To the Reader in Chief…

Some of our favorite feminists recommend books for the next US president’s reading list.

Alicia Ostriker

The next president should read the current edition of Our Bodies, Ourselves (2011) cover to cover, to learn the realities of life for half the population of the United States. This is the book that more than any other begins to make clear what “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” equally for women and men should mean.

Alicia Ostriker is a poet and critic, twice a finalist for the National Book Award, currently a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Her most recent book of poems is The Old Woman, the Tulip, and the Dog (2014), and her most recent book of critical essays is Dancing at the Devil’s Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics, and the Erotic (2000). She is also author of Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America (1987).

AnaLouise Keating

An Indigenous People’s History of the United States, by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2015). The United States suffers from a profound historical amnesia that almost always ignores the origins of this country in settler colonialism, which Dunbar-Ortiz defines as “the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft.” To counter (both personally and collectively) this amnesia, the next president should be conversant with indigenous histories and white settler colonialism’s ongoing impact around the world. Awareness can be the first step to transformation; by thoroughly understanding our own history, perhaps the next president could assist us in avoiding a continued repetition of our previous errors.

This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (3rd edition, 2015). This multigenre collection is as relevant today as when it was first published in 1981. With contributions from 29 US women, This Bridge Called My Back offers a variety of firsthand perspectives on racism, sexism, homophobia, interlocking systemic oppressions, and transformation. To address the oppositional politics that plague Washington, and to avoid becoming trapped in them, our next president will need to build bridges and develop complex alliances. The Bridge authors’ visionary alliance-building and sophisticated critiques of social injustice will provide our future president with a concise primer on feminism, as well as useful models for coalition-building.

The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh (1999). For more than fifty years, the Vietnamese peace activist
and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has allowed his deeply held spirituality to guide and infuse his tireless activism and political interventions. Exiled for decades from his homeland because of his peace work during the Vietnam War and despite many other setbacks, he maintains his belief in human beings’ radical inter-relatedness with all existence (which he calls “interbeing”) and uses this belief to work for social change. In this short book Hanh teaches readers how to cultivate mindfulness, even in challenging situations. The future president will benefit from Thich Nhat Hanh’s sage council and nonoppositional approach to individual and collective social change.

Anzaldúa’s multigenre book is essential reading for every US elected official, including the president. Anzaldúa uses history, mythography, poetry, autobiography, popular culture, and critical theory to develop an incisive analysis of the borderland region between the United States and Mexico. Her theory of the “new mestiza”; her use of code-switching (shifts between English, Spanish, Nahuatl, and other languages); and her critique of sexism, homophobia, and other narrow ways of thinking can educate and transform the next leader of our country.

AnaLouise Keating, professor and director of the Doctoral Program in Multicultural Women’s & Gender Studies at Texas Woman’s University, is the author, editor, or co-editor of ten books, including Transformation Now! Toward a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change (2013); Teaching Transformation: Transcultural Classroom Dialogues (2010); and Light in the Dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality, by Gloria Anzaldúa (2015). Her work focuses on multicultural teaching and literature; transformational pedagogies; US women-of-colors theories; womanism/feminism; Anzaldúa’s studies; spiritual activism; and post-oppositional thought.

The Question of Palestine, by Edward W. Said (1992). First published in 1979 and later updated to address more recent issues, Said is one of the most compelling intellectuals of our era.


Callie Crossley

Though I read everything from the serious to the silly (both for work and for my Literary Sisters Book Club), subconsciously I ended up with a list that reflects a running theme. I guess I want the new president to look beyond his or her own experience and to develop a deep understanding of the lives of black female citizens.

Sister Outsider, by Audre Lorde (1984). I was first introduced to Lorde’s work some years ago by a group of black women readers and educators. During the past few years I find myself quoting often from her body of work, especially her essays, which feel as though she wrote them yesterday.

Beverly Guy-Sheftall

Because of the absence of attention to Palestine from the vantage point of Palestinians, I have decided to suggest titles that an incoming president is not likely to have read. The titles speak for themselves and offer alternative perspectives to mainstream public discourse on the growing crisis in the Middle East as it relates to Occupied Palestine.

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Callie Crossley is the host of the weekly public radio program Under the Radar with Callie Crossley and of the public television show Basic Black, and a frequent commentator on local and national television and radio. A former producer for ABC News 20/20, Crossley often lectures at colleges and universities about media literacy, media and politics, and the intersections of race, gender, and media. She has had fellowships from the Nieman Foundation for Journalism and the Institute of Politics at the John F. Kennedy School of Government. Her awards include the 2015 Salute to Excellence Award from the National Association of Black Journalists, for a compilation of her weekly commentaries, Observations on Ferguson: America’s Racial Ground Zero; and the 2014 Associated Press, Edward R. Murrow, and Clarion awards for writing, producing, and co-hosting the radio documentary, Witness to History: WGBH’s 1963 Coverage of the March on Washington.

