

On Books  
By  
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Written in 2008 and Updated Periodically

I recently hosted a dinner party and an M.D. acquaintance poised the question, “So, what are your ten best books?”

I quickly threw out a few recommendations; others chimed in. We scanned my library and I loaned a few books; a rare action. (Once I’ve read a book I’m loathe to let it go; by reading it I feel I own it...forever.)

Days later, the question remains. “What are your ten best books?”

Book lists date back to Alexandria’s first scroll, but this list would be mine...therein lies the fun. I have been keeping a tally of my book reading since I turned 40. I record the title, author, date, number of pages and total number of pages per annum.

For instance, the millennium saw a total of 68 books comprising 19,658 pages. In 2003, I recorded 59 books and 17,289 pages. In ’07, I plowed through 61 books and 16,772 pages. I also kept track of the time I spent reading and can report that I spent an even 300 hours or 12.5 days spent reading in ’07.

The reader finds me obsessive regarding my book reading and list making?

Guilty.

There are worse problems than an affinity for the printed word. (I recently finished *A Gentle Madness* by Nicolas Brisbane that chronicles obsessive book collectors throughout the ages. I find the title to be spot-on.)

Give or take, I’ve read 500 books during the past eight years. Certainly, one should be able to mine ten “best” books from this rich deposit. But first, I suppose I owe it to myself and the reader to define “best.”

One could simply take Shakespeare’s First Folio and select ten favorites. Who can argue with the Bard? But that seems a bit narrow and stuffy. Conversely, I suppose one could easily throw out obvious choices. Something along the lines of:

*The Wealth of Nations* (Adam Smith)  
*Ulysses* (James Joyce)  
*King Lear* (Shakespeare)  
*The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Edward Gibbon)  
*The Theory of Evolution* (Charles Darwin)  
*The Odyssey* (Homer)  
*Summa Theologica* (Thomas Aquinas)  
*The Bible* (Various)  
*The Bhagavad Gita* (Various)  
*Meditations* (Marcus Aurelius)

But that is not the point.

This is MY list. The books listed above certainly have had a huge impact on the lives of literally millions of readers across millennia, yet they do not, necessarily qualify for my list of “best books.”

So, for better or worse, here is my definition of “best books”:

Books that I simply enjoyed. Books that I found well-written and that opened up an entirely new world and/or way of thinking. Another way of putting this may be: books that changed my life.

(For the record, The Bible can not be included in this list; The Bible exists in another realm.)

Here goes:

1. *The Iliad*. Homer. People tend to be familiar with the more accessible *Odyssey* featuring the Sirens, Cyclops, et. al. But this poem is the foundation of Western Literature and, indeed, to my mind, Western Civilization. One literally can not get through a day without stumbling across a reference to something from *The Iliad*.
2. *Lonesome Dove* by Larry McMurtry. Sublime writing and characters I want to meet in heaven. This isn't a Western; this is a novel about the grand sweep of humanity.
3. *The Killer Angels* by Michael Shaara. If you think you understand American History and, in particular, the Civil War, you don't until you have read this book. You will never look at our history again...you will never think of bravery or sacrifice in the same manner.
4. *Patton-A Genius for War* by Carlo D'Este. One of the finest biographies I have ever read about one of the most enigmatic humans to ever live. Superb!
5. *The Last Lion* by William Manchester. Winston Churchill was a dyslexic child with a father who thought him a dullard (a father who eventually died a syphilitic lunatic). The dullard grew up to be a war hero, a prisoner of war (who filed stories from behind enemy lines!), the most famous journalist of his age, a Nobel prize winning historian and, oh yeah, the savior of Western Civilization. All this from a man who began every morning in bed with a glass of scotch. Manchester's two volume series paints Churchill better than any other I have read. And by the way, Manchester died before he got the collection to WWII.  
  
