

# Beach Reads: Books for Summer

***Abundance*** by Michael Fine (320 pages, PM Press, published May 1, 2019).



Michael Fine, author of *Abundance* and *Health Care Revolt*.

(Photo: Michael Bilow)

Doctors among warriors occupy an unusual position in society, witness to much yet trusted and expected to respect confidences. The character Doc Daneeka in *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, 1961, defines the title that has become a standard idiom of American English. *MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors* by Richard Hooker, 1968 – the pseudonym of real-life military doctor H. Richard Hornberger – is a serious and dark comedy with forgotten religious symbolism that was mostly cut from the movie version, featuring incidents such as a mock crucifixion of the Protestant chaplain, a “Last Supper,” and a surgeon who conducts personal appearances and signs autographs as Jesus.

Michael Fine, a doctor whose 40-year career encompasses everything from serving as director of the RI Department of Health to practicing medicine in war zones in Africa, has written a gripping thriller informed by personal experience. “I’ve always thought of myself as a fiction writer. I’ve been writing fiction for a long time,” Fine explained why he published his first novel about a society in collapse. “The only way we’re going to fix this is with the imagination.”

Set amidst the wreckage of the Liberian civil war that ran in phases from 1989 to 2003, the novel centers on RI-based colleagues separated in the course of a “rescue” by US Marines, leading one of them, Carl Goldman, to head back to Liberia for an unauthorized rescue of another, Julia Richmond, enlisting the help of William Levin, an older doctor who is her mentor. Levin asks if Carl and Julia have a romantic connection: “‘Not exactly yes, not exactly no,’ Carl said. He paused. ‘More yes than no. Maybe more than that.’”

Fine is careful to supply cultural background. He includes a non-fiction preface explaining the founding of Liberia in 1820 by free blacks from the US, organizing the country along the model they know from home at the time, complete with these “Americo-Liberian” immigrants becoming *de facto* slave masters. Fine often employs dialect in “Liberian Kreyol, also called Liberian Pidgin, which is a trading language based on English and Portuguese that has been used for three hundred years,” and he includes a glossary. There’s even a non-fiction appendix that discusses, among other things, the rumors that brutal

Liberian dictator (and subsequently convicted war criminal) Charles Taylor at one point lived in Pawtucket.

Fine told *Motif* the writers he most admires are “Tolstoy, probably more than anybody,” and I.L. Peretz, “who continues to live in my heart and soul” and “was a giant of his time” in Yiddish literature during its brief flowering in the late 1800s to the early 1900s who could, Fine said, “see through to the human values.” Fine’s English style has nothing of the supernatural succubi and holy fools of Peretz but, among that class of Yiddish writers, is more reminiscent of the worldly and modern I.B. Singer. “I once had the opportunity of hearing I.B. Singer speak when I was young and he was living on 86th Street in New York, although I actually heard him in Philadelphia,” Fine said.

*Abundance* is a realistic tour-de-force of survival in a failed state rife with warlords and child soldiers answerable to no one, where ordinary people struggle to get on with their lives in a society run by naked power exerted through machine guns. Fine’s skill as a raconteur makes the novel seem as if he is your personal tour guide through chaos and civil war, but with a very hopeful and optimistic outlook.

If you like this: *Another America: The Story of Liberia and the Former Slaves Who Ruled It* by James Ciment (336 pages, Hill and Wang, published August 12, 2014) and *Madame President: The Extraordinary Journey of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf* by Helene Cooper (336 pages, Simon and Schuster, published March 7, 2017).

***Henry Hits the Ball* by Thom Ring** (350 pages, independent, published March 4, 2019).

Known for his young adult stories about motor racing (*The Red Racecar* series), RI author Thom Ring wrote his first novel for adults about a 14 year-old boy with severe cognitive and intellectual disabilities – accompanied by a savant’s ability to hit a baseball, even if he can’t understand how to run the bases. Spotted fortuitously by a scout for the Chicago White Sox, Henry suddenly becomes the focus of a lot of attention for which the book uses sports as both a setting and a metaphor. Baseball and boxing seem to be contenders for inspiring the most literary efforts, and there is no shortage of either from serious authors (including some true greats such as *The Natural* by Bernard Malamud, 1952, and *The Great American Novel* by Philip Roth, 1973), as well as a few who rapidly head downhill after the title (notably *Bucky F\*cking Dent* by David Duchovny, 2016), but Ring’s new contribution manages to cross genres in an original way, avoiding the cliches of both coming-of-age and sports novels.

If you like this: *Unbeaten: Rocky Marciano’s Fight for Perfection in a Crooked World* by Mike Stanton (400 pages, Henry Holt and Co, published June 26, 2018) and *The Summer of Beer and Whiskey: How Brewers, Barkeeps, Rowdies, Immigrants, and a Wild Pennant Fight Made Baseball America’s Game* by Edward Achorn (336 pages, Public Affairs Press, published April 30, 2013).

***The Prince of Providence: The True Story of Buddy Cianci, America’s Most Notorious Mayor, Some Wiseguys, and the Feds* by Mike Stanton** (464 pages, Random House, published August 5, 2003).

The definitive history of the decline and fall of Buddy Cianci, legendary mayor of Providence, is hardly new, but you might want to re-read it before it gets a lot of attention again as the basis for the new and original play that will open the upcoming Trinity Rep season on September 12.

If you like this: *Politics and Pasta: A Memoir* by Vincent “Buddy” Cianci Jr. (376 pages, St. Martin’s Griffin, published July 17, 2012), which is something of a rebuttal.

***Sifting Through The Ashes of Me; Where I'm Comin' From; Flower* by Jay Walker** (Stillwater River Publications, published January 2019).

RI poet Jay Walker reprinted his three prior books from 2009, 2011, and 2012, respectively, making again available his work that has been widely acclaimed in the Providence poetry scene. (We covered his recent reading at Stillwater Books in Pawtucket.) If you missed the original print runs, here's your chance.

### **Not Local, but Recommended**

***The War on Normal People: The Truth About America's Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income Is Our Future* by Andrew Yang** (304 pages, Hachette Books, published April 3, 2018).

These days every politician writes a book (or has one ghostwritten), but Andrew Yang wrote a book and then ran for president in order to get people to read it. His big idea is Universal Basic Income, which he renames "Freedom Dividend," a concept that has been kicked around by thinkers as diverse as Thomas Paine and Milton Friedman, but takes on greater urgency in the face of dire predictions that tens of millions of American jobs will disappear in coming decades due primarily to automation. Even under the most optimistic scenarios where new technology creates new kinds of jobs, they will require different skills than the ones eliminated. It's encouraging to see someone, anyone, taking seriously the long-term future of the country rather than, say, promising to resurrect coal mining.

***The Personality Brokers: The Strange History of Myers-Briggs and the Birth of Personality Testing* by Merve Emre** (336 pages, Doubleday, published September 11, 2018).

People who mistake Myers-Briggs as having any validity at all should read this history of it, and be worried about the extent corporate America subjects current and prospective employees to such junk science.