

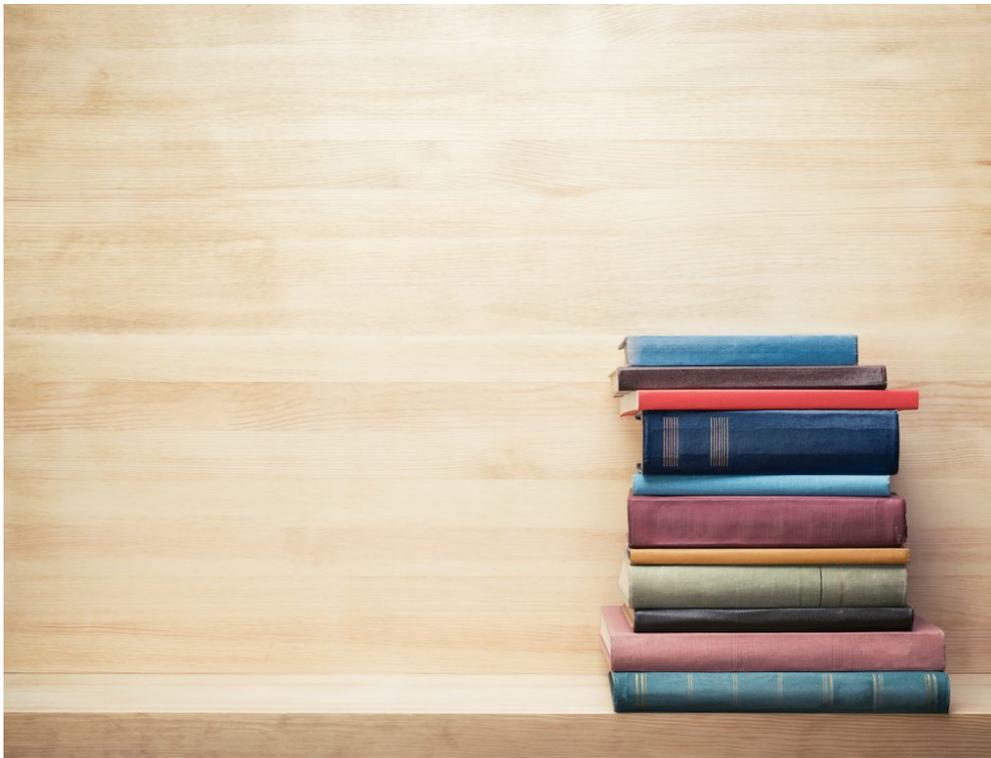
# Five *on* Friday

*Musings on Mental Health*

## Summer Reads

By Kathleen M. Pike, PhD  
July 9, 2021

*With summer upon us, it is time for some good book recommendations. This year, I asked a few colleagues to share what they are reading. Wow. I want to read them all.*



[Photo Credit](#)

*Sci-Fi, biography, history, fiction, nonfiction. No matter the genre, these books offer the promise of taking us to worlds unknown - feeding our imagination and deepening our understanding of the wildly varied human experience. Psychological and mental health themes abound.*

1. [\*\*The Space Between Worlds\*\*](#) by Micaiah Johnson [Aug 2020] is Haley Brown's recommendation. Haley has been a research associate with our global mental health team for the past year. She just finished reading this debut sci-fi novel written by a young Black queer person. Haley says the novel centers gender-queer experiences without making the entire premise of the book about the experience of being queer. As a queer

person herself, Haley finds that many novels featuring LGBTQIA+ characters are riddled with stereotypes, inaccurate representations, and/or have solely trauma-driven narratives. While Haley loves the way *The Space Between Worlds* is a fun and otherworldly read, she also finds that it represents queerness in a way that feels more real. And for the sci-fi fans, the portrayal of how Cara, the main character, travels the “multiverse” [aligns with](#) some far out science. But Haley says the novel is really more character-driven than world-building, and while set in a different reality, it captures complex issues such as privilege, class, race, gender, and sexuality. Ultimately, *The Space Between Worlds* is about facing one’s demons, nature, nurture and consequences on this life journey.

