52 Books for 52 Weeks of 2017

Here it is! My 52 Books for 52 Weeks of 2017! I challenged myself to read widely, both nonfiction and fiction. So you’ll see everything on here from theology to sociology, fantasy to romance, and children’s literature through adult.

Because this blog is read primarily by clergy and church leaders, I’ve put in a few warnings on books that might be out of the comfort zone for some people in terms of language, violence, or sexual content. However, I’ll remind you that the Bible is full of all of that. Our translations of the Bible tone down some of the language (just try reading Ezekiel in Hebrew—yikes!)

Here they are, my 52 for 52.

1. Carve the Mark by Veronica Roth

After several interviews in which the author compared this YA science fiction book to Star Wars, I ended up being disappointed because, except for taking place in a different galaxy than our own, it wasn’t like Star Wars at all. Also, there are problematic elements in how the dark-skinned race of the story are depicted. Like the Divergent series, there are things I really enjoyed, but the issues with the book make it hard for me to recommend reading it.

1. Healing Spiritual Wounds: Reconnecting with a Loving God after Experiencing a Hurtful Church by Carol Howard Merritt

Fantastic book. Carol’s a friend, so I was very much looking forward to this book’s release and I highly recommend this book for all those who have experienced abuse in the church, especially spiritual abuse. This is a book every pastor should have on their shelf as a resource.

1. Uprooted by Naomi Novik

Enjoyed this YA fantasy, though it took me a while to get into it. Having taken two years of Russian in high school, I liked this retelling of Russian folklore with its own twist.

1. The Forbidden Library by Django Wexler

Picked this up after Emerald City Comic Con and thoroughly enjoyed this middle grade fantasy. I haven’t read the rest of the series yet, but the characters are compelling. It reminded me of a twisted Secret Garden.

1. Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now by Walter Brueggemann

This book kicked my butt. I should have read this a long time ago. Fantastic resource for pastors (ahem, speaking to my colleagues here, because we are not good at practicing sabbath!) as well as anyone looking for a devotional resource. A good kickoff to resistance reading and preparation, as well as self-care.

1. Leviathan Wakes by James S. A. Corey

Um… I’m a bit obsessed now with the Expanse series. I read this book and the subsequent books in the series every day for two weeks. When I finished, my husband said, “Welcome back.” I got sucked in right away. So many space operas start out in other galaxies. I love the idea of the near future, in our own solar system, and what might be. And of everyday people running the water haul for Pur ‘n Kleen becoming the heroes (for some) of the solar system. One of my favorite series ever.

1. Caliban’s War by James S. A. Corey

Fantastic sequel. Adding in new characters and points of view, showing growth in the main characters and how they will continue to save the day in the solar system.

1. Abaddon’s Gate by James S. A. Corey

Taking this space opera to the next level, into the slow zone. And… introducing Anna, a young United Methodist minister, showing that in some versions of the future, I have a job! Think about it—so many space operas treat religion as something that less developed cultures have, and that more developed cultures have “overcome.” It’s nice to see a version of the future with religion not being ridiculed and still part of society, though not the dominant force.

1. Cibola Burn by James S. A. Corey

Might be my favorite of the series—venturing outside of our solar system with weird biology and ancient technology that might kill us. Oh, and dealing with the fact that in our visions of the future, we still have a problem with colonialism and claiming land that might be inhabited before we get there.

1. Nemesis Games by James S. A. Corey

Did I say Cibola Burn was my favorite? I was wrong. This one is my favorite. Going into the backstories of the crew and seeing how well Holden can handle being alone. And Naomi—wow! This is my favorite, because she survives. And kicks ass. And regrets her past but still goes on.

1. Babylon’s Ashes by James S. A. Corey

The end of the world. What did you think would happen? Is Earth always going to be our focal point? Can it survive? Another fantastic book in the series. Had to wait until December to read the next one.

1. Outriders by Jay Posey

Fun, fast-paced military sci-fi. Main character dies in the first chapter. I’m serious. Unfortunately, I felt there should have been more character development. The author gave hints of feelings and possible relationships but we never really learned about the character’s past (at least, I don’t recall as I write this). Fun story, but wish it had the depth of Leviathan Wakes, as it was a similar setting (Earth-Luna-Mars, etc).

