SUMMER READING LIST 2026

FOR THE PRIME MINISTER

NZIER
PUBLIC GOOD
PROGRAMME

THINKING ABOUT AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND'S FUTURE

BusinessDesk.

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ABOUT

This reading list is part of the NZIER Public Good Programme, which conducts economic research and analysis to enhance understanding of Aotearoa New Zealand's economic challenges.

This year's list brings together a wide range of perspectives on the choices that matter for New Zealand's future. We hope it will inform and spark discussion among Ministers and others interested in economics and public policy.

We encourage New Zealanders to read and take time to reflect on our shared future – summer is an ideal time for that.

THE BOOKS

Inclusion in the list does not imply that the selection panel (or NZIER) endorses the content of any entry.

Each of these books encourages critical thinking – not by seeking faults, but by prompting reasoned responses to the plausibility of the stated facts and the coherence of the argument. These processes are crucial for applying economic theory to policy analysis and social discourse.

Selection Panel



Emily Mason
Managing Director, FrankGroup



Chris Nixon
Principal Economist, NZIER



Sarah Hogan
Deputy Chief Executive (Wgtn) , NZIER



Dileepa Fonseka
Deputy Editor, BusinessDesk



Jason Shoebridge
Chief Executive, NZIER



Megan Fitzpatrick
Senior Economist, NZIER

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COULD SHOULD MIGHT DON'T: HOW WE THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE

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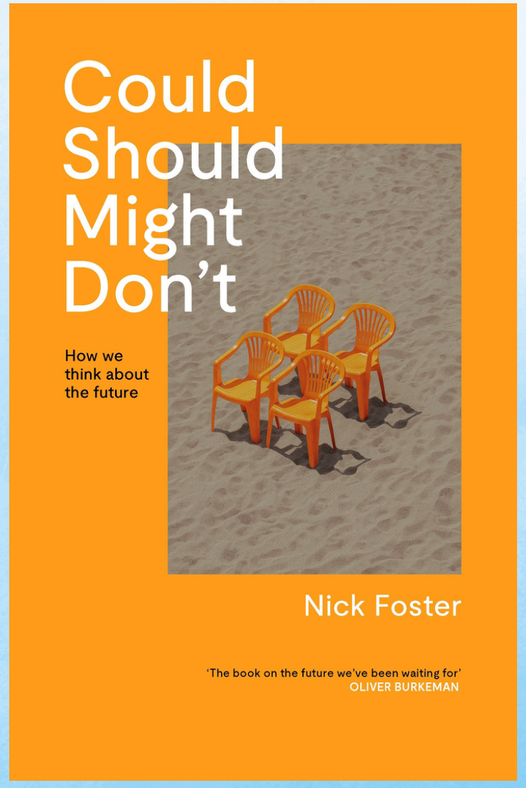
BY NICK FOSTER



RECOMMENDED BY EMILY MASON



New Zealand is in the process of choosing a government, and every negotiating party is framing the future it sees for New Zealand. Nick Foster, former head of design at Google X, gives us a framework for thinking about the future in *Could Should Might Don't: How we think about the future*. He identifies four habits of thought, each with a corresponding weakness. "Could futurism" sells a shiny sci-fi future and ignores how we get there. "Should futurism" names a destination and backs it with a forecast. Foster calls the weakness in should futurism "numeric fiction": once the line on the chart turns dotted, the data has ended, and a story has begun, yet we continue to treat it as fact. "Might futurism" maps so many scenarios that nobody decides, creating analysis paralysis. "Don't futurism" casts the future as a threat, which sorts everyone into those sounding the alarm and those causing the problem. The warning usually comes with a call to stop something immediately. The people running the industry or system can't stop overnight, so the demand goes nowhere.

Coalition talks bring all four habits into one room. Each party arrives with campaign promises ("could") and a programme it wants delivered ("should"). Each party also brings bottom lines, the things it will refuse ("don't"). While they negotiate, the country waits to learn which government it gets ("might"). The deal is struck by swapping one party's programme for another's bottom line, so what survives reflects who holds the numbers, whether or not they see furthest. Foster's quieter point is that nobody at the table speaks for the future, as people will live it. He calls the future accretive: it builds up in layers on top of the present. Nothing starts from a clean slate. Whatever is signed has to work alongside every policy and system already in place, on someone's ordinary Tuesday.

That is why this book belongs on the summer list. A new Prime Minister will spend three years being sold futures, by ministers and officials, and by investors and lobbyists. Foster gives them a test for each one: which habit is this, and what is it leaving out?