(2018: An update: Author and historian Paul Reid wrote the third and final volume. I read it and sent Reid a fan letter. He actually phoned me and we had a 15-minute conversation about Churchill. That ranks as one of the highest moments of my literary life.)
6. *The Cruel Sea* by Nicholas Monsarrat. Marvelous book. Very well written. Covers the convoys during WWII and the battle they fought to provision England and the Allies during Overlord.
7. *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. I've read it, I don't know, ten times. Hamlet remains the pinnacle of literature. Layer upon layer upon layer of rich text, character interaction and heartbreak. And, as my Dad used to say, "The best thing about Shakespeare is that, in the end, everybody dies!"

8. *A Short History of Nearly Everything* by Bill Bryson. I believe this to be one of the most intellectually entertaining and stimulating books I have ever read. From protons to Darwin to the heat of the sun, he covers it all. For the first time I understand gravity and relativity to a certain degree. Fun book. Good book.
9. *Empire—The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* by Niall Ferguson. Wonderful book...though politically incorrect. His thesis, in short, is that, yes, the British are guilty of some heinous things such as slavery and the opium trade. Yet, they were the most benign empire in history and when they left, they left behind an appreciation for parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, private property, Protestantism and the corresponding work ethic, schools, roads, sanitation and a few other worthwhile things such as the English language. Great read.
10. *Ulysses* by James Joyce. I now understand why it garners the title of greatest novel of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I also know why so many have tried and failed. Superb book. I have little doubt I understood, at best, 25 percent of Joyce's message. He mixes Shakespeare, Christ, Homer, Yeats, Irish History, British History, theology, math, body parts and Lord knows what else...then he does away with sentence structure and punctuation...and meanwhile the characters are occasionally in a dream-world and sometimes operating within reality. Complex, sublime, superb. I now know why scholars can devote their entire life to this one text. How can one man, one simple man, have packed so much into one novel? Nothing short of incredible.
11. *On the Beach* by Nevil Shute. One of the most disturbing books I have ever read. It physically hurt to read this novel. Shute not a spectacular writer, but his subject matter---the slow approach of Armageddon due to man's senselessness after a nuclear war in the 1960's---grips the mind with a series of horrendous "what ifs?" I'm pleased I read it yet the experience was so upsetting I felt physically ill. The horror.
12. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon—I am amazed, thrilled and engrossed by this incredible work of history. How one man can absorb so much knowledge and then disgorge all of it in fluid, witty and learned style seems little short of a miracle. 596 pages.
13. *Great Poems* by Louis Untermeyer—There are untold collections of Poetry...but this one is different in that the author explains the poems, the poet and the era in brief, learned paragraphs that explain why each work is important and he guides the reader on what to look for within the work. Sort of a collection and a guidebook at the same time. Sublime.

14. *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides. Herodotus “invented” history but told some stretchers along the way. Thucydides was the first person to realize great men drive history and that the study of events could be useful to future generations. He writes on Alcibiades, Pericles and the rest of the Greek pantheon. This magnificent book includes The Funeral Oration of Pericles that was the inspiration for Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Classic.

(OK...so I couldn’t narrow it down to ten...)

#### Honorable Mention

1. *Short Stories of Somerset Maugham*-Volumes I & II—Somerset Maugham said of himself, “I know where I rank, I’m in the very front of the second tier.” I don’t agree with him. He spins wonderful short stories. Buy it. Read it. Love it.
2. *The Odyssey*-Homer—Spectacular...Homer is the foundation of Western Civilization!
3. *Moll Flanders*-Daniel Defoe—Classic about a British prostitute in London circa 1790. Very well written. Great read. Am glad I was not a female born 250 years ago!
4. *Aeneid* by Virgil. The single greatest poem every written and, arguably, the most influential piece of writing ever (with apologies to the Bible). Superb. I loved it. First time I have ever read a poem of such length. Wonderful!
5. *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar. Superb! A combination history, treatise on Roman government and rumination on life and living from the perspective of one of the most powerful—and best educated—emperors of all time. Except it wasn’t written by Hadrian...it was written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by French scholar Marguerite Yourcenar as she thought Hadrian would have written. Had I read this before beginning my studies of antiquity I would have enjoyed it; but 50 percent of it would have gone over my head. References to Alcibiades, the famous Wall of Hadrian, Virgil, the Jewish uprisings, etc. A wonderful book. (I re-read this book in 2017 while on a European Trip. I think this book should be one of the top five all time on my list.)