1. The Wonderful Wizard of Futhermucking Oz by Matt Youngmark

Warning for the 87 f-bombs in the story. But a hilarious retelling as sixteen-year-old foul-mouthed Arabella gets trapped in this classic book, and learns that not only is the book not the same as the movie, the author was problematic, too. If you ever read fractured fairy tales, this is a majorly f’ed up fairy tale. And it’s fun to read.

1. Finn Fancy Necromancy by Randy Henderson

Got to hear Randy read from his latest at Norwescon, so I picked up Finn Fancy afterward. This adult contemporary fantasy is Harry Potter for grownups who live in Seattle. It’s perfect. The worldbuilding is vivid, the characters relatable and you really want Finn to get out of this mess after being exiled in the Fey world for 25 years and missing out on the 80’s and 90’s of pop culture in our world. Alas, it takes three books, and even then you’re not sure he’s untangled the mess he’s in.

1. Bigfootloose and Finn Fancy Free by Randy Henderson

Second in the series. Loved the continued development of the characters and their relationships, including matchmaking for sasquatches! But Finn ends up in more trouble when he discovers his grandfather’s messes are continuing to mess up life as Finn knows it.

1. Smells Like Finn Spirit by Randy Henderson

Last of the series. I really wanted this series to continue. The worldbuilding expands into the Fey world this time, and Finn’s attempts to save everyone he loves come at a cost.

1. The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

This is THE book of 2017. If you haven’t read this, you must. A black teen witnesses the murder of her friend by a police officer. It’s hard to read. It challenges assumptions. And it’s the best book I have read in a long time.

1. Not Another Rock Star by Amber Belldene

Amber is a friend who writes romance novels featuring Episcopal priests who get it on. Bow-chicka-wow-wow. A priest falls in love with the atheist rock star who is laying low for a while and ends up playing the organ at her church (that is not a euphemism, he actually does play the organ). The third in the Hot Under Her Collar Series. Warning for sexual content.

1. The Sun Is Also A Star by Nicola Yoon

A YA contemporary romance that was highly recommended, but I found somewhat disappointing. It all takes place within 24 hours in New York between two teens who meet and fall in love, but one is about to be deported. It’s timely, but also unrealistic in my opinion. Not the deportation, sadly.

1. Friend (With Benefits) Zone by Laura Brown

Laura’s a friend who writes romances with deaf characters. This one is about two people who are just friends, but they both have struggled with their feelings for each other. While I liked this one, I highly recommend Signs of Attraction, Laura’s debut novel, which was one of my favorite books last year. Laura does a fantastic job of describing what it is like to be deaf and letting hearing people have a glimpse into deaf life and the deaf community. I really appreciate her books for this reason.

1. Invisible 3: Essays and Poems on Representation in Science Fiction and Fantasy, edited by Jim C. Hines

I purchased this originally because a friend’s essay is included, but this is a fantastic collection of essays on disability, race, gender, sexual orientation, adoption, and other topics of representation in science fiction and fantasy. A must read for all writers in SFF.

1. Amaskan’s Blood by Raven Oak

Loved this fantasy by a local author and friend! To me, this was the grown-up version of Alanna in Tamora Pierce’s Song of the Lionness. Religious orders, assassins, devious kings, and all hell breaking loose. Loved it! Can’t wait for the sequel to come out!

1. Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by New Church Starts by Jim Griffith

This book has been around for a while, and is a good resource for those starting new churches. I’m in a restart and was looking for some advice for starting something new. Some of it is a bit dated, but the information on stewardship is really crucial. And having been part of a church start that closed, it was helpful to look at this and say, “oh yeah, we made those mistakes, too” and know we’re not alone.

1. The Stone Sky by N. K. Jemison

The Broken Earth series is incredible and unique in the SFF world. I love the concept of combining geothermal forces with MAGIC! The Fifth Season is still my favorite of this series, but this was a satisfying ending for all the characters.

1. A Red Peace by Spencer Ellsworth

Yay! I had waited for this friend’s book to come out and it did not disappoint. The first in the Starfire series, told in dual POV with compelling characters and a fantastic nobody heroine who turns out to be the savior of the galaxy. And giant space bugs. An adult space opera that tells the story of what happens after the glorious revolution and the rebels win, but then decide to eliminate all humans from the galaxy.

