

# NIGHTSTAND

## SCOT NAKAGAWA

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Over the past month, I moved from Oregon to Tennessee for a job at the Highlander Center, a 69-year-old organization with roots in labor and Civil Rights struggles. My “big move” reading list includes four books about Highlander: The autobiography of Highlander’s founder Miles Horton (**The Long Haul**), a personal account of Citizenship Schools leader Septima Clark’s involvement in the Civil Rights Movement (**Ready From Within**), and two history books.

All of the books are worth reading, though I have to admit I’ve not gotten to the last page of even one yet. I think the history books are likely to be the most interesting and useful for students of labor and Civil Rights struggles.



**Highlander: No Ordinary School** by John M. Glen (not the astronaut), an exhaustive history of Highlander from 1932 - 1990s, is definitely worth reading. It is highly detailed, making it

important from historical point of view; but if you, like me, have a short attention span, be prepared to read with a pot of coffee at your side.

The other history book, **Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grass Roots Social Activism in America, 1921-1964**, edited by Eliot Wigginton, is much better for those seeking high drama. In this collection of short biographies of grassroots leaders of labor and Civil Rights movements, people like Rosa Parks, Don West, Julian Bond, and Bernice Robinson tell us about the events leading up to and including their work in historic movements. Through insights into the lives of these leaders, the book tells the story of the Highlander Center, which was a point of intersection for all of

them. It’s a fun and easy read (which means it gets four stars on my rating scale), and one I heartily recommend.

## SUZANNE PHARR

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Unlike those who studied political science or sociology or law to prepare themselves for engagement in the great social movements of our time, I studied literature. Most of what I’ve learned about social and economic justice, organizing and strategic analysis has come from either direct experience or the wide range of novels I read.

Thus, the book I just returned to the Knoxville Library is Barbara Kingsolver’s latest, **Prodigal Summer**. Heads up to those of you who are seeking a great read, such as you found in her earlier novels: this isn’t it. It is not a fine novel, but it is a good description and analysis of the ecological destruction being experienced in southern Appalachia, not so far from the Highlander Center. It makes an important contribution to our efforts to preserve the environment and to save ourselves.

Through a collection of seemingly disconnected characters in a landscape of disappearing forests and small farms, Kingsolver writes of the interconnectedness of people and nature. The novel is a study of re-introduced but endangered coyotes, chestnut trees, insects and birds — and the physical and spiritual disaster their destruction portends.

Prodigal Summer is full of warnings and lessons and possibilities. The human relationships, despite some pretty good sex and drama, are not enough to sustain it as a novel — but it’s saved by its intricate weavings of the efforts for survival by fauna and flora, as well as by humans, through our sometime-desire for true connection.

The novel offers a pleasurable way to learn about the many complex and critical relationships that must be sustained in nature in order for us to survive. Ultimately, the message of the book is that while we humans believe we are the center of the universe, we are there at the moment only because we hold the power to destroy it.