TRADE WORLD:
THE TIES THAT BOUND OUR PAST AND MAY UNRAVEL OUR FUTURE

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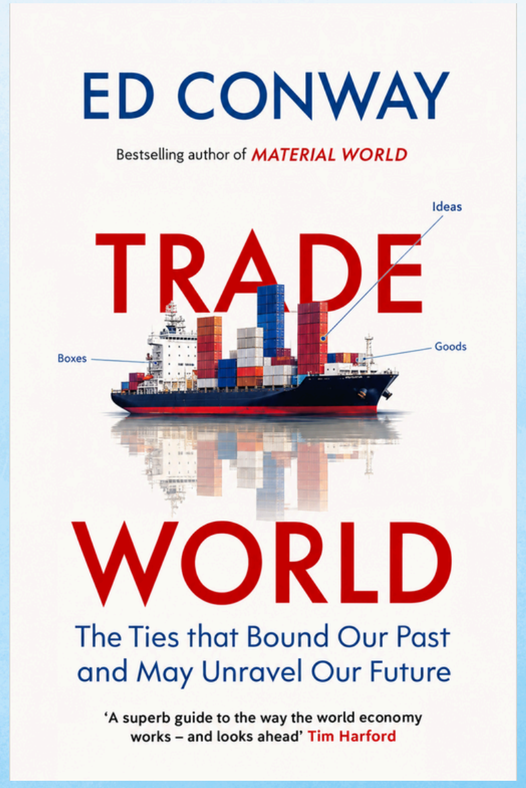
BY ED CONWAY



RECOMMENDED BY CHRIS NIXON



Ed Conway has written a potboiler on trade. That is no small achievement. Trade is the lifeblood of prosperity, something the United States may be rediscovering the hard way as protectionism makes a comeback.

At a time when tariffs and geopolitical tensions dominate the headlines, Conway reminds us how profoundly trade shapes our lives. Through three seemingly mundane products – bread, clothing and cars – he reveals the extraordinary complexity of global supply chains and the centuries of innovation, specialisation and cooperation underpinning modern living standards.

As an agricultural economist, I see the logic of the approach. The devil is in the detail. Understanding how products are made, moved and traded tells us far more about the benefits of trade and why successful trade strategies work. Conway brings these details to life with fascinating stories about the people and businesses that power global commerce.

The message is that trade is remarkably adaptable, even when politicians try to constrain it.

What has struck me over the years is how readily New Zealanders take trade for granted, particularly our outrageously successful temperate-zone agricultural products. Conway's book, *Trade World*, reminds us that this success is neither accidental nor guaranteed. It rests on the same intricate networks of specialisation, innovation, cooperation and market access that underpin the everyday products he vividly describes.

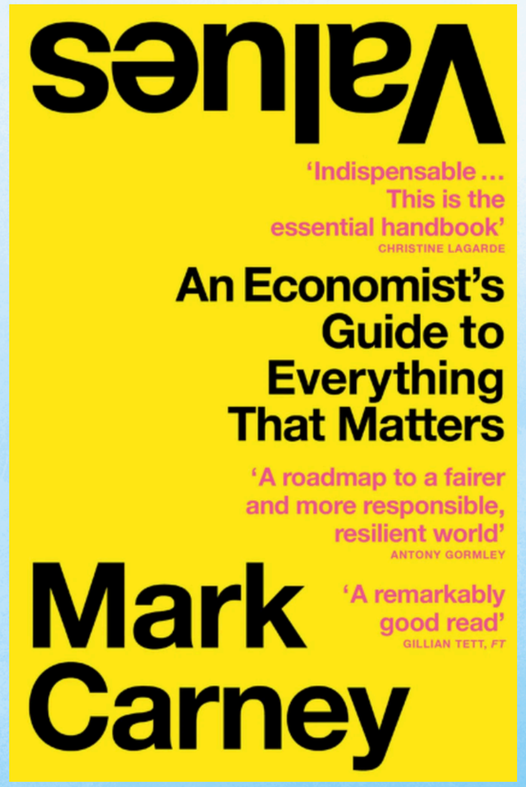
For a small country like New Zealand, the lesson is particularly important: trade is not simply about exports and imports. It is about productivity, innovation, opportunity, and ultimately our standard of living. Our new Prime Minister would do well to remember just how much New Zealand's prosperity depends on our ability to trade with the rest of the world.