1. Shadow Run by AdriAnne Strickland and Michael Miller

Sadly, this book did disappoint. I picked this up at the local bookstore back home in Alaska and was so excited to see Alaskan authors writing a space opera story using Alaskan elements in space, such as commercial fishing. However, in the first seventy pages the male character attempts to kidnap the female character and she FALLS IN LOVE WITH HIM. No. Just. No. He’s white, she’s dark-skinned, and at one point described as having “savage beauty.” Just wrong. I almost didn’t finish, but I hate not finishing books. But it was hard to get through.

1. Machinations by Hayley Stone

I “met” Hayley on Twitter, and picked up her first two books: a robot apocalypse set in Alaska! While there are choices I would make differently having grown up in Alaska and knowing the landscape a bit better, the author did do her research and specific scenes involving the Alyeska Pipeline are really cool. Oh, and this is another story where the main character dies in the first chapter. Compelling story about how to mend trust once it is broken. Or in this case, has literally died.

1. Counterpart by Hayley Stone

The second in the Machinations series. I enjoyed this sequel, but it is definitely a middle book. I got to the end and was surprised that it didn’t wrap up much at all. Also, I questioned some of the character’s motives in this one, based on the first book. Still, very much enjoyable.

1. A. Grimsbro, Warlord of Mars by Matt Youngmark

The second in Matt’s “Futhermucking Classics” (again, warning for language!). The source book is so bad that it was hard to read this at times. Arabella is a compelling character but at times I wanted her to break out of the structure of the book. I think this concept worked better in the Wonderful Wizard of Oz because it was a children’s book, and also a story where most readers would be somewhat familiar whereas this one was not. I’m hopeful for the third that we will get back to a more familiar story and Arabella will get the eff out of where she is and back to the real world.

1. Avalon by Mindee Arnett

I read this because a friend who beta read my own YA space opera said, “Have you read Avalon? It starts off in a similar way…” It must be that we share the same name so we share the same ideas. Seriously. Even the name of some of the ships and some of the things that happened to the main character were the same as mine, so I made some changes. But I digress. This was a fun YA space opera. I am a bit tired of the bad boy who’s also overprotective of his younger sister stereotype, but it’s such a fast paced fun plot I couldn’t put it down.

1. Polaris by Mindee Arnett

The sequel to Avalon (there is a novella Proxy that takes place before Avalon but contains information used in Polaris, so you might want to read that, too). The crew of Avalon get into more trouble, and Jeth, the main character, continues to face impossible choices to save his family, both of blood and by choice, as well as save interstellar travel for the galaxy. Another fast-paced read.

1. Railhead by Philip Reeve

Also recommended by my friend who beta read my manuscript. A YA science fiction that is such an interesting concept—high speed rail throughout the galaxy! It took me a few chapters to get into it, but the worldbuilding is vivid, the story compelling, and a really fun read.

1. The Prey of Gods by Nicky Drayden

Several of my friends recommended this. It was okay. I enjoyed it, but it took me a long time to get into it, and I didn’t really connect with the characters in the story—except the robot Clever. There are multiple POV’s and I think it was tough to flip around the story. They were different enough to keep track of, but I felt like I was jerked around through the plot. This might be one of those that I will appreciate more on a re-read.

1. Turtles All The Way Down by John Green

Not everyone likes John Green. I love John Green. (Except for An Abundance of Katherines—could not stand that one). The story and main character reminded me a lot of The Fault In Our Stars in terms of tone, seriousness, and the limitations she faces. I think my feelings at the end o both books were the same—glad I read it, and heartbroken for the main character. The struggle for Aza in living with mental illness is a story that needs to be told, one that the author knows personally.

1. Binti by Nnedi Okorafor

Wow! Another fantastic space opera series, with unique concepts and characters. I could not put this down. Binti, the first of her family to leave Earth, runs away to go to school, witnesses a horrific murderous rampage, and makes a difficult choice to help bring peace.

1. Binti: Home by Nnedi Okorafor

This is an amazing series (the third will come out in January 2018). Binti returns home after a year with her friend, who was once the enemy of another people on Earth. She struggles with who she has become, who she once was, and who she will be. One of those times where the sequel is better than the first, and the first was good!

