

## WHAT TO READ AT 30,000 FEET

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



I don't think my friend Maggie knew what she was starting when she asked me to recommend good books to read on a plane. She

was headed to China, an air journey of many hours, and she wanted something immersive on her lap – a book or two to get lost in during the long stretch between takeoff and landing. I'm not sure if I helped Maggie, but her request brought to mind the many books I'd read in my own air travels to various places.

In the summer before I started college, I brought along a copy of *American Journey*, a travelogue by newspaperman Richard Reeves, during a long plane ride to Alaska. Reeves, roving around the country and writing about what he saw, helped sharpen my sense of journalism as a job I might like for myself. That thought seemed even more plausible as I read Reeves on a flight to the top of the country, already poised for a little adventure of my own.

*The best writers make language levitate, lifting readers on wings of words to places they've never been.*

In 1984, while flying back from a journalism conference in Washington, D.C., I opened a fresh copy of *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony* that I'd picked up from a Smithsonian museum gift shop. After spending several days in a city obsessively focused on politics, I found this collection of essays by Lewis Thomas about the wonders of medical science a useful reminder that the world is much bigger than Congress or the White House.

On a flight to Paris in 1991, I carried V.S. Naipaul's *India: A Million Mutinies Now* on board. A book about India seemed an unlikely prologue to Paris, but I loved Naipaul's exacting vision and thought it would be great company as we threaded our way across the Atlantic. One of the book's abiding messages is that India – and, by implication, any country – isn't one but many things, a vivid variety that defies easy summary. It was a good idea for me to keep in mind as I landed in France for the first time.

Flying back from London in 2019, I dipped into a volume of Virginia Woolf's diaries I had come across in a lovely Chelsea bookshop. Woolf intrigues me because she focuses on everyday experience so intensely that what at first looks ordinary can seem to vibrate, pulsing with the promise of revelation. Woolf was a bracing companion for a reader in a passenger plane, or so I discovered as I glided through her sentences while dusk deepened and the sun slowly fell into the sea.

I owe a lot to these books for teaching me that literature can be its own form of flight. The best writers make language levitate, lifting readers on wings of words to places they've never been.

---

**DANNY HEITMAN** (Southeastern Louisiana University) is editor of *Forum*. He frequently writes about literature and culture for *The Wall Street Journal* and other national publications.