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## Oregon Trails-Books to Alaska

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## Oregon Trails — Books to Alaska

Column Editor: **Thomas W. Leonhardt** (Retired, Eugene, OR 97404) <[oskibear70@gmail.com](mailto:oskibear70@gmail.com)>

While driving back towards home along the Alaska Highway, I began to miss the sparsely inhabited vastness of Alaska, its people, and fond memories of long ago when I attended the fifth and sixth grades at the **Big Delta Territorial School**.

I began to daydream about returning, not to live year round but to spend a summer there in a cabin where I would do nothing but read, write, and take long walks. Writing materials and walking shoes were easy decisions but what books should I take?

As I look at the books surrounding me, I could just start piling them up until I had a random sampling of what I had been accumulating for the time when I would be free of the constraints of work. I thought of **Somerset Maugham**, who liked to take a bag of books with him on his world travels. He would pack a variety of titles knowing that his mood would change with location and time. It would not be a random selection nor would mine.

When in high school, **Philip Wylie's Generation of Vipers** (1942) had been re-issued (1955) with an introduction by Wylie stating that "In 1955 — a year far more threatening to American freedom, American security, and even to American existence than the year 1942..." You get the picture. I want to re-

read the book more than fifty years after the first reading and include **Henry Miller's** 1945 examination of American society, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, a book I read while in the Army. I remember taking exception to some of **Miller's** observations but don't recall what they were. I wonder what I will think about **Miller's** (and **Wylie's**, too) take on America seventy years later at a time when much from that era no longer exists or is no longer recognizable.

I recently bought a time-worn Penguin edition of **Miller's** *The Colossus of Maroussi* and have thrown that into the mix as well. And **Miller's** *Greece* reminded me of **Lawrence Durrell's** *Corfu* (**Miller** mailed a copy of *Maroussi* to **Durrell** in 1941) and his *Alexandrian Quartet*, so that goes into my book bag, too, along with my copy of *Lawrence Durrell & Henry Miller: A Private Correspondence*, hardly private once published but good letters including one from **Durrell** posted from Alexandria, Christmas 1943 that reads in part, "Meanwhile salut for *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* — it is great stuff."

I read *The Alexandrian Quartet* while in college at **Berkeley** and at a time when Egypt, especially Alexandria, still had an allure. My interest in seeing the Nile and the interna-

tional culture of Alexandria had waned considerably even before the uprising two years ago and now I would rather spend my time in Alaska and read about the halcyon days of Alexandria when **Larry Durrell** could write to his heart's content, relaxing in bars and dreaming up aphorisms to enchant readers such as I was in 1970 or thereabouts.

I seem to be selecting companion pieces, so why stop now? On my long-time reading list are two books published in 1955 and 1959 that re-interpret **Freud: Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud**, by **Herbert Marcuse**, and *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, by **Norman O. Brown**. Both books were popular when I attended **UC Berkeley** in the late 1960s and I even managed to get through **Brown's** book but I can't recall what it was all about. I have the time and inclination now to read them in chronological order and see if I can make something of them now.

Not only am I selecting companion pieces, I am including a lot of re-reading, and why not? I have seen a lot since I last read some of the

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books that I have retained over the years and am curious about what my take on them will be now with the advantages of age and experience. And I have read many other books and authors and even if I can't quote them or even provide a coherent synopsis, I cannot discount impressions, however faint, that many have surely made on my subconscious.

Harkening back to high school, a perennial favorite of mine is **Henry David Thoreau's** *Walden*. But now I want to re-read *Walden* while also trying to get a better appreciation of the man through other writings by him and about him. My curiosity about **Thoreau** the man was piqued by **Susan Cheever's** *American Bloomsbury*, her name for the group of writers and intellectuals who inhabited Concord, Massachusetts in the 19th Century — **Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, and Margaret Fuller**.

