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Oregon Trails — Collecting What You Read and Why

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On April 16, I attended a special reception at the **Eric V. Hauser Memorial Library** on the **Reed College** campus. The winners of the **2013 Reed College Book Collecting Contest**, co-sponsored by the **Himes & Duniway Society**, were announced and all participants were honored and asked to say a few words about their collections. The essays with annotated bibliographies are available (five essays at this writing) at <http://www.himesduniway.org/>. “This contest is a part of a nationwide college book collecting contest with the local winner entered as a participant in the **The National Collegiate Book Collecting Contest**. This national level contest is supported by the **Antiquarian Booksellers Association of America (ABAA)**, the **Fellowship of American Bibliophilic Societies (FABS)**, the **Center for the Book and the Rare Books and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress**.” (<http://www.himesduniway.org/>)

When you go to the Website and read those essays, you will be inspired and humbled by the efforts of these college students. The winning essay, “How to be Alone,” is by **Mack Sullivan**. Just as I thought that I had my own list (not annotated) of books to last me, in retirement, for the rest of my life, I come across this incredibly thoughtful, articulate, and learned essay and have extended my list but in translation having never acquired much Latin and not even a smattering of Greek.

The other essays are winners, too, either a second or third prize or honorable mention (all of the remaining essays). There are no losers in this contest. Only one will be entered in the national contest but in competitions of this sort, as acknowledged by the judges, the difference between placements are razor thin. Read the essays and decide for yourself and then articulate the reasons for your choices. You will then see for yourself to understand the difficulties that faced the judges.

One of the students collects illustrated books and not necessarily first editions. For those who fear that deep pockets are a hindrance to collecting, let this be an encouraging note. It helps if the book is in good condition and that all of the illustrations are intact, but beyond that, it is a matter of personal taste. One need not restrict oneself to one’s native language, English, for example, in order to collect attractively illustrated books. Children’s books represent most of

the current illustrated books, especially fiction, but there are many exceptions. This student, wanting to encourage support of a local press, gave away copies of illustrated books published by **Good Ink**, an imprint of **Scout Books** (www.scoutbooks.com), a Portland, Oregon publisher. The book that I chose is *The Story of an Hour and other Stories*, by **Kate Chopin** and illustrated by **Gemma Correll**.

The day after the reception, I had to fly to Boston for a meeting. I don’t have a Nook or a Kindle, preferring paperbacks when I travel. *The Story of an Hour* fit in my shirt pocket and I didn’t have to power it down when the plane’s cabin doors were closed. Instead, I clicked on the overhead reading light and leaned back to enjoy **Kate Chopin’s** sense of humor. She would have made much of modern America.

College students are not only reading, they are collecting their favorite books and thinking about what they collect and why and continue. Aesthetics apply to the illustrated books but the other collections are reflections of intellectual interests and a drive to be educated beyond the classroom. These students, I call them curious undergraduates, are the ones I used to buy for. The students I met and listened to at **Reed** were living proof that curious (intellectually, that is) undergraduates exist. The national book collecting contest is testimony that we are still producing thoughtful readers and they are not satisfied with having hundreds of books on an eBook reader. Rather, they are content with a smaller number on their shelves where they can be seen, pulled off the shelf at will, held lovingly, opened randomly, perhaps to a hand-notated passage, and then placed gently back on the shelf. A couple of the students noted that some of their favorites had come apart from use and annotation and had to be replaced. Their collections are not museums of books that look good on the shelf but living things full of ideas, information, and sustenance as in “Season to taste: A love affair in cookbooks,” by **Stephanie Bastek**.

More than a decade ago I had occasion to go to **Reed College** for meetings in the library and would arrive before the staff got to work.

The library would be open and I would find students there sleeping, reading, studying, and writing. I would head for the area where the “little magazines” were shelved, a luxury coming from a technical university, and after choosing a couple of those inviting literary journals, would plop myself down in an overstuffed chair situated among other comfortable chairs and sofas, and read until time for my meeting.

I have no idea how many college and university libraries I have visited but it’s more than a handful and of them all, **Reed** has the most bookish atmosphere. I get the feeling that there are nothing but curious undergraduates there and that it is understood that to be well educated is to read broadly and engage in intellectual and not so intellectual discussions that come from that reading and from the heart as well as the head. And in such an atmosphere, it is a matter of course to subscribe to **Anthony Powell’s** notion that *Books Do Furnish a Room*. And it matters which books furnish that room and they must be books that matter, classic titles along with perhaps idiosyncratic titles that have special meaning for the reader. Reading is, after all, a highly personal, private activity.

Some time ago at a conference in which information technology was the theme, a speaker somewhat derisively referred to books as outmoded models of linear thinking. The preferred way to read, to that speaker, was on a computer. The irony, of course, is that reading on a screen that moves up and down or left to right, is literally linear and is a throwback to the scrolls of yore that were made obsolete by the codex, a superior way to present written literature in the age of manuscripts and later when moveable type became available.

I would not be surprised to learn that some, perhaps a majority, of these **Reed** essayists own eBook readers and have assigned them a specific role, but that is not what they turn to as they pursue their bookish passions. They want to see those trusted, cherished companions on bookshelves, piled on desks, littering any available plane surface so that at a whim, the desired volume can be picked up, readily

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day against what the majority believe. That is, you may help students find something that they have not been able to find and they may well shower you with well-deserved praise. They may also fustigate the Web and Google and all the rest because they have been frustrated by their inability to find what they want. The same could be said of that **ABD** faculty member who wants to give you a **Nobel Prize** for finding that

article she’s been looking for, for months. But those are three, or five, or even twenty, of the five thousand or ten thousand or twenty thousand on your campus. What are *they* saying, and if nothing, why? Could it be because they are using something else?

Further, if nothing else, these studies confirm that a) we’re still not telling the library story very well; b) that all the very valuable help we provide is to but a fraction of those who really need us; and c) we really need to come up with a more effective strategy of reaching students and faculty. The current strategy we’re

using just isn’t working, or it isn’t working all that well.

But it doesn’t matter what I think. What do you see in them? By all means, go read the studies. Don’t listen just to me or anyone else. Read them for yourself. And then, let’s not put our heads in the sand about them when they reveal something we don’t want to hear. These studies are not the library’s Armageddon, nor should they be shoved down Alice’s Rabbit Hole of nonsense. And while I’m on the allusion kick, let me end with this: Let’s learn from them what we can in order to avoid a Waterloo of our own making. 🐘

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Samuel Johnson (I think it was he) noted that one can learn a lot simply by reading the spines of books. Try it sometime and you will see what I think he meant. What he didn't say is that when we visit the homes or offices of friends and colleagues, we also make certain judgments by reading the spines of the books we find there. Hmm, three rows of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, *Happiness is a Warm Puppy*, and the *Collected Poems of Rod McKuen*. Don't hold your breath waiting for the accompanying essay and annotated bibliography and don't despair when those very titles disappear into a portable reading device that keeps them safe, out of sight, and out of mind. 🐾

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Booklover — Boston Strong

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Sunday April 21, 2013 was a cool breezy morning. Runners in Charleston, SC were gathering at Colonial Lake for an impromptu 5k run. There was a strong need in the running community to show Boston that we stand strong and will continue to run our marathons in the wake of the bombings that had occurred at the finish line of the **Boston Marathon** on Monday. I participated in this event not only to show this strength but to remember that I had once stood at the finish line of the **Boston Marathon** cheering a friend as she finished. It was emotional and exhilarating to run this race.

I have often remarked that somehow the **Nobel Literature Laureate** books find