1. The Girl with the Silver Eyes by Willo Davis Roberts

This is a reread of an old childhood favorite! Talking with others on Twitter this book came up, and I had to read it again. For those who like Stranger Things, this is a story of a child, written in the early 80’s, who has telekinetic powers, and ends up on the run from the people who are after her.

1. Kiska by John Smelcer

I wrote a Facebook rant about this book. I read Smelcer’s article for NPR last year about the internment of the Aleut people of Alaska during WWII, a story that has been forgotten in history (but I learned about it growing up in Alaska). At the end of the article it mentioned this book would be coming out in November, so I pre-ordered it, then forgot about it. When it arrived, I was excited to read the story of a girl who survived that internment. I thought overall it was well done. Then I went to post my review on Goodreads, decided to link the article from NPR, only to find a disclaimer statement from NPR with links showing that Smelcer is a fraud. He claimed to be Native Alaskan, but is not. He claimed to meet all these famous people (including the Dali Lama) and did not. Because he fabricated his background and experience, it casts all the details of the story (it is fiction, but he claims to know the culture, and shares myths and folklore from that culture) into speculation. So I can’t recommend reading it. It’s a story that needs to be told, but not by Smelcer.

1. Me, Him, Them, and It by Caela Carter

I won a copy of this YA contemporary in an online contest, without knowing anything about it. If you like John Green books you’ll like this one. It’s heartwrenching, and you watch Evelyn, sixteen and pregnant, make wrong choice after wrong choice because she doesn’t believe she has any other recourse, and the people who should have made a difference in her life fail her again and again. It’s the only book I read this year that made me cry.

1. A Wrinkle in Time by Madeleine L’Engle

If you can believe it, I never read this as a child. I read C.S. Lewis and Tolkien, but never got to L’Engle. I took a course in college on C.S. Lewis and knew L’Engle was influenced by him, but never picked it up. I finally did. If you haven’t read it, keep in mind it was written in 1962, so some of the language is dated. There are clear references to communism = evil, but if you can keep the time period in mind, it’s a fantastic story with a compelling female protagonist whose excellent at math and science (remember, 1962, this was groundbreaking!) and I’m excited to read the rest of the series, and see the movie when it comes out in March.

1. Paige in Progress by Brighton Walsh

Another book I won in an online contest, a steamy romance (warning: sexual content) of a woman who falls for her one-night stand. So not what you would expect a minister to read, but hey, it was entertaining. Not the best romance I’ve read this year (Not Another Rock Star was my favorite of that genre for 2017) but a decent story of a woman who has been burned by relationships in the past trying hard not to get into another relationship.

1. Shadow Sun Seven by Spencer Ellsworth

The sequel to A Red Peace (the third installment comes out in March) and another one of those books that surprised me by being better than the first! Both of the main characters mature in their understanding of their role in the battle for the galaxy and in their relationships. And an epic battle happens inside a giant space bug. I’m not kidding.

1. Real Good Church: How Our Church Came Back from the Dead, And Yours Can, Too by Molly Phinney Baskette

Another book I wish I had read a long time ago. It is an excellent resource for anyone involved in revitalization or re-starting churches. Everything from practical advice on things you can do right now to long-term goals. I’ve been implementing some of the suggestions from this book from the moment I opened it.

1. Persepolis Rising by James S. A. Corey

The seventh book in the Expanse series, this came out in December. The crew have aged, there has been relative peace for a while, until an old power suddenly comes back into play through the gates. Will the Solar system survive? Will Holden continue to bumble through and save the day, though he is a little older? Will Amos do something stupid to start a fight? You bet your ass. And we’re left with a major cliffhanger and a whole year before we find out what happens next.

1. I’m Just That Into Me: You’re The One You’ve Been Waiting For by Dayna Mason and Jason Andrada

This is written by a friend from my former writing group when I lived in Burien. She and her co-author have written a book that is part fiction, part non-fiction. The main part of the book are stories from two characters who have experienced great trauma in their past from abuse, but think they have moved past it and don’t understand why their current relationships don’t work out, why they can’t find happiness, why they hide away from the things they really want in life. As they go through the journey of self-discovery, they reveal the tools they have learned to make it through and to make significant changes in their life. The only difficulty I had with the book is that both of the main characters didn’t talk about going to counseling, and they needed it for the trauma they had experienced, but in a sense, they did therapy together in figuring out what had happened to them and how they could move forward. The latter part of the book has exercises you can use for navigating your own life and making changes for a happier and healthier you.