Citizen, by Claudia Rankine (2014). So much of what Rankine writes here resonates with my experiences and with our times of race confusion and race baiting. Here is the work that describes the real meaning of “microaggression” and explains why it matters. I am still working my way through the book, because I have to keep putting it down to manage my emotions.


The Light of the World, by Elizabeth Alexander (2015). Alexander’s heartbreaking story of her life after the sudden death of her husband celebrates marriage, family, cross-cultural connection, spirituality, and moving on. Alexander, who read her poem, “Praise Song for the Day,” at President Obama’s first inauguration, gives us a real history of black love—there are not enough of these.

The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010 (2015). Clifton’s work is witty and wise, earthy and ethereal. She is a true “race woman,” and I’ve found sustenance and support in her words. Our president may, also.

A Shining Thread of Hope: Black Women in America, by Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson (1998). This is only one of Hine’s many great books about the history of black women in America. Her research that has established the field of black women’s history in America.


Citizen by Claudia Rankine (2014). This deeply affecting, multigenre poem is about the ways racism infects even the smallest of human interactions. I think it would be an important addition to a president’s understanding of structural racism.

Courtney E. Martin is an author, entrepreneur, and weekly columnist for the public radio program On Being. She is currently working on a book titled The New Better Off, exploring how people are redefining the American dream (think more fulfillment, community, and fun; less debt, status, and stuff). Martin is the co-founder of the Solutions Journalism Network and a strategist for the TED Prize. Her books include Do It Anyway: The New Generation of Activists (2010), and Perfect Girls, Starving Daughters: How the Quest for Perfection is Harming Young Women (2007). Her work appears frequently in national publications, including the New York Times and the Washington Post. She has appeared on the TODAY Show, Good Morning America and other television.

Ellen Feldman

We are in a period of societal struggle as significant as that for self-determination in the sixties and early seventies. Now, as then, the struggle takes many forms: equal rights, including marriage equality, for the LGBT community; freedom from discrimination and injustice, including police brutality, for African Americans; and equal rights and breaking through glass ceilings, for women. The struggle (always) continues even as we celebrate our victories.

Courting Equality: A Documentary History of America’s First Legal Same-Sex Marriages, photographs by Marilyn Humphries and text by Patricia A. Gozembba and Karen Kahn (2007). This is a chronicle of how the LGBT community fought for and gained marriage equality, with photographs documenting players in one of the most important achievements in civil liberties of our time. The book demonstrates how much you can achieve by listening to and forming alliances with grassroots constituencies.

Carrie Mae Weems, by Andrea Kirsch and Susan Fisher Sterling (1993). In her “Kitchen Table Series,” Carrie Mae Weems created a narrative with facing pages of photographs and text. The images are black-and-white, stripped-down photographs of Weems, who is African American, by herself and with others at a kitchen table, that most commonplace private and communal space. She pairs these with colorful, streetwise, lyrical prose that traces the progress of a fictional romantic relationship, from start to collapse, along with a woman’s growing self-assurance.

Cindy Sherman, by Eva Respini (2013). Cindy Sherman made a name for herself with her “Untitled Film Series,” in which she photographed herself as an actress in fake publicity stills of fake foreign, art-house, and noir movies. With each subsequent photographic series of herself, she delves into ever darker terrain, from bleak “centerfolds” through grotesque “fairy tales” to macabre scenes of violence and decay. When everyone in a policy meeting is
The Sneetches, by Dr. Seuss (1961). Seuss writes:
Now, the Star-Belly Sneetches had bellies with stars.
The Plain-Belly Sneetches had none upon thars.
Those stars weren’t so big. They were really so small.
You might think such a thing wouldn’t matter at all.
But humans, like Sneetches, take insignificant things and turn them into gigantic problems.

Jennifer Camper
The Lottery, by Shirley Jackson (1948). This story needs to be reread often, because, of course, it’s so perfectly written, but also to remind us that we do many hateful things merely because of stupid, obsolete traditions.
The Kid, by Sapphire (2012). A sequel (of sorts) to Sapphire’s book, Precious (2009), this novel tells the story of Precious’s son, Abdul, and how he is repeatedly failed by people and institutions. It’s a powerful and brutal account of how a person can get chewed up by our society, how victims become victimizers, and the devastating results of injustice.
People Like Us: Misrepresenting the Middle East, by Joris Luyendijk (2009). Luyendijk is a Dutch journalist who explains how “truth” is carefully controlled and edited by those with the power to disseminate information—and how they do it inevitably, both consciously and unconsciously. While he specifically describes his experiences as a journalist in the Middle East, his descriptions of how the messenger manipulates the message is universally applicable.