Along with *Walden* I will take *Backwoods and Along the Shore: Selections from The Maine Woods and Cape Cod* (in an attractive edition from Shambala), *The Heart of Thoreau's Journals*, edited by **Odell Shepard**, the Norton Critical Edition of *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, edited by **Owen Thomas**, *Young Man Thoreau*, by **Richard Lebeaux**, and *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, by **Robert D. Richardson, Jr.**

My school days are behind me so learning so much about **Thoreau** is not for any reason except one, to learn more about him after years of admiring him from a distance. I admired him for so many years for his independence and his writing, but **Cheever** pulled him out of his lonely cabin (he was apparently never lonely, though, while living there) and exposed him to the light of day. I remember that in high school I admired **Thoreau's** essay on civil disobedience so much that in my senior year I refused to stand for the pledge of allegiance in opposition to the House Un-American Activities Committee that was active back then. But I could not agree with **Thoreau's** defense of **John Brown**, a contemporary of **Thoreau** who had spoken in Concord and for whom **Thoreau** had great regard. Not I then or now. I want to know more about this complex, principled man even if it means that some of the shine will fade. He was a simple but complex man and I mean to learn more.

Every so often I get stranded in an airport and the one that I have learned to know more intimately than I ever dreamed possible or desirable is Chicago's O'Hare. I have logged not hours but days there and even stayed at the O'Hare Hilton in 1979 when it was still affordable for a librarian. A couple of years before I retired, I booked a flight to our nation's capital in order to attend a meeting. I reached O'Hare without incident but the delays and gate changes began and before I knew it, I had finished the books that I had brought with me and no, I didn't wish that I had an eBook reader with me, I rejoiced in the fact that there was a

good book store in the airport and I was able to buy something to tide me over until I could fly away. My flight was finally cancelled and I would not get to the District of Columbia until after my meeting took place so I persuaded the airline (I no longer fly with it if at all possible) to book me on an earlier flight to Austin. I checked into the O'Hare Hilton with my recent purchase, **William Faulkner's** *Collected Stories*. I didn't finish it (I read only 183 of 900 pages) but set it aside for after I had retired. The stories were so unexpectedly good (he was only a novelist in my mind despite reading and liking *A Rose for Emily* back in high school). It's a good choice for my cabin reading.

Next to Faulkner's short stories I place *Collected Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, bought on the recommendation of a friend. I decide to take *Good-bye Columbus*, the Philip Roth short story collection that I read while in the Army. As I recall, I didn't know what the fuss was about but I expect that on re-reading the stories, I will understand. Both writers are generally considered novelists but they also mastered the short story.

Earlier this year I found a copy of *3 By Flanner O'Connor: The Violent Bear It Went Away; Everything That Rises Must Converge; Wise Blood*. I took notice of the book thanks to **Brother George**, a professor of English, a poet, and a Roman Catholic Brother of the Congregation of Holy Cross, who regularly taught a course on **Flannery O'Connor**. She is both a Catholic and a Southern writer so it was especially apt to introduce her to students in Texas attending a Catholic university.

As I was writing this essay, I was reading **Larry McMurtry's** *Roads*, curious about his love of driving America's highways after I had just returned from a 6,200 mile road trip of my own, mostly on the Alaska Highway and a couple more, too, while I was at it. **McMurtry** may be the most interesting, well-read, and bookish person on earth. His true loves are books, and he can't help but mention them as he writes about roads. After praising **Faulkner**, he writes, "The other southern writer of genius — one whose gift was too distinct, too pure, and too original to be affected by **Faulkner**, was **Flannery O'Connor**, whose best stories are like nothing else in our fiction." Now I really am curious and may begin reading her sooner than later. **Brother George** has retired and moved to Notre Dame, Indiana. I have retired and moved to Eugene, Oregon. How delightful it would be to sit down with him and let him expound on this gifted writer who I know by name only.

But before leaving **McMurtry**, his *Roads* reminded me of **Steinbeck's** *Travels with Charlie: In Search of America*, a book that I first read in 1963, a year after it came out. I had seen my first copy of it in the Milbank [South Dakota] public library the summer I worked at a YMCA camp near there. I was not a member of the library and there were already holds on it, so I had to wait. I read it again a couple of years ago and will include it in my Alaska reading along with my "Advance Reading Copy" of *Long Way Home: on the Trail of Steinbeck's America*. Could I write my own book about

crossing the U.S.A. in the several automobiles that I have owned over the years? I could, but it would not be the result of a self-conscious attempt to discover America; I just discovered it by driving across and around it for many years and thousands of miles. Add to that the miles covered hitch-hiking and riding Trailways and Greyhound and I might have a pretty good tale to tell. It's a big country, much bigger, I think, than the average American realizes.

