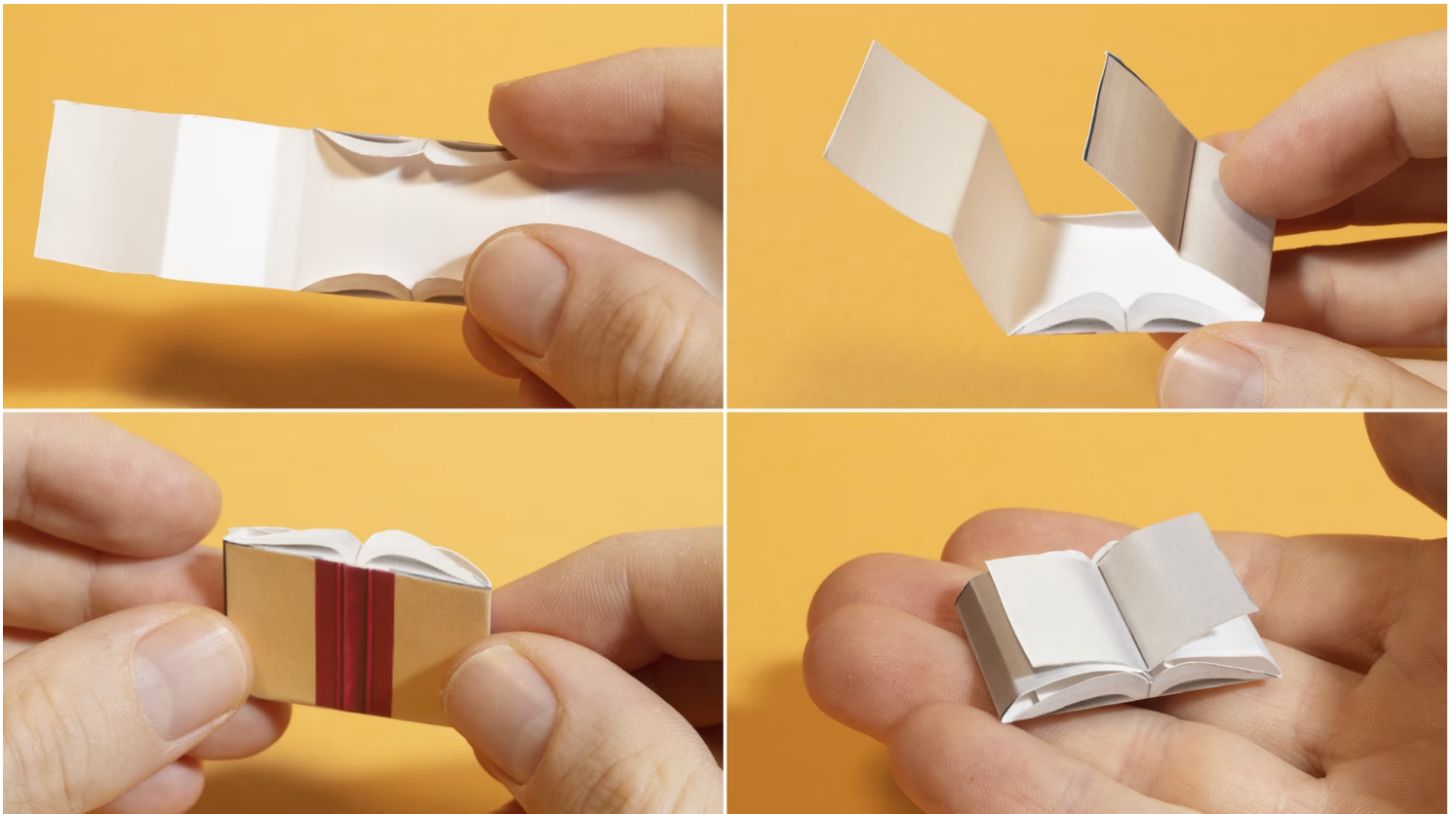


BOOKS

Seven Books for the Lifelong Learner

These books may tempt you to take up a new pursuit and enlarge your sense of your own capabilities.