Values:
An Economist's Guide to Everything That Matters

By Mark Carney



Recommended by
Sarah Hogan



Values: An Economist's Guide to Everything that Matters, originally published in 2021, provides a fascinating history of economic thought and philosophy, an important perspective on where the world is at right now through the eyes of someone eminently qualified to assess it, a framework for leadership in a market economy, and a reassuring insight into the values that drive the man who has been regularly called "the new leader of the free world" in 2026.

The book opens with a historical and philosophical review of the evolution of economies and monetary systems, tracing the gradual shift from a society driven by shared values to one driven by market value. It then analyses three modern crises (the GFC, COVID-19 and climate change) and the decisions that were made through each, with the benefit of Carney's front-row-seat insights. From these insights, Carney proposes a framework for leadership in a modern economy based on seven values essential to good outcomes: dynamism, resilience, sustainability, fairness, responsibility, solidarity and humility. These then form the basis of policy solutions to climate change, intergenerational fairness, technological change, and resilience for future crises.

What I enjoyed most were the little windows into Carney's experience, his wit and humour, and his values as a leader. While it's not an autobiography, it's nevertheless an inspiring and reassuring portrait of competent, confidence-inspiring leadership.

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Breakneck:
China's Quest to Engineer the Future

By Dan Wang

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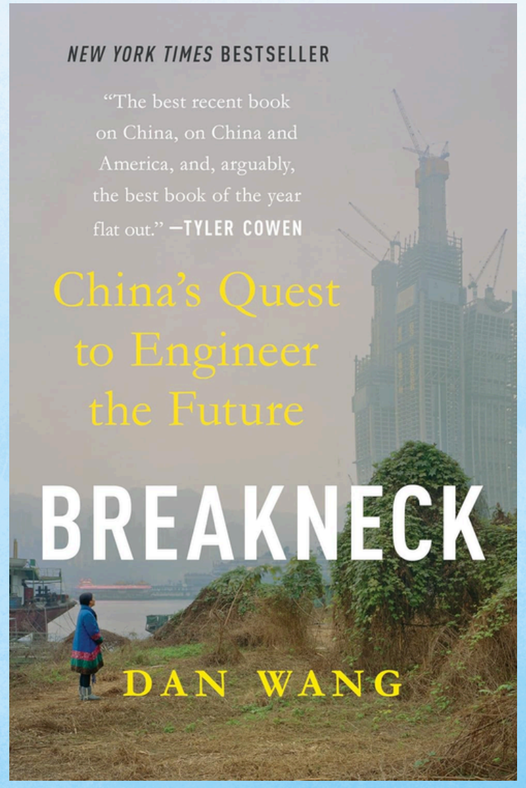
Recommended by Dileepa Fonseka



"Americans live today in the ruins of an industrial civilisation, whose infrastructure is just barely maintained and rarely expanded."

This appears in the first chapter of Dan Wang's *Breakneck*, a book about China that belongs in the beach bag of any aspiring New Zealand Prime Minister.

Why does China boast vast manufacturing capacity and impressive infrastructure while America struggles to build either? Wang's answer: China is an engineering state. Its rulers build railways, factories and cities, learn by doing, then build again. America is a lawyerly society, where the right to object is sacred and finishing a project is largely optional.

There is a catch. Engineers can build bridges, but give them unchecked power over human beings and they begin to think the same principles apply. China's one-child policy and the grim final stages of zero-COVID reveal the danger of a state that can issue orders but struggles to hear objections.

"The future would be better," Wang writes, "if China could learn to build less, while the United States learns to build more."

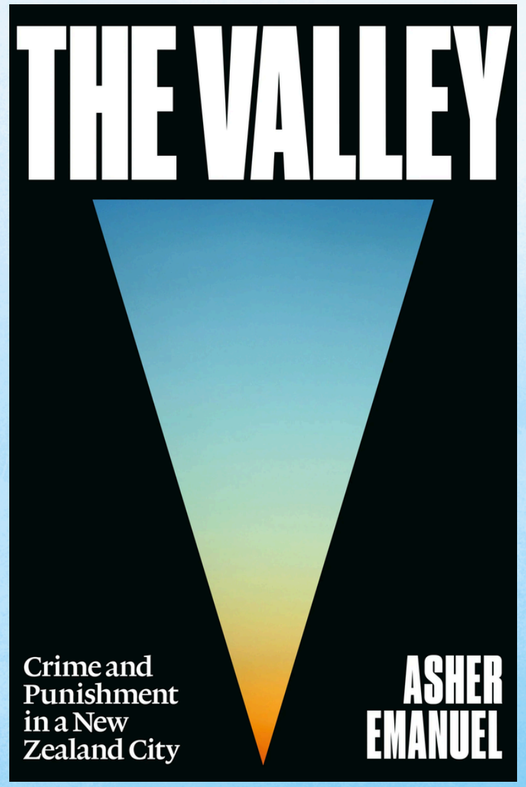
The author neither worships Beijing nor believes conflict with Washington is inevitable. Instead, he thinks both powers could learn something from each other. New Zealand could too.

