



# WELCOME!

## california READS OVERVIEW

Welcome to *California Reads*, a statewide program that brings Californians together to explore important topics through reading and discussion. This year, our theme is *Searching For Democracy*. What does democracy mean to us? What challenges has American democracy faced in the past? How can we strengthen our democracy in the future? How can we talk and work together despite our differences? What can we learn from the experiences of others who have struggled with these questions?

*California Reads* offers a choice of five superb books to act as a springboard for community discussion. These works include fiction as well as non-fiction, and were written by men and women of diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. There are many ways to experience and explore what democracy means, strives for in its promise, and requires for its success. No singular book can capture all of these complexities, and each selection offers the reader an opportunity to discover new perspectives by inviting us to think about individual responsibility, the importance of a free press, the collective good, and what it is needed from each of us to sustain a healthy democracy.

Cal Humanities and the California Center for the Book are partnering on this project because we feel books—and the conversations they spark—can make a difference in the world. We hope this will be just the first of many statewide conversations under our *California Reads* banner, providing Californians with opportunities to read and discuss stories and ideas that matter. Whether you are joining the discussion through a program at your local library, bookstore, school or elsewhere, we hope you will be inspired by these books and enjoy a new connection with your community and your state.

With gratitude,



Ralph Lewin  
President and CEO  
Cal Humanities



Mary Menzel  
Director  
California Center for the Book

*California Reads* is a new program of Cal Humanities developed in partnership with the California Center for the Book and the California State Library. It invites Californians from all walks of life throughout our state to participate in reading and discussion programs and related activities hosted by libraries, schools, colleges, bookstores and other community institutions.

We have selected a slate of books this year to stimulate a thoughtful reflection of, and lively discussion among, friends and neighbors, family and strangers about the past, present, and future of democracy. Five thought-provoking books were chosen from a pool of over 300 titles nominated by members of the public, and based upon the final recommendations of an advisory group of librarians, authors, scholars, publishers and critics.

### *These five books were selected:*

- *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution: A Fully Annotated Declaration of Independence, U.S. Constitution and Amendments, and Selections from The Federalist Papers*, by Richard Beeman. Annotated by one of the nation's foremost Constitutional scholars, this compact edition of our nation's founding documents provides text and context for readers seeking to understand the framework of our democracy as well as its meaning, past and present.
- *Farewell to Manzanar*, by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston. A heartbreaking and compelling memoir about the Japanese American internment experience as seen through the eyes of young girl, this personal story bears witness to a failure of American democracy.
- *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*, by Rebecca Solnit. A masterwork of narrative nonfiction by a contemporary California writer reaches some surprising conclusions about our need for community and common purpose, which she argues are fundamental to democratic forms of social and political life.
- *It Can't Happen Here*, by Sinclair Lewis. This underappreciated classic by one of America's greatest novelists, first published in 1935, imagines a chillingly undemocratic America. It details the rise of a populist politician as he creates a fascist regime, and reminds us of the fragility of our democratic institutions.
- *Lost City Radio*, by Daniel Alarcon. A haunting novel by a young California writer explores the aftermath of a traumatic civil war in a fictitious South American country, and raises questions about the importance of historical knowledge, collective memory, and public access to information in a democratic society.

The discussion guides for each book—like this one—provide an overview of the book and author, a series of discussion questions to begin conversations, a brief author interview, bibliographies and other supplemental resources for interested readers. A K-12 curriculum guide for each book is also available to further support classroom activities. All of these materials, along with additional resources and information about *Searching for Democracy* and *California Reads* public programs and activities at libraries and other community venues, can be found at our web site at [www.calhum.org/searchingfordemocracy](http://www.calhum.org/searchingfordemocracy).

# SEARCHING *for* DEMOCRACY OVERVIEW

Leading into the national 2012 elections, *Searching for Democracy* is the culmination of a two year-long initiative that provides Californians with various ways to explore how the humanities can provide insight and opportunities to converse about the nature, state and needs of our vibrant American democracy. Cal Humanities and its partners will explore these complexities—through a series of local, regional, and statewide humanities-inspired activities—to accomplish a greater understanding of what is needed to sustain a healthy democracy in an increasingly interdependent world.

Students, families and people from all walks of life will explore—online and in person—what discoveries and lessons lie in works of fiction and nonfiction, provocative cultural exhibits and public conversations. The Cal Humanities website ([www.calhum.org](http://www.calhum.org)) will be an online hub for all activities, where participants in events, readers of the initiative's books, and people new to our effort can learn more and share what they have discovered.