By Chelsea Leu



Ben Denzer for The Atlantic

JULY 25, 2023, 7 AM ET

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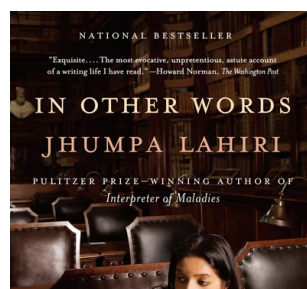
SAVED STORIES ↗

SAVE 

For the past six months, I have been obsessed with housekeeping—something that, all of my former roommates can attest, I have previously shown neither interest in nor aptitude for. I have drawn up cleaning schedules, spent far too much time thinking about the relative merits of different fabrics, and become chipper when loading the dishwasher. I even recently found myself describing it as “fun.”

I credit and blame one book for all of this: Cheryl Mendelson’s *Home Comforts*. First published in 1999, this unlikely best seller contains nearly 900 pages of practical advice—the proper way to wash dishes, the use of furniture paste wax. What drew me in was its wonderful opening essay, in which Mendelson, a novelist, professor, and lawyer, argues for the importance and dignity of keeping house—an act “that makes your home alive, that turns it into a small society in its own right, a vital place with its own ways and rhythms.” Although I remain a haphazard housekeeper, I’ve become convinced that housekeeping is both an art and a science, an enterprise whose meaning extends far beyond keeping one’s home clean.

The seven books below also describe the experience of becoming absorbed by a skill or craft, and deliver insights into what mundane activities—say, playing sports or learning a foreign language—can tell us about how we live today. Look closely enough at any human endeavor, these books suggest, and you’ll find lessons on our relationship to the natural world, to history, to other cultures, and to our own body. And they so vividly capture the satisfactions of the pursuits they describe that you might be tempted to take up gardening or long-distance running or bookbinding and enlarge your sense of your own capabilities.



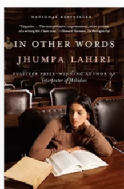


Vintage

In Other Words, by Jhumpa Lahiri

In 2012, Lahiri moved to Rome and stopped reading and writing in English in order to immerse herself in Italian. This bilingual series of reflections—the original Italian on the left, an English translation by Ann Goldstein on the right—charts her love affair with the Romance language, from her “indiscreet, absurd longing” upon first hearing it on a trip to Florence to the 20 years of language classes, tutoring, and diligent self-teaching that followed. The march toward fluency, she admits, is “a continuous trial.” She mixes up similar words such as *schiacciare* (“crush”) and *scacciare* (“expel”), uses the wrong prepositions, and can’t quite get the hang of when to use simple or imperfect past tense. When she begins composing stories in Italian, she’s aware that she will never attain the facility she has in English. But Italian reintroduces mystery, delight, and intensity to her reading: “Every page seems to have a light covering of mist,” she writes. “The obstacles stimulate me. Every new construction seems a marvel. Every unknown word a jewel.” Beneath her sense of wonder is a deeper argument—that plunging into new skills for the love of them is fundamentally hopeful, even transcendent. “The more I feel imperfect,” she writes, “the more I feel alive.”

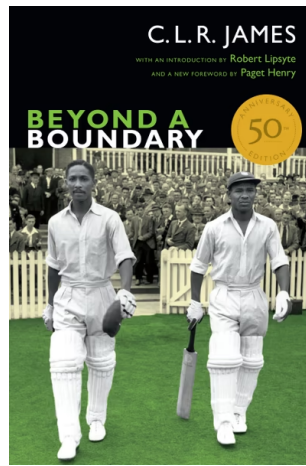
[Read: Learn a foreign language before it's too late](#)



In Other Words

By Jhumpa Lahiri

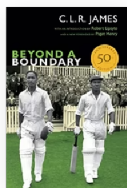
Buy Book



Duke University Press

***Beyond a Boundary*, by C. L. R. James**

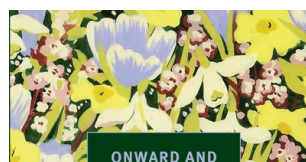
James, the Trinidadian scholar, might best be known for his Marxist writings and his advocacy for Caribbean independence. Less known is his obsession with cricket. James spent a lifetime steeped in the sport: He disappointed his family by focusing on the game rather than schoolwork, played for a first-class club on Trinidad, and eventually covered cricket as a journalist in England. He even credits the sport for his activism. “Cricket,” he writes, “had plunged me into politics long before I was aware of it”—in part because class and race tensions on the island played out among its socially stratified clubs. *Beyond a Boundary* makes the case that cricket is impossible to understand without considering its historical, social, and cultural context; in the book’s most ambitious moments, it argues for cricket’s foundational place in modern British history and for its status as a dramatic and visual art. Even if you know nothing about the sport, James conveys its richness—how a batter’s style can reflect both individual personality and a society’s priorities, and how the game effortlessly connects its followers with the wider world.