6. *Greetings, Carbon-Based Bi-Peds* by Arthur C. Clarke. Marvelous collection of essays by one of the great “futurists” of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Sure, he’s known for 2001: A Space Odyssey. But he is much more than a science fiction author. He has some great pieces on the future, space-travel, the size of the universe, the future of mankind, etc., etc. Good stuff from a brilliant man who makes science and technology accessible to the layman.
7. *In a Sunburned Country* by Bill Bryson. Delightful read about the quirks, beauty and habits of Australia and her people.
8. *The Elements of Style* by Strunk & White. Quite simply the best book on writing every written. Slim and accessible. A must read.
9. *Another Life*. Really great book by Michael Korda, editor in chief of Random House from 1965-present. He edited books by Will and Ariel Durant, Graham Green, Jacqueline Susan, Harold Robbins, Nixon, Reagan, Cornelius Ryan, Tennessee Williams etc., etc., etc. Great stories. Fun read.
10. *My Ears are Bent* by Joseph Mitchell. He has a wonderful, curt, tight way of writing. Wrote for the New Yorker and others about clowns, bums, drunks, strippers, etc. in NYC in the 1930s. Fun, easy read.
11. *Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow. A wonderful biography of a wonderful man. I did not realize how important and how impressive Alexander Hamilton was. A giant! Terribly moving and sad to read of his last days and the letter he wrote to his wife before the duel. (I read the book and wrote this description long before the book was adapted to the stage for the hip hop show *Hamilton!*.)
12. *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Sublime. Wonderful poetry from a sage of the Indian subcontinent more than 4,000 years ago.
13. *Collapse* by Jared Diamond. A detailed, impressive and sobering look into the collapse of past societies including Easter Island, the Norse of Greenland, Mayas, Incas, etc. with parallels drawn to current society. Deforestation, over-fishing, destruction of top-soil, mining damage, and other catastrophes line the pages. Politicians, business-leaders, community leaders, farmers and, yes, the common man should read this superb book. I do not agree with all his conclusions yet clearly the author spent a significant part of his life researching the past to try to sound a clarion bell for the current and future generations. An important book.
14. *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. I do not quite exactly understand why, but I find this to be one of the most moving novels I’ve ever read. Certainly, this great work belongs in the “canon.” Superb writing with excellent characterization. A delight to read; a tragic story.

15. *Damon Runyon Favorites* by Damon Runyan. Read this! You will find a spectacular collection of short stories populated with characters bringing 1920 New York roaring into life. The stories contain superb turns of phrase, beautiful “dolls” and a description of those who lived life on the wrong side of the law while frequenting horse tracks, wearing wide lapels and keeping the speakeasy open. Wonderful. 192 pages
16. *Mao* by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday. If any secular book can move the world, this one should do it. The authors spent ten years compiling an exhaustive account of the satanic life of Mao Tse-Tung... “evil incarnate” as a phrase would have had to be invented for him. Hitler and Stalin, lassoed together, pale in comparison to the vileness of Mao. Mao has the blood of 70 million human beings on his hands...and he knew it...and he didn't care. He raped his nieces, abandoned his children, starved his people, abandoned his friends, double-crossed his allies and did it all without an iota of human compassion or kindness. For added measure, he did not shower or bathe...nor brush his teeth...for the last 39 years of his life. Beelzebub personified. 806 pages.
17. *Team of Rivals* by Doris Kearns Goodwin. Superb book centering on Abraham Lincoln's cabinet. One comes away with incredible admiration for Lincoln and his hand-picked advisors. Truly, the country had the right men in place at this most vital time. A detailed, lengthy yet ultimately very rewarding read. 935 pages.
18. *The Number* by Lee Eisenberg. This many end up being one of the single most important books I will ever read. The topic is saving for retirement but, more to the point, what will one do with the rest of your life. Great, thought provoking reading. 274 pages
19. *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville. I understand why it ranks with Huckleberry Finn and a couple others at the summit. Superb book with great writing and characters (Ahab...Starbuck...Pip...Flask). Melville's exhaustive description of the entire whaling industry boggles the mind. Talk about a hard life! On top of that, he weaves a rich tapestry on the philosophy of life. I'm thrilled to have read it. Must admit, however, it is not the most accessible of books. 489 pages.
20. *Winning* by Jack Welch. The finest book on business I've ever read. Period. Superb advice. 362 pages.
21. *America Alone* by Mark Steyn. This probably ranks as the most important book I've read all year...maybe in ten years. The author explains clearly and lucidly the threat faced by Western Civilization. A must read. 245 pages.