Our *Searching For Democracy* program partners include: California libraries, California Center for the Book, California History-Social Science Project, Exhibit Envoy, and Zócalo Public Square, in collaboration with California State Library, California Community Colleges, California State University, and University of California Television.

## about the book

### *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution*



In *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution*, Richard Beeman provides us with a compact, fully annotated copy of the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and its amendments, including the Bill of Rights. It is a highly portable reference guide to our nation's law-of-the-land. Beeman's annotations

are impartial and illuminating. They place these great documents in a historical context and describe the events and personalities of the day that contributed to their creation, as well as provide the reader with a glimpse into modern applications of these centuries-old laws. In addition to highlighting all that the founding fathers accomplished, Beeman does not refrain from pointing out their weaknesses.

Beeman not only succinctly explains the history behind the inclusion of particular articles but also provides the reader with invaluable information on the behind-the-scenes debates surrounding the Constitution's ratification. The book also features excerpts from *The Federalist Papers* and takes a look at several critical Supreme Court cases. Beeman reminds us that the meanings of many of the specific provisions in the Constitution have changed over time and that the document is by no means a static work. *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution* also contains a concise summation of the long history of America under British rule: the events leading up to and the rationales for independence, revolution, ratification and the formation of a new government. Though the book itself is small, it impressively portrays the power and magnitude of the documents that define us as a nation.

Writing in *The New Yorker*, Jill Lepore called this guide "laudably equitable...valuable and judicious."

## about the author

### Richard Beeman



Richard Beeman was born in 1942 and lives in Media, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Mary Cahill, and their golden retriever, Abigail Adams. He is an American historian specializing in the American Revolution and is currently

the John Walsh Centennial Professor of History at the University of Pennsylvania. He is one of the most respected constitutional scholars in the nation and is the author of seven books and several dozen articles on the history of Revolutionary America. He has served as Chair of the University of Pennsylvania's Department of History, Associate Dean in the School of Arts and Sciences, and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. He is a member of the Board of Trustees of the National Constitution Center and is Chair of the Constitution Center's Committee on Programs, Exhibits, and Education.

Dr. Beeman is the recipient of numerous awards, including fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, and the Huntington Library. His recent book, *Plain Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution* was the winner of the George Washington Book Prize and the Literary Award of the Philadelphia Athenaeum. He holds a BA from the University of California, Berkeley, an MA from College of William and Mary, and a PhD in History from the University of Chicago.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution*  
by Richard Beeman

- 1 Before picking up the book, what did you expect to get out of a reading of *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution*? Upon reading the book, did you learn anything unexpected? Did anything surprise you? What impressed you the most?
- 2 Some in our society feel that we must adhere to the original meaning and intent of the framers, however that can be ascertained. Others feel that interpretation of our Constitution should reflect the immense changes in our world since the 18th century. What do you think?
- 3 Just as our founders faced challenges as they formed a new government, challenges face emergent democracies around the globe, particularly those that have resulted from the uprisings of the Arab Spring. Are the challenges faced by those attempting to establish democratic forms of government in other parts of the world today the same as the ones our founders faced, or different?
- 4 Consider the Occupy demonstrations and the Tea Party movement. Some see these as democracy in action, a sign that our democracy is vibrant. Others see them as unorganized, ineffectual and conducive to mob rule. How do you think these movements relate to democratic ideals?
- 5 Article VI contains the only mention of religion in the body of the Constitution, forbidding any religious test as a qualification for office. How do Americans' attitudes about the relationship of religion and politics affect how we select the officials who represent us? Do you feel religious beliefs should play a role in decisions about how to cast a vote?
- 6 Beeman argues that the institution of the electoral college reflects the fear of the delegates that the American people, in the days before mass communication, were too provincial to elect a president, too ignorant of the candidates' merits to vote knowledgeably. Since this is no longer the case, do we still need the electoral college?
- 7 When discussing the article requiring that our president be a "natural born Citizen," Dr. Beeman remarks that immigrants increasingly shape our culture and politics and so "this particular constitutional provision seems a good candidate for amendment." Do you agree? Do you think such an amendment could be politically viable?
- 8 Do you agree with the author that our Constitution is generally successful in balancing the maintenance of public order with the nurturing of personal liberty? Or do you feel it privileges one over the other?
- 9 Keeping in mind the context of their times, did the framers do the best job they could, or could they have done better?
- 10 Reading over the Supreme Court cases that Beeman includes in the book, one is struck by the changes in societal norms and how these eventually become reflected in changes to the US Constitution. Do you anticipate additional changes to the Constitution in the near future? In the distant future? If so, what changes do you foresee? Do we almost have it right? Will it ever be "set"?
- 11 The 22nd Amendment limits presidents to two terms. Are term limits, either in the executive or legislative branches, true to democratic principles?
- 12 Jefferson said that it is in the nature of democracy to be contentious and that it was never meant to be placid. Dr. Beeman writes that popular democracy is "one of the most tumultuous forms of political activity." Why do you think this is true?
- 13 Dr. Beeman says in his interview, "Nowhere is it written that effective and just democratic institutions are automatically self-perpetuating." What can we do to ensure that our democracy continues?