Kate Clinton
If the Trump juggernaut somehow holds through November 2016, we won’t have to stock the White House with any books because he knows everything. Ayn Rand? He wrote it. Pop-up books? He is one.
If President Obama leaves some of his collection behind, it would be a nice welcoming gift to the incoming president. Here are three classic books that I’ve found provide different angles on black psychology and politics. Triangulation of the three provides great insight into black thought and the solutions black intellectuals have brought to moving race relations forward in a complicated world.

Katie Grover
From Outrage to Courage: Women Taking Action for Health and Justice, by Anne Firth Murray (2009). Murray is the founder of the Global Fund for Women, and here she looks at the health of women around the world as a human rights issue. It is an indicator and correlate to poverty, social inequity, war, violence against women, trafficking, education, housing, and a host of other facets of human rights and social welfare.
Half the Sky, by Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (2008).
Katie Grover is the board chair emerita of the Ms. Foundation for Women. She has also served on the advisory board of the Wellesley Centers for Women, and on the boards of Re:Gender (formerly the National Council for Research on Women), and Equality Now. She has long worked for social justice for all women and girls.

Layli Maparyan
Understanding not only race relations, but also racial psychology in the United States, will be an absolute must for the next president. Here are three classic books that I’ve found provide different angles on black psychology and politics. Triangulation of the three provides great insight into black thought and the solutions black intellectuals have brought to moving race relations forward in a complicated world.
Given the generational changes occurring in US society and globally, I think it is important to have a fresh and research-informed perspective on youth. To this end, I am recommending The Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence, by Laurence Steinberg (2014).

In terms of foreign affairs, here are two items I'd like the next president to read and reflect upon. The first is a controversial book that invites us to ask tough questions about foreign aid to developing countries, and the second is a document I'd like the United States to ratify!


With a world embroiled in conflict and significant controversies, it will be essential for our next president to know how to maintain inner peace and equipoise. Here are four of my favorite books for staying centered, focused, and calm, even in the midst of storms:


Your Invisible Power, by Genevieve Behrend (1921).


The Wretched of the Earth, by Frantz Fanon (1963).

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Many of the Australians I spoke with seemed to consider the American campaign an entertaining sideshow akin to Survivor or The Voice. They were surprisingly knowledgeable about US presidential candidates—at least in terms of bad or good hair and the most absurd sound bites. But it’s disturbing that many Americans don’t know much beyond the sound bites, either.

Australians and Americans are culturally kissing cousins. Australian ideals are both egalitarian and “matey” (i.e., macho and white), and while you can find ferocious feminists in progressive pockets like Melbourne, the status of women and indigenous people often elicits eye-rolling. Australia has had a female prime minister (briefly), so Hillary Clinton’s candidacy is not an issue. But women, children, and minorities of all types are disproportionately affected by economic class differences, and just who benefits from “the good life” in Australia (or America) is the big issue.

So, this presidential season, I’ve found myself most worried about the increasing gap between rich and poor around the world—and the cultural gaps in understanding that are festering everywhere. For these reasons, I’ve selected five books for the next US president that highlight such gaps and the lasting damage they do.

**Indelible Ink**, by Fiona MacGregor (2010). Fiona MacGregor’s big fat social novel documents economic change in one of the world’s most expensive cities, Melbourne, through the eyes of a formerly wealthy wife who loses almost everything in a divorce, and her adult children. The protagonist ends up covering her body with artful tattoos, crossing all sorts of class and cultural boundaries. Why should the next US president read this book? Because novels make you feel what it means to fail in a tough economy.

**Barracuda**, by Christos Tsiolkas (2013). Christos Tsiolkas (also author of *The Slap* [2008]) is a master at portraying economic, ethnic, and racial differences. The protagonist of Barracuda is a young working-class swimmer who dreams of Olympic gold—and even gets a scholarship to a fancy private school. His story exposes the flip side of the Australian (and American) dream: What happens when you aren’t good enough to make the cut?

**Unspeakable Things: Sex, Lies, and Revolution**, by Laurie Penny (2014). Laurie Penny says, “Being a good girl gets you nowhere. Asking nicely for change gets you nowhere. Mutiny is necessary. Class mutiny, gender mutiny, sex mutiny, love mutiny. It’s got to be mutiny in our time.” Even if we end up with a female president, she needs to be reminded that feminism is not just about advancing your career—it’s about changing the terms of the patriarchy.


**Notes of a Native Son**, by James Baldwin (1955). Racial prejudice remains a raw wound to the American national soul. These essays, although they were written during the American civil rights movement, remain disturbingly relevant. I recommend Notes of a Native Son to all white Aussie politicians as well as to the next US president.

**Parable of the Sower**, by Octavia Butler (1993). The dystopic future predicted by Octavia Butler is here, now. The threat of collapse is closer than we think. By following Butler’s character Lauren and her ever-growing cult of followers, the new president might start to see how big policy changes affect communities and individuals. The new president would hopefully see the writing on the wall and attempt to shift course by intervening in the corporatization of our lives.

