One of the most frequent comments I hear from fellow anthropologists is: “I wish I had more time to read ethnographies. And even if I did, I wouldn’t know where to begin.” I can’t do anything about time management, but I can perhaps help on the selection issue. I surveyed a wide range of colleagues and asked them “What’s your favorite ethnography? Which ethnographies give you the most pleasure to read, inspire your teaching and research efforts, and make you glad that you're an anthropologist?” I’ll occasionally use this column to share their responses. Perhaps this will motivate all of us to discover (or rediscover) ethnographic gems.

Carla Jones (U Colorado-Boulder) recommends Suzanne Brenner’s The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth and Modernity in Java (1998). “It is full of fabulous information about a community that thinks about familiar issues, like gender, money and power, in ways that are unique and different from how Americans think of those issues. This makes it a wonderful book with which to teach, because students can relate to the topics, but realize that the ways they think of them are also unique. Brenner's theoretical arguments about capitalism and class are seamlessly interwoven with her descriptions, making it both a great read and a highly sophisticated analysis, showing that great ethnographies don't have to be one or the other.”

Bob White (U Montréal) suggests Julie Taylor’s Paper Tangos (1998). “Taylor tells the story of how she learns to dance tango, but she also explains how the pains of dictatorship are embodied through intersubjective contact and memory. More than any other ethnography I know it combines the personal and the political and shows us how ethnographic observation in local scenes links up to the ‘larger impersonal systems’ described by Marcus and Fischer.”

Daniel Mains (Washington U) endorses Adam Ashforth’s Madumo: A Man Bewitched (2000). “Since reading it I've found myself constantly recommending it to friends regardless of their interest in anthropology. I've also been searching for ways to fit it into my courses so I will have an excuse to read it again. Madumo is a fascinating story about one man's struggles to deal with family and witchcraft in post-apartheid South Africa. Ashforth has a great talent for detailed descriptions of smells, personalities, food, small talk and everything else necessary to convey a sense of day-to-day life in Soweto. He suggests broader theoretical arguments, but for the most part readers are left to draw their own conclusions about Madumo's story and I think this makes the book particularly compelling.”

Carla Freeman (Emory U) says, “My favorite ethnography these past couple of years is Donna Goldstein’s Laughter Out of Place (2003). While Goldstein herself describes her approach as ‘old fashioned’ ethnography, based upon traditional long-term fieldwork in a gritty and often dangerous favela in Brazil, it is also startlingly cutting edge. Through the life story of one

woman, Gloria, Goldstein offers one of the most eloquent and powerful explications of the dialectics of race, class, sexuality, gender and violence. This book wears its theory lightly but profoundly, and through beautiful prose offers a window into the intricacies of power, subjectivity, and the sometimes jarring ways dark humor resiliently speaks to the lives and feelings of the dispossessed. This is one ethnography I will read again and again not only for the haunting story it tells, but for the subtle and sophisticated weaving of big ideas and the minute details of a human life."

Finally, Ken MacLean (Clark U) recommends Leach's classic Political Systems of Highland Bur ma
(1954). "Leach's account, which he claims to have faithfully reconstructed from memory after the loss of his field notes, provides a dynamic and compelling model of change and identity formation that demonstrates how social structures and individual agency shape one another across time and space. The result is a compelling model that signals an initial attack on the 'culture' concept as enshrined in the work of Malinowski and his students. Moreover, the 1964 edition contains a wonderful polemic on works by Gluckman and Gellner that exemplifies the richness of the intellectual disputes of the time."