building pipe organs. He shows that our current crisis of attention is only superficially the result of digital technology, and becomes more comprehensible when understood as the coming to fruition of certain assumptions at the root of Western culture that are profoundly at odds with human nature.

The World Beyond Your Head makes sense of an astonishing array of common experience, from the frustrations of airport security to the rise of the hipster. With implications for the way we raise our children, the design of public spaces, and democracy itself, this is a book of urgent relevance to contemporary life.*

Saturday, October 15: *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* by Thomas Paine

[English and American political activist Thomas Paine's book] is an influential work...[which] follows in the tradition of eighteenth-century British deism, and challenges institutionalized religion and the legitimacy of the Bible. Originally distributed as unbound pamphlets, it was published in three parts in 1794, 1795, and 1807. It was a best-seller in the United States, where it caused a short-lived deistic revival. British audiences, however, fearing increased political radicalism as a result of the French Revolution, received it with more hostility. *The Age of Reason* presents common deistic arguments; for example, it highlights what Paine saw as corruption of the Christian Church and criticizes its efforts to acquire political power. Paine advocates reason in the place of revelation, leading

him to reject miracles and to view the Bible as "an ordinary piece of literature rather than as a divinely inspired text". It promotes natural religion and argues for the existence of a creator-God.

Most of Paine's arguments had long been available to the educated elite, but by presenting them in an engaging and irreverent style, he made deism appealing and accessible to a mass audience. The book was also inexpensive, putting it within the reach of a large number of buyers. Fearing the spread of what they viewed as potentially revolutionary ideas, the British government prosecuted printers and book-sellers who tried to publish and distribute it. Nevertheless, Paine's work inspired and guided many free thinkers.**

Supplementary reading for the discussion is *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man* by Christopher Hitchens.

Saturday, November 19: *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* by Gustave Flaubert

A book that deeply influenced the young Freud and was the inspiration for many artists, [this book] was Flaubert's lifelong work, thirty years in the making. Based on the story of the third-century saint who lived on an isolated mountaintop in the Egyptian desert, it is a fantastical rendering of one night during which Anthony is besieged by carnal temptations and philosophical doubt.*

Gustave Flaubert, the 19th Century French novelist best known for *Madame Bovary*, was also a sceptic. *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1874) puts that scepticism on view, along with being a fascinating portrait of Alexandria at the time of the decline of Rome and ascendancy of Christianity. Flaubert is widely quoted as saying, "It is necessary to sleep upon the pillow of doubt."

"[*The Temptation of Saint Anthony*] calls up not only the great problems of knowledge, but the real riddles of life . . . and it confirms the awareness of our perplexity in the mysteriousness that reigns everywhere."
—Sigmund Freud

Saturday, December 17: *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* by Susan Jacoby

A biography that restores America's foremost nineteenth-century champion of reason and secularism to our still contested twenty-first-century public square.

"Jacoby succeeds in capturing Ingersoll's remarkable appeal across sectarian and political boundaries. His warmth, humor, tolerance, and rhetorical skill are vividly conveyed, and they are validated by much contemporaneous testimony from figures who would ordinarily have been expected to shun an infamous blasphemer." – Frederick Crews, University of California, Berkeley

"Jacoby's goal of elucidating the life and work of Robert Ingersoll is admirably accomplished. She offers a host of well-chosen quotations from his work, and she deftly displays the effect he had on others. For instance: after a young Eugene V. Debs heard Ingersoll talk, Debs accompanied him to the train station and then – just so he could continue the conversation – bought himself a ticket and rode all the way from Terre Haute to Cincinnati. Readers today may well find Ingersoll's company equally entrancing." – Jennifer Michael Hecht, *New York Times Book Review*

All discussions are from 2-4 pm at the Unitarian Society of New Haven, 700 Hartford Turnpike, Hamden, CT.

*Description from Amazon.com website

**Description from wikipedia.org website