22. *Something of Value* by Robert Ruark. Read this book!! Wonderful novel that chronicles the Mau Mau revolt in Kenya circa 1949. The author gets inside the head of the native African and presents a frightful story of man's inhumanity to man...by both white and black. Powerful. 566 pages.
23. *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck. In 200 years people will still read Steinbeck and Hemingway will have been forgotten. Steinbeck said he thought this book superior to *The Grapes of Wrath*. A grand story covering some 80 years with wonderful characters and the theme being "the meaning of life." Long and well worth every minute.
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Additions November 14, 2010

24. *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. I read this when I was 18 and again at the age of 49. The author predicted what is happening to our country and our world 50 years ago. Yes, her books are too long...but they are accurate, frightening and important.
25. *The Time it Never Rained* by Elmer Kelton. Superb fiction that I find to be a cross between *Lonesome Dove* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Read this one!
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Additions February, 2011

26. *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. How could I possibly have left anything by Dickens off my original list!? I read this at about the age of 14 and was absolutely bamboozled by the storyline and the characters.
27. *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Once again, how could I overlook Twain? He has to have a place on my personal list. Tom Sawyer is easier to read but *Huckleberry* ranks as a masterpiece that will be read for centuries.

Additions December, 2013

28. *All the Kings's Men* Robert Penn Warren. Warren is the only person to win a Pulitzer Prize for both literature and poetry. Read this book to learn why. A fictionalized account of the life of Huey Long. Wonderful.

## Additions October 2016

29. *Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight* by Alexandra Fuller. Wow! One of the best memoirs I've ever read. Life of a young girl growing up in Southern Africa through all the civil wars and turmoil of the 1970s and 1980s. Incredibly tough life. She writes like a dream. Finished this in two days. READ IT! 315 pages.
30. *Maximum City* by Suketu Mehta. I like books best that take me into an entire different world/frame of thought/outlook on life and this book certainly delivers. Born in Bombay, Mehta moves to the US at the age of 14 and returns in his early 30s to interview gangsters, murderers, slum dwellers, mystics, billionaires, police detectives, drug runners, politicians, "Bollywood" movie stars and many more. Fascinating book! 550 pages.
31. *Act One* by Moss Hart. A memoir by one of the most successful playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote *You Can't Take it With You* (Pulitzer Prize) along with *A Star is Born* (among many others). I read about this book in another book on "how to write." This memoir features writing so crisp and descriptive that the reader will fall in love with the book even if he or she cares not a whit for the theatre. Superb writing. 460 pages.
32. *Einstein* by Walter Isaacson. One of the best biographies I've ever read on one of the greatest minds of all time. Simply outstanding. 567 pages.

## Additions 2018

33. *Our Culture, What's Left of It* by Theodore Dalrymple—A collection of essays by a UK-based physician who has traveled the world. His basic theme is that the intellectual intelligentsia and the welfare state have ruined the underclass...and he makes a most erudite, learned and informed case.
34. *Tattoos on the Heart* by Father Gregory Boyle. A superb memoir of a Jesuit working in the poorest, gang-infested area of Los Angeles.