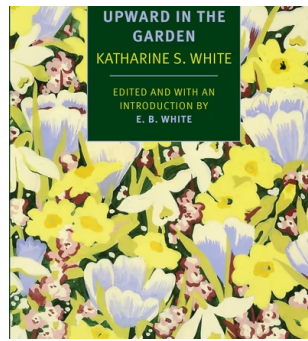


Beyond a Boundary

By C. L. R. James

[Buy Book](#)





New York Review Books

***Onward and Upward in the Garden*, by Katharine S. White**

White describes her gardening habits as “careless,” “lazy,” and “amateur,” but the critical eye and exacting taste that come through in her collected gardening columns for *The New Yorker* are a delight. White was that magazine’s first fiction editor—she was an early publisher of many famous writers, including E. B. White, her future husband—and in these columns she delivers crisp assessments of gardening books and seed catalogs from 1958 to 1970, considering not only their prose but ease of use, typography, paper quality, and color reproduction. Scattered throughout are glimpses of a life suffused with flowers. In winter, she moves through a house crowded with plants, worrying about the location of the cyclamens and the temperature of the African violets. Once, she informs us, she tried to grow lilies in her frozen Maine garden, which resulted in “the comic spectacle of me and my eager family attacking a flower border with a crowbar.” Her opinions about bearded irises and gourds, dahlias and gladioli are all expressed with such humor and charisma that I couldn’t help dreaming of what a garden of my own might look like.

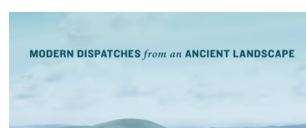
[Read: The healing power of garden class](#)

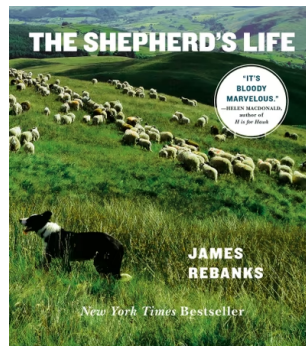


Onward and Upward in the Garden

By Katherine S. White

Buy Book





Flatiron

***The Shepherd's Life*, by James Rebanks**

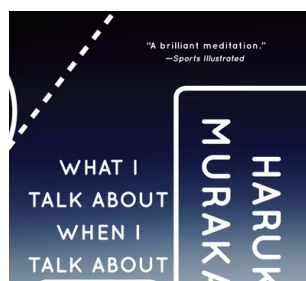
Cast your mind's eye over the verdant mountains of England's Lake District, and you might think of Wordsworth and the Romantic poets writing paeans to wildernesses untouched by man. Rebanks, a shepherd whose family has lived on that land for centuries, rebuts these poetic images of his home. "Every acre of it," he writes in his thought-provoking memoir, "has been defined by the actions of men and women over the past ten thousand years." The author makes the care and maintenance of sheep utterly absorbing, conjuring the coordinated pincer movement the shepherds perform every summer to gather their sheep from the mountaintops and the nerve-racking work of birthing lambs in the spring, which sometimes requires reaching in with one's bare hands. By the end, selecting which rams to mate with your ewes begins to seem like a high-stakes artistic decision. Rebanks positions his portrait of traditional farming as a counterpoint to modern life (he finds a stint at Oxford largely "pointless and empty"). His compelling critique invites readers to seek out more rooted, time-honored ways to live.