## AN INTERVIEW

*with author Dr. Richard Beeman*



### **In what ways is your book about democracy?**

I wrote *The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution* in order to help Americans understand not only how their Constitution was created, but also what it means today. Much of the history of our nation has been shaped by the changing ways in which we have interpreted our Constitution; and since our history has been marked by a consistent, if uneven, expansion of democratic institutions and practices, the subject of "democracy" pops up on nearly every page of the book.

To give just one example: In the late eighteenth century, the phrase “We the People” in the preamble to the Constitution did not include all Americans. For example, slaves, women, and most Native Americans were not permitted to vote, nor indeed, were many free white males who did not own enough property to meet the voting requirements then in existence in most states. But over the course of the more than two hundred years since the framing of the Constitution, the definition “We the People” has expanded to include an ever-growing number of Americans. I hope that my book is helpful in telling that story.

### Do writers have special roles or responsibilities in democratic societies?

That’s a tough question! And I must begin my response with a slightly whimsical answer: In order to have any influence at all, writers must have readers who actually read their books! So, I begin by thanking the California Reads project for its efforts to encourage California residents to read books that have “democracy” as one of their themes.

But to speak to your point: one must begin by identifying the responsibilities of ALL citizens of democratic societies. So I would begin by saying that writers, like every other citizen, need to know something about the way their government functions, to exercise their right to vote in an informed way (a responsibility evaded by far too many Americans!), and to involve themselves in some constructive way in the civic life of their communities. Beyond that, it seems to me that the particular responsibilities of novelists, poets, journalists, bloggers, historians, etc. might differ depending on the type of writing they are doing. I can only speak to the sort of writing that I do. As one who has spent his entire adult life writing about the history of the United States, I feel that my most important responsibility is to search for the truth. My version of the “truth” of any particular historical event may differ from that of others who have written on the same subject, but I have always felt that I had a responsibility to approach the evidence before me with an open and critical mind.

### What relationship do the literary arts and humanities have to democracy?

I can’t imagine a flourishing democracy in the absence of a culture in which the literary arts and humanities are not also flourishing. The literary arts and humanities, like democracy, are filled with contestation—the diversity of style, taste, and opinion among writers and humanists is almost certainly as great as the diversity of political opinion among all citizens in a democratic society. But that diversity and contest of style, taste and opinion are just as vital to the survival of the arts and humanities as they are to democracy itself.

### Do you think American democracy is fragile or robust?

When compared to democratic societies (or societies that aspire to democracy) around the world, American democracy is not only robust, but also solidly-rooted in our culture. We are the oldest and, on the whole, most effectively functioning democracy in the modern world.

But is our democracy as robust as it could be, and does the present state of our politics inspire confidence that our democracy will remain robust? Nowhere is it written that effective and just democratic institutions are automatically self-perpetuating. I find myself worrying more about the future of our democracy at the present moment than at any time in my lifetime. Political gridlock in Congress; the mean-spirited, vitriolic tone of politics in both our election campaigns and among our elected officials themselves; the insidious role of money in our election campaigns; the growing gap between rich and poor among our citizenry—these are all worrisome signs that the health of our democracy is in a pretty fragile state.

### What concerns you about the current state and future of our democracy? What makes you hopeful?

I’ve already listed just a few of the things that concern me about the current state of our democracy, and, if I were a pessimistic sort, I’m sure that I could give you a much longer—and more depressing—list. But I’d rather look for those things that make me hopeful. So, let me attempt that search. In the quality of our political leadership? Well, there might be a few bright spots there, but not enough to light my house, or even my closet. In our financial leaders on Wall Street? I won’t even go there!! In the essential strength of our capitalist economy? Things look pretty gloomy in that area, but the United States has been a powerful source for economic progress and innovation for nearly all of its history, so perhaps we can re-discover the sources of our past success. And how might we do that—in both our politics and in our economy? There’s only one answer—or at least only one answer in a well-functioning democracy: through the active engagement of the American people. “We the People”—whether we are Tea Party members or Occupy Wall Street activists or computer geniuses working in their garages on the next great American invention or recent immigrants working hard to achieve the promise of the American dream—“We the People” are our nation’s best and ultimate hope.

