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AMERICAN

HISTORY

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The Battle for Our Better Angels
Jon Meacham

RECONSTRUCTION:
America After the Civil War

UNCIVIL WARRIORS
The Lawyers’ Civil War
Peter Charles Hoffer

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THE QUESTION OF SLAVERY
The Debate ThatDefined America

FREEDOM
Prophet of Liberty
David W. Blight

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Erik Mathisen

WEST FROM APPOMATTOX
The Reconstruction of America After the Civil War
Heather Cox Richardson

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PBS BOOKS

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WATCH
This Spring, PBS will premiere “Reconstruction: America After the Civil War”, a new four-hour documentary executive produced and hosted by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.. Viewers will see a definitive history of one of the least understood chapters in American history. This new documentary explores the United States’ emergence from the Civil War and slavery, as well as the thwarted vision for an interracial democracy that still impacts the country more than 150 years later.

You can read up on Reconstruction with this Reading List. Contact your local library (or bookseller) if any title catches your eye. Each of these esteemed authors are taking a unique look at this moment in history, offering nuanced perspectives and analysis.

Grant « Ron Chernow
Pulitzer Prize winning journalist/historian Ron Chernow previously wrote about Washington and Hamilton, but his 2017 New York Times bestseller takes an intimate look at Ulysses S. Grant, and the surprising trajectory his life took, before, during, and after the Civil War. Whereas many know him for his role as a General, Chernow gives readers a broader picture of the man, particularly as a politician, as he pushes for black equality and wins praise from Frederick Douglass.

In an interview with PBS Books, Chernow said that inspiration for the book came from what he saw as a need to illuminate the issues raised during the Reconstruction-era.

The Soul of America: the Battle for Our Better Angels « Jon Meacham
The battles that Meacham writes about are the major turning points in American history: including Reconstruction. We have been through “darkness” before, as Meacham said in an interview with the PBS Books, and it is important to reflect on the stories where we either survived that darkness or on the moments where we lost ground. This book emphasizes that history is not episodic, and that periods like Reconstruction, while it and other attempts faltered, are part of a unifying trend, one of slow, sometimes very slow, progress, that can often risk receding into the dark, only to then swing back toward the light, (and then, sometimes back and again).

Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom « David W. Blight
An iconic abolitionist, writer and orator, Douglass not only published his own newspaper, but wrote three successive versions of his autobiography. Blight’s research included information from a private collection that few historians have consulted, as well as newly uncovered issues of the aforementioned newspaper. Blight details Douglass dismay at the nation’s abandoned attempt at Reconstruction, and the emergence of Jim Crow laws. It would make for an enlightening counterpoint to follow-up Grant’s experience of Reconstruction (from Chernow) with Blight’s description of Douglass, as witness to those years following the Civil War.

Barracoon: The Story of the Last ‘Black Cargo’ « Zora Neale Hurston
A previously unpublished manuscript from the author of “Their Eyes Were Watching God” takes us back 90 years ago to an interview Hurston conducted while working as an anthropologist in Plateau, AL, compiling the life story of Kossola (also known as Cudjo Lewis). Hurston details Cudjo’s arrival in 1860, transported on the last American slave ship. Hurston shows, through a tragic moment in Lewis life, that the echoes of Reconstruction-era tensions stretched more than 30 years past the end of the Civil War. Notably, hip-hop drummer Questlove made the discovery on PBS’ ‘Finding Your Roots’ that he is a descendent of a couple who were aboard the very same ship as Cudjo.

Uncivil Warriors: The Lawyers’ Civil War « Peter Charles Hoffer
To indicate “the business” of lawyers in the aftermath of the Civil War, Hoffer writes that “from all indications, it is reasonable to say that postwar legislation was as much for the lawyers and their clients as for the freed men and women.” Hoffer illuminates the influence of lawyers and the evolution of American jurisprudence up to, during, and after the war, reframing the Civil War’s conflict with arguments made before the first shot was fired: as a dispute between the South defending succession as legal, and the North contesting it as illegal. Advocates of an 1866 Civil Rights Act were only able to glimpse a Constitution in the days of Reconstruction.

Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution « Eric Foner
Published in 1988, with a new edition in 2014, Foner’s comprehensive and well-researched telling of the decade following the Civil War, including the corrupt practice of the “carpet-baggers,” the consolidation of a new class structure in the South, and conflicts over the region’s economic resources. Foner’s book details how Americans, both black and white, responded to the profound changes that followed the end of the Civil War, with implications for economic autonomy and an inevitable struggle for (and against) equal citizenship.

West from Appomattox « Heather Cox Richardson
Richardson takes us from the South’s surrender onward to the turn of the century, as politicians, special interest groups, and industrialists wrestled with each other’s ideals and motives, each trying to secure their own visions for what post-war American life would be like. This book is a captivating portrayal of a country finding its identity, with the North and South ostensibly carrying on their conflict just as it was expanding into a new region, leading to the formation of a middle class, and the evolution of American individualism.