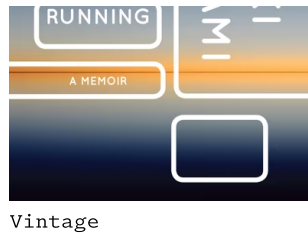


The Shepherd's Life: Modern Dispatches From an Ancient Landscape

By James Rebanks

[Buy Book](#)





***What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*, by Haruki Murakami**

This classic avocational memoir follows Murakami as he trains for the 2005 New York City Marathon and reflects on a life of serious running. The book verges on self-help—chapter titles include “Suffering Is Optional” and “Most of What I Know About Writing Fiction I Learned by Running Every Day”—but the aura of upbeat resignation that colors the proceedings alters its tone. “Life is basically unfair,” Murakami writes. “But even in a situation that’s unfair, I think it’s possible to seek out a kind of fairness.” You simply can’t control what happens on race day, just as Murakami can’t control his aging body and slower finishing times, much less the stubborn, avoidant personality he’s carried around “like an old suitcase.” This book is refreshingly free of exhortations for everyone to take up running. (The author in fact believes forcing people to do it is “pointless torture,” which, yes.) But the scenes of him jogging through Kauai or Cambridge, Massachusetts, thinking of nothing but crisp morning air and “the sounds of my footsteps, my breathing and heartbeats, all blended together in a unique polyrhythm,” are their own kind of persuasion.

[Read: The wisdom of running a 2,189-mile marathon](#)



What I Talk About When I Talk About Running: A Memoir

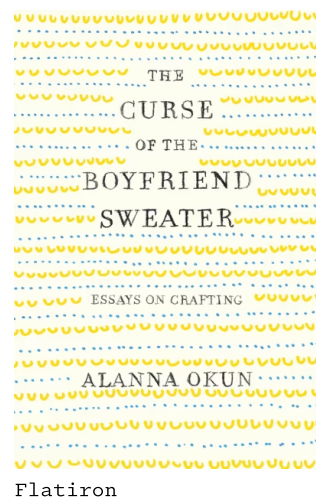
By Haruki Murakami

Buy Book

***A Degree of Mastery*, by Annie Tremmel Wilcox**

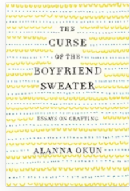
The first section of *A Degree of Mastery* flings the reader straight into the deep end of book conservation, and it is utterly engrossing. Wilcox slices the spine off of a deteriorating book printed in 1817, disassembles the binding, and then literally washes the pages in a bath of deionized water. She meticulously mends rips with a

Japanese wheat-starch paste, prepared in a device called a Cook 'n' Stir. I learned names for parts of books I didn't know had names: That striped cord attached to the spine of hardcover books, for instance, is an endband. In 1987, Wilcox became the first female apprentice of the renowned book conservator William Anthony, before his death from liver cancer. Her memoir details life at a workbench in the University of Iowa Libraries' conservation department, where she picks up bookbinding by doctoring 15th-century incunabula and editions of *Leaves of Grass* under Anthony's patient eye. It's also a moving meditation on the nature of apprenticeship, on the mutual learning that occurs among a craft's practitioners, and on the teachers who live on through students who espouse their knowledge and ideals.



***The Curse of the Boyfriend Sweater*, by Alanna Okun**

Most people, Okun asserts, become engrossed in hobbies because they're seeking a specific kind of satisfaction: "that small but constant motion that helps them metabolize the universe and comprises a corner of their identity." Some play musical instruments; some fish. Okun's preferred activity is knitting, a lifelong pursuit, as well as crochet and embroidery, all of which create safe havens for her from an often-overwhelming world. In these strikingly vulnerable essays, knitting baby cardigans and crocheting gargantuan blankets aren't just pleasant diversions but emotional lifelines while Okun contends with her grief over the death of two friends and her grandparents, as well as the agonies of romance and her struggles with anxiety. "A craft project," Okun writes, "allows you to hold something concrete in your hands even while everything around you is swirling and illegible." Crafting is also, she makes clear, extremely fun. Okun brings her knitting on the subway and to the beach, and makes witty lists of the skills she's gained from her fiber-art endeavors. Through her eyes, we see the infinite potential of "a large pile of marled green wool, three balls of unbleached cotton, a tiny skein of silk."



The Curse of the Boyfriend Sweater: Essays on Crafting

By Alanna Okun

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