1. Otherworld by Jason Segel and Kirsten Miller

A YA space opera co-written by a famous author. It’s okay. It’s not groundbreaking or mindblowing by any means. It’s very similar to Ready Player One, except this time it’s a spoiled rich kid inside a video game. It does get better as it goes along and is clearly open for a sequel. I was entertained, and others might enjoy it more than me, but I was hoping for a more unique story.

1. The End of White Christian America by Robert P. Jones

This was actually the first book I started reading in 2017, but I was reading it out loud with my husband, and we got sick halfway through January, and never read the last chapter until December. This is a must-read, especially in light of the 2016 elections. There is now an afterword that was printed in versions after the elections (I did not read that). The entanglement of white supremacy within the white church, both mainline and evangelical, continues to be the sin we bear today. Especially among white evangelicals, the church has become a vehicle for white supremacy. My husband and I have some criticisms of the book (there are some places the author seems to give a pass, seems to think things are getting better but as we have seen in 2017 they are not). Overall it is an excellent place to start and I highly recommend it.

1. Transcending Generations: A Field Guide to Collaboration in Parishes by Meredith Gould

This is another good resource (written by a friend!) for those doing work in revitalization and restarts, in understanding differences between generations as well as understanding our own identities. If you have a church where you’re dealing with old guard vs. new guard in leadership, this is a good resource, not just for clergy but for those lay leaders trying to navigate those differences.

1. Shadowhouse Fall by Daniel Jose Older

The second in the Shadowshaper series, this YA urban fantasy series just keeps getting better. This time, Older subverts the paradigm of light = good and dark = bad, while fighting both spiritual forces and protesting police violence. Read this series. I love it when the sequel is better than the original and Older does not disappoint.

1. Welcoming Community: Diversity That Works by Doug Avilesbernal

Doug is not only a friend, he’s about to become the new Executive Minister for the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches. Doug writes from his unique perspective as a pastor and a child of missionaries in how we extend the welcome in our established but shrinking churches to new people, moving away from tolerance to true inclusiveness. A fantastic book full of little tidbits that make great sermon illustrations.

1. Intentionally Inclusive: Together at the Table for Ministry by Marcia Patton

Marcia is not only my friend, but my current Executive Minister, and this is the story of the Evergreen Association. For those in denominational leadership, I highly recommend reading our story. We became an intentionally inclusive region, moving away from voting delegates to caucuses, and practicing consensus rather than using Roberts Rules of Order. We’ve had bumps along the way, but the bumps have been our growing edges. This is a great story, one we are still living and telling, and Marcia was the right person to write the story.

1. Ancillary Justice by Ann Leckie

All of my science fiction reading and writing friends have been telling me to read Ann Leckie all year, and I finally did. It took me a bit to get into this story, but wow! It is a unique premise and concept. The main character was once part of a collective, and that was taken from her. Imagine being used to being part of twenty-four others as well as your ship, seeing your identity as one, and having all of that taken from you. It’s an incredible story, flashing back between the present and past.

Bonus Mentions:

These are books I started in 2016 but finished in 2017, therefore I didn’t include them in my 52 list.

Faithful Resistance: Gospel Visions for the Church in a Time of Empire, edited by Rick Ufford-Chase.

This is a must-read for Christians doing resistance work. From environmental justice to immigrant sanctuary, from Black Lives Matter to worker justice, this is an excellent book of various stories and perspectives, with discussion questions at the end of each chapter, in how to do this resistance work as faithful followers of Jesus. I highly recommend this book.

Good Christian Sex: Why Chastity Isn’t the Only Option—And Other Things the Bible Says About Sex by Bromleigh McCleneghan.

I bought this book and used it as a book study with the young adult’s Pub Theology group in my last church. This is a needed resource for today’s church, especially for those who grew up in evangelical or fundamentalist churches. We need this book to meet the reality of today’s world and our own real-life experience. Bromleigh has a study guide on her website for those who want to use this book.