

MY SUMMER READING HAS A YULETIDE RING

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



Every summer, well-meaning writers and editors publish lists of new book titles that are supposed to make great

summer reads. Those lists make their own kind of fun reading, and in my years as a lowly scribe, I've been recruited to write quite a few Great Summer Reads features myself.

But while reading lists are irresistible pleasures, I've never approached any vacation season wondering what books I might read. My reading plan for June, July, and August is already scoped out. In this summer, as in every vacation season, I'll simply try to finish the books I got last Christmas.

My life is a perfect storm when it comes to reading backlogs. I consistently buy more books than I can easily read. Well-meaning friends and loved ones, aware of my interests, gift me with more titles. Because I occasionally write about books, publishers send me even more. I'm also a slow reader, savoring especially good sentences like verbal bonbons.

Reading winter books in summer just deepens a sense of escape from your life just beyond the page.

The result is a literary logjam as books teeter on desks, nightstands, and coffee tables, waiting for my attention. Which is why, should I find time to crack open a few pages in a hammock or patio chair this summer, the books in my lap will probably be volumes that first entered my life beneath a holiday tree.

I'm thinking, in particular, of *The Story of a Life*, Soviet author Konstantin Paustovsky's mammoth memoir, clocking in at some 800 pages, that arrived last December in a new edition.

Light summer reading, this is not, which points to the peculiar challenges of doing your winter reading half a year later. But as someone who has always enjoyed reading out of season, I find these kinds of contrasts in my reading life a pleasure rather than a burden. One of the great joys of reading is that it lifts you into a world of its own – one often quite different than the one you happen to be inhabiting just beyond the page.

I'm actually thrilled by the prospect that as the thermometer climbs past 90 and the backyard barbecue sizzles, I'll be marching across the frozen Russian landscape of Paustovsky's early years.

This doorstopper of a book is a tall order for a slow reader, so I'll probably be reading it *next* summer, too.

Happy summer, everyone, and Merry Christmas.

DANNY HEITMAN (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for other national publications, including *The Wall Street Journal* and *Humanities* magazine.