2. [Off the Charts: The Hidden Lives and Lessons of American Child Prodigies](#) by Ann Hulbert [Jan 2018]. Carol Davidson, long-time advisor to our Columbia-WHO Center for Global Mental Health, recommended this one. Carol read this book when it was first published and was inspired to re-read it now because of her own personal quest to understand her history as a child prodigy. A concert pianist performing around the world at a young age, Carol has intimate knowledge of the disconnect between the inner emotional world of the child and the public persona of the prodigy. *Off the Charts* is filled with stories of extraordinary human beings, many of whom are well known to the public, such as Bobbie Fisher, Lang Lang, and Shirley Temple. *Off the Charts* tells the lesser-known stories of these prodigies’ complex mental health issues that are rooted in the psychological abyss between their public personas visible to an adoring public and their private emotional and developmental struggles hidden from view. Psychologically captivating, albeit heart-wrenching.

3. [The Self-Driven Child: The Science and Sense of Giving Your Kids More Control Over Their Lives](#) by William Stixrud Ph.D. and Ned Johnson [Feb 2019]. I first met Trish Dunne when she was a student, and we have worked together on multiple projects ever since. Currently, Trish serves as Senior Researcher and Editor for *Five on Friday*. When she is not fact-checking and editing, she is chasing after her 1 year-old and 3 ½ year-old toddlers. Always committed to tracking down the most reliable sources, it is no wonder that she has a stack of parenting-related books on the shelf. *The Self-Driven Child* is her current ‘parent’ read. The book’s basic premise is that parents today are unwittingly over-managing and overcontrolling their children’s lives in an effort to ‘help them succeed’ when what they really need to do is let go. By doing so, their kids will have the space to engage in the developmental work of risk-taking and failing – which is critical to growing a healthy sense of agency and resilience. The authors recommend that parents aim to be their child’s consultant rather than their manager. Trish especially likes this book because it is science-based, and the guidance provided is derived from research on the developing brain and child psychology.

4. [Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly](#), by Anthony Bourdain [May 2000], gets a Michelin star from Rayna Wang, our Columbia-WHO Center for Global Mental Health’s Communications and Publications Coordinator. First published in 2000, Bourdain’s memoir describes his early life and introduction to the world of food and the food business in the 1970s. Bourdain’s signature direct, authentic, and unapologetically honest perspective is on full display as he gives readers a taste of life in the kitchen, with all of its hierarchies, power dynamics, energy, and organization. In classic Bourdain style, it is filled with profanity and, at times, it is lacking in cultural sensitivity. He also spares no detail regarding his heavy drug use during the early stage of his career. In terms of mental health, Rayna was especially moved by Bourdain’s capacity to capture the physically and emotionally draining experiences of working in the restaurant industry and its toll on all staff – from dishwasher to acclaimed chef.

5. [The Unanswered Letter](#), by Faris Cassell [Sep 2020]. Sent to me by my dear friend, Josh Reckord, this is my current read and recommendation. It is an extraordinary chronicling of Alfred and Hedwig Berger’s Viennese Jewish family’s story in the wake of the Anschluss and the steady march into World War II and the Holocaust. In 1939, desperate to find a sponsor in the United States, Alfred wrote a letter pleading for support to strangers who happened to share the same surname. The letter passed from generation to generation until one day in 2000 when Cassell’s physician husband came home with this sixty-year-old letter given to him by a patient. Cassell, a journalist by training, spent the next two decades tracking down what happened to the

Bergers of Vienna and their extended family. Her research uncovers the intimate details of one family and her compassionate storytelling makes the political history of the Holocaust exquisitely personal. The book is replete with mental health themes of loss, resilience, intergenerational grief, the ties of family, and hope.

*When it comes to reading, we each have our favorite genres. Some of us are fast readers; some slow. Some read multiple books in parallel. Some devour one at a time. Sometimes reading the same book at different times in our lives reveals new meaning as a function of where we are on our life journeys. Across this diversity, a common truth is that [reading is good for our mental health](#). Reading has the potential to generate health benefits of deep relaxation and inner calm, similar to meditation. Having a practice of reading is associated with better sleep, lower stress levels, higher self-esteem, and lower rates of depression. I hope at least one of these books will pique your interest and deliver on the mental health front as well. Happy Reading!*