Oregon Trails-Books to Alaska

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ile 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 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 international 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
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. Among 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.


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 protest. The pledge had been too 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 Finnegans Wake, and a couple hundred pages of Ulysses from a copy that I bought in 1966 in Fresno, California. I am not sure after I was separated (a happy parting) from the United States Army. I have never, despite good intentions, finished a book. 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?

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, literarily 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
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.”

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.