**Martha Nichols** is editor in chief of Talking writing.com, a digital literary magazine based in the Boston area. She’s a contributing editor at WRB and teaches in the journalism program at the Harvard University Extension School.

**Moya Bailey**

I struggled with this task of selecting books for the new president, because to desire the position is to desire imperial, colonial, patriarchal, capitalist, and racist power. That said, should someone be elected to the nation’s highest office, I’d like to offer materials that would hopefully help them realize the deep-seated problems with their chosen profession.

**A People’s History of the United States**, by Howard Zinn (1980). If you are going to be the leader of the so-called free world, you need to get down the basics about your country’s violent past. Howard Zinn’s history will help the new president see how the United States government has violated the human rights of the people who reside on Turtle Island (North America) in both the past and present. Perhaps the new president will be moved by people’s continual resistance and willingness to fight in the face of governmental oppression.

**The Street**, by Ann Petry (1946). Ann Petry’s book is a master-class in the real world impact of capitalism on those most marginalized in our country. This is deep sociological theory disguised as a brilliant novel. Racism, sexism, class, and the impossibility of the American Dream when you are black and poor are all expertly rendered in this tragic but beautifully told story. If the president takes the book to heart, they will surely have to transform the economy, end racism and sexism, all while creating a new plan for city living.

**Robin Becker**

**Diving into the Wreck**, by Adrienne Rich (1973). The incoming president might want to listen to the inner lives of US women baby boomers by reading one of Adrienne Rich’s most potent collections. Here, the struggle to articulate the consequences of patriarchy finds a voice—in poems including “From a Survivor,” “Translations,” and “Meditations for a Savage Child.” In the title poem, Rich begins to fashion a language for a new way of being and thinking.

**Mrs. Dalloway**, by Virginia Woolf (1925). With its thematic antipathy to war and war’s devastating consequences for the human psyche, this novel is more important than ever. In it, Virginia Woolf combines an examination of gendered, middle-class London in the post-World War I era with her style-breaking rendering of the inner life. Women’s friendship, the compromises of heterosexual marriage, and a poet’s lush language make this a presidential must-read.

**Robin Becker**, Liberal Arts Research Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Penn State University, is the author of seven collections of poems, the most recent of which is Tiger Heron (2014). New poems are forthcoming in the American Poetry Review and the New Yorker.

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Gloria Steinem, “If men got pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament.” And a Wonder Woman chastity bracelet to anyone who still wants to ban abortions.

Maus, by Art Spiegelman (1980). Cartoonist Art Spiegelman shows what it’s like to be crushed by the top dogs and the fat cats. In a just world, this book would put an end to fake analogies to the Holocaust.

For the Democrats, I recommend: Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin, by Timothy Snyder (2010). It’s critical that our president move away from cold war stereotypes and begin to appreciate the magnitude of the destruction of lives and property in the former Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe. Twenty-seven million Soviet citizens lost their lives in the war in Europe; the Red Army saved the rest of the world from Hitler and an even worse Holocaust. This book aids understanding of the murderous crimes of Stalin and their legacy in Russia and the former Soviet bloc. Yet, if the US could work with Stalin to defeat Hitler, surely we can figure out a way to work with Putin to defeat ISIS and Al Qaeda.

Sex, Politics, & Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia, by Valerie Sperling (2014). Valerie Sperling argues that Putin maintains power by appealing to strong masculine stereotypes. Feminism is thus an opposition strategy.

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, by Michelle Alexander (2010). Our country was built by the free labor of countless slaves, too many of whose descendants are now in prison as the US has, by far, the highest incarceration rate in the world. Our country was built by the free labor of countless slaves, too many of whose descendants are now in prison as the US has, by far, the highest incarceration rate in the world. Our country was built by the free labor of countless slaves, too many of whose descendants are now in prison as the US has, by far, the highest incarceration rate in the world.

Year One of the Empire: A Play of American Politics, War, And Protest Taken From The Historical Record, by Elinor Fuchs and Joyce Antler (1973). This play shows how US global imperialist policies began with the War on the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century. Teddy Roosevelt plays a critical role in whipping up passions for global expansion. Southern segregationists and Jim Crow demagogues such as Pitchfork Ben Tillman oppose him, to no avail. Abominable atrocities against Native people including water torture, go largely unpunished.

Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume I, 1884-1933, (1992), and Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume 2, The Defining Years, 1933-1938 (1999), by Blanche Wiesen Cook. Hillary Clinton will make history if she wins, as the first female leader of the most powerful country in the world. Margaret Thatcher hardly offers a positive role model, and Angela Merkel appears to have been weakened. Eleanor Roosevelt is the best model of a US woman close to the centers of power, who knew how to stand up to men in power and maintain the courage of her principles.

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