The Valley:
Crime and Punishment in a New Zealand City

By Asher Emanuel



Recommended by
Jason Shoebridge



The Valley by Asher Emanuel follows a lawyer from the Public Defence Service and two of his clients as they navigate repeated dealings with the Hutt Valley court system and the broader justice system over two years. As Asher observes, most people's view of the justice system is shaped by news media reporting, which focuses on high-profile crimes, moral panics and unsolved mysteries. This obscures what justice actually looks like, which, to quote Asher, is "the base practicalities of trying to deal with social harm". By following the day-to-day interactions of the book's subjects with the justice system, the reader's eyes are opened to that reality.

It makes you realise that our crime statistics are driven by the intersection of long-term and short-term problems. Given that the incoming Prime Minister will be busy this summer, not least because he has five other books from this list to read, he could just read the epilogue, which sets out the issues and what could be done to address them. Some of these issues are long-term and intergenerational and therefore require long-term solutions – family violence, foetal alcohol syndrome, traumatic brain injury, and poor literacy rates. Others offer the prospect of much more immediate solutions – better funding for mental health and addiction services, better social housing and support services for prisoners returning to the community, and better-resourced rehabilitation services. As Asher says, the needs of the offenders profiled in this book are not so much complex as numerous, and the resources to meet those needs are not there.

This book is well written and offers fascinating insight into what needs to be done to improve what politicians in this country term 'law and order'. I have no hesitation in recommending it to the Prime Minister for his reading list.

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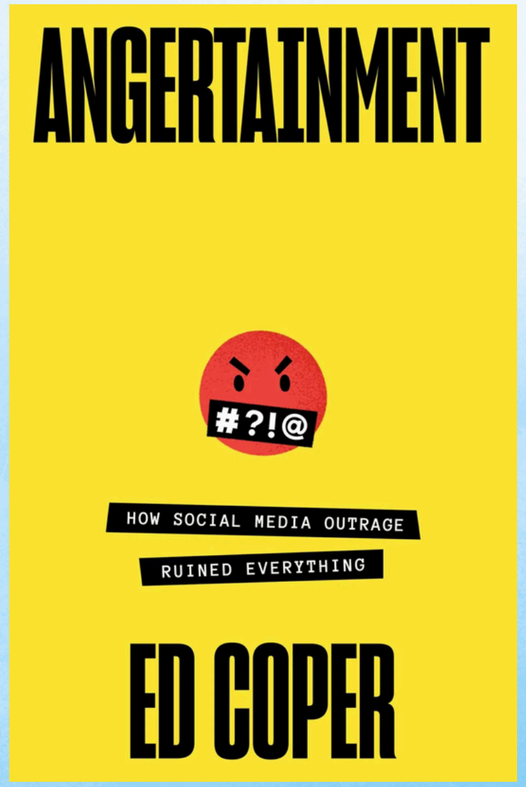
ANGERTAINMENT:
HOW SOCIAL MEDIA OUTRAGE RUINED EVERYTHING

BY ED COPER



RECOMMENDED BY MEGAN FITZPATRICK



In *Angertainment*, Ed Coper explores the mechanics, harms and implications of our growing appetite for outrage in the age of social media. He emotively unpacks how outrage is amplified, why it has become such a powerful force in public discourse, and what this means for our politics and society. It's a particularly relevant read for anyone involved in politics or public policy, where understanding the forces shaping public opinion matters more than ever.

What sets *Angertainment* apart isn't just its compelling explanation of how we got into this mess, but its focus on how we might get out of it. Refreshingly, roughly a quarter of the book is dedicated to solutions. Perhaps I've become too accustomed to books that seek to persuade rather than to offer a way forward, but Coper's approach offers something increasingly rare in discussions of these issues: a genuine sense of hope.

For a Prime Minister navigating an increasingly polarised and uncertain world, this book offers both a timely examination of the challenges facing public discourse on substantive policy and an optimistic reminder that the future isn't predetermined. It's a refreshingly constructive read on a deeply troubling issue.

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