### What questions would you like readers to keep in mind as they read your book?

*The Penguin Guide to the United States Constitution* and my earlier work on the Constitutional Convention, *Plain Honest Men: The Making of the American Constitution*, seek to trace the progress that the American nation has made in fulfilling the promise of democracy and equality contained in

The Declaration of Independence. *The Penguin Guide*, in particular, is intended to help Americans understand how the United States Constitution has operated to fulfill the promise of “a more perfect union” contained in the preamble to that document. With those goals in mind, here are a few questions that readers might want to think about as they read the book.

- 1 Why did Americans find it necessary to compose a “Declaration of Independence” as they contemplated their separation from Great Britain?
- 2 What are the most important ideas and principles contained in the Declaration of Independence?
- 3 How is the principle of “federalism” embodied in the United States Constitution?
- 4 How is the principle of “separation of powers” embodied in the Constitution?
- 5 What are the most important changes that have occurred in the Constitution during its nearly 225 years of operation? To what extent were those changes produced by constitutional amendment and to what extent were they the result of changing interpretations of the meaning of the words on the four parchment pages of the original document?
- 6 Closely related to the question above, should we interpret our Constitution today in accordance with the intent of those who framed the document, or should we interpret it in light of changing times and circumstances in our own world today.
- 7 The failure of the framers of the Constitution to deal with the institution of slavery would constitute “the paradox at the nation’s core”—a glaring contradiction to Americans’ stated belief in liberty and equality. We managed to eliminate the institution of slavery only after fighting the bloodiest war in American history, but some impediments to the full realization of liberty and equality for all people still remained. What progress have we made in reaching that more ambitious goal?
- 8 How was it that the fifty-five men who gathered in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 were able to accomplish so much in the course of less than four months, while members of our current Congress seem to accomplish so little?

[What do you think would surprise the framers most about the last 50 years of American democracy?](#)

If were to put James Madison or George Washington in a time machine and plunk them down in any place in America in the year 2012 we would first need an emergency medical crew to revive them and help them recover from the shock of landing on what almost certainly would seem to them to be another planet!

Although the framers had high hopes for America’s future political and economic development, their vision only rarely extended beyond America’s shore. They would no doubt be stunned by the extraordinary role that the United States plays in an increasingly inter-connected world. And, of course, as America’s political, military, and economic power has not only moved across state lines, but also the boundaries of nation-states, the size and reach of the American government has grown accordingly—indeed, it has grown beyond anything that the framers could ever have imagined. I suspect that some of the framers would have seen this as a good thing, while others might be unhappy about it. So, they would no doubt argue about the merits of “big” versus “small” government, just as we Americans do today.

Perhaps most important, the framers would have been surprised, even amazed, that the American union, having expanded from the Atlantic to the Pacific oceans, would endure for more than two centuries. Surprised and amazed, but pleased.

[Why is it important for Americans to read and discuss these “core documents.”](#)

I can imagine few times in American history when an understanding of the meaning (or multiple meanings) of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution could be more important. As the political debate in our nation has become more acrimonious, as one group denounces another for being “un-American” or as “undermining the Constitution,” the need for Americans to come together and understand the underlying meaning of the documents on which our nation was founded is ever-more-pressing—even essential. Although we Americans still have many miles to travel before we fulfill completely the Declaration’s promise of equality and of the protection of certain “unalienable rights,” the language and logic of Thomas Jefferson’s document can continue to inspire us to continue to attempt to meet the challenge. And though Americans will continue to argue about the precise meaning of particular articles, clauses, and paragraphs of the U.S. Constitution, that document contains some fundamental principles which will help us preserve our remarkable experiment in liberty:

- that the division of power between different units of government—national, state, and local—is essential to the protection of liberty.
- that the separation of powers among the branches of our federal government, however cumbersome, is another important means by which we make government the servant, rather than the master, of the people.
- most important, that governments are, ultimately, founded upon the will of “We the People,” and that we, the citizens of America, are the ultimate stewards of our Constitution.