Another writer who was popular when I was in high school, at least with some of us, was **Gertrude Stein**. I read selections of her work then and have read some of her novels or books, if you will, when I was in the Army but I never read her most famous book, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. I now own a copy of it, a Vintage paperback, and will include it in my lost cabin reading matter.

It seems as if I am selecting authors who were important to me, in one way or another, when I was in high school and the Army. My readings then were dictated by what? I am not always sure. I obviously heard of the authors and having read one book was drawn to another. Isn't that the way it is supposed to work?

While in high school, I discovered *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It made a lasting impression on me and I have read it several times since then. I have also read *Dubliners*, excerpts from *Finnegan's Wake*, and a couple hundred pages of *Ulysses* from a copy that I bought in 1966 in Fresno, California not long after I was separated (a happy parting) from the United States Army. I have never, despite good intentions, finished **Joyce's** most famous (infamous to some) work so it is a good candidate for my Alaska reading. Along with it I will take my Modern Library copy of *Dubliners*, my *The Viking Portable Library: James Joyce*, my **Penguin's Classics** edition of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and some helpmates: *James Joyce's Ulysses: A Study*, by **Stuart Gilbert** and *A Reader's Guide to James Joyce*, by **William York Tindall**.

Why, you might ask? Just because I want to.

**Flannery O'Connor** was a so-called Southern writer but she was also a tortured Roman Catholic writer. Perhaps not as tortured but simply obsessed with Catholicism, especially Catholic priests, I will pack *The Presence of Grace* and *The Prince of Darkness*, collections of short stories by **J.F. Powers**. And while I am at it, I will include my **Signet Classic** edition of **James T. Farrell's** *Studs Lonigan*, a book that mesmerized me when I was in high school. While working at a Roman Catholic University in a much different climate, literally and figuratively, than **Farrell's** Chicago, I thought about that book (a trilogy, in fact) and some of the images that remained after more than forty years. But I knew so little back then, and after reading **Farrell's** short stories, the old school of realism, there grew a curiosity and an urge to re-read an American classic that I think captures the world of working class Chicago in the early 1930s. His prose does not sing but the story he tells, as I remember it, is compelling and a

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## Oregon Trails from page 88

good glimpse into that Depression era that textbooks fail to show.

Another **Signet Classic** that has been on my shelves is **Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don***. I dipped into it in the late 1970s and have ever since wanted to read it, so I bought a paperback copy and put it on the shelf for the right time. The time has come.

There are so many to choose from. It is not so much where do I begin as where will I end? I have more than enough but will round my selections off with one serious, somber book, **Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*** and **The Thurber Carnival**, by **James Thurber**, just for pure whimsy. Both selections are made with the full awareness of my age, having recently reached the Biblical three-score and ten.

*"The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away."*

These are words to live by and to read by.

*"Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh."* 🐘

## Back Talk from page 93

third trend, being changed. In the context of libraries, I remember well the instance at **Columbia University** when **Paula Kaufmann** bravely refused to allow **FBI** access to our circulation records in order to protect the privacy of students. In this day, **NSA** or the **FBI** would have long ago hacked into the online circulation files to find the information they needed. I am not sure how the fourth trend about hyper-connected societies being willing to listen to and empower new voices and groups relates to libraries. But perhaps the isolated librarians of the world could use the **WEB** to unite and demand the end to the defunding and destruction of libraries. Finally, the fifth trend about changes in the global information economy is true. Librarians, vendors and publishers have all been on the front line of this transformation, and we know it is not over.

I was thinking of ending this article on an optimistic note, that in terms of doom and gloom consequences for libraries, this is "much ado about nothing." Yet, my iPhone just beeped at me announcing a new operating system is available. As I was thinking about the consequences of the upgrade, it asked me if I would agree to enabling locational services, if I would agree to putting my data in the cloud, and if I would agree to their privacy restrictions. Maybe I should read more science fiction, including *Fahrenheit 451*, unless it has been wiped from the **WEB** or significantly rewritten. 🐘

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