## SUPPLEMENTARY LISTS *for further reading & viewing*

### for adults

*Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* by Joseph J. Ellis (2000): Six key events illuminate the challenges the founding fathers faced in creating an upstart new government.

*Wrestling with the Angel of Democracy: On Being an American Citizen* by Susan Griffin (2008): Examination of a nation struggling to stay true to democratic ideals.

*Revolutionaries: A New History of the Invention of America* by Jack N. Rakove (2011): How ordinary men – a group of planters and lawyers – developed their revolutionary ideas and became our founders.

### for teens & tweens

*Nothing but the Truth* by Avi (2003): Satire about an apathetic high school freshman whose humming of “The Star-Spangled Banner” becomes a national incident.

*Claudette Colvin: Twice Toward Justice* by Phillip Hoose (2010): Factual saga of a 15-year-old black girl’s refusal to give up her bus seat to a white passenger in Alabama circa 1955.

*Chains (Seeds of America)* by Laurie Halse Anderson (2008): A 13-year-old slave girl fights for freedom just as the Revolutionary War begins.

### for children

*Shh! We’re Writing the Constitution* by Jean Fritz (1997): 55 delegates from 13 states gather on a summer day in 1787 to craft the Constitution of the newly formed United States of America.

*Grace for President* by Kelly S. DiPucchio (2008): A grade school girl is stunned to learn the U.S. has never had a female president and she vows to be the first — and embarks on her life in politics by running in her school’s mock election.

*Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down* by Andrea Pinkney (2010): Four college students stage a sit-in at a Woolworth lunch counter in North Carolina circa 1960.

### for viewing

*John Adams* (2008): Television mini-series chronicles the life of one of the primary, but relatively unsung, founding fathers.

*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939): James Stewart is the naïve scoutmaster who finds himself in the halls of government where he crosses paths with a corrupt senator.

*Slavery and the Making of America* (2005): Four-part series examines the history of slavery in the U.S. and the integral role it played in shaping the new country.

*1776* (1972) A hit Broadway musical is the basis for this film about America’s first congress and the nation’s declaration of independence from Britain. Large portions of the song lyrics are taken from letters and memoirs of the founding fathers.

### online resources

[www.ned.org/democracy-stories](http://www.ned.org/democracy-stories)

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is a private, nonprofit foundation dedicated to the growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. At NED’s website you can view profiles of democracy-promoting projects run by non-governmental groups in more than 90 countries.

<http://constitutioncenter.org>

The National Constitution Center brings the U.S. Constitution to life, illuminates constitutional ideals and inspires acts of citizenship. It has online exhibits and access to recorded speeches on the theme of democracy throughout the website.



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Cal Humanities and the California Center for the Book wish to thank all who have contributed to the development of *California Reads* and this discussion guide, including the more than 300 people who nominated books for consideration; the team of the librarians and book professionals who helped us review the submissions; and the writers, educators, scholars, and critics who served as project advisors, including Alex Espinoza, Steve Fjeldsted, Jewelle Gomez, Tim Hernandez, Leila Lalami, Scott Martelle, Patt Morrison, David Ulin, Susan Walsh, Connie Williams, Richard Yarborough, and Victor Zazueta. Special thanks to David Kipen for expert advice throughout the development of the project and to Patricia Garone for research and writing services. We also wish to thank the authors and their publishers for their assistance and support.

This program is made possible by our funders -- the California State Library, which has provided assistance from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, through its Federal-State Partnership program as well as the Chairman's Special Initiative: Bridging Cultures. Additional funding has been provided by The BayTree Foundation, the Seedlings Foundation and the Whitman Institute.

The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of The National Endowment for the Humanities, the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services, the California State Library, Cal Humanities and/or its funders and no official endorsement by any of these institutions should be inferred.

*funding provided by:*



## about cal humanities

Cal Humanities is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting a greater understanding of the human condition. We produce, fund, and support cultural experiences in media, literature, discussion programs and more. Through engaging and inspiring work, we encourage our audiences to learn more, dig deeper, and start conversations that matter to create a State of Open Mind.

*To learn more about us, please visit [www.calhum.org](http://www.calhum.org)*

## about the california center for the book

As part of a network of Centers for the Book in every state of the Union, all affiliated with the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, the California Center for the Book develops statewide programs that celebrate California's rich literary heritage, encourage reading and discussion, and promote libraries as centers for community engagement and lifelong learning. It is supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian.

*To learn more, please visit [www.calbook.org](http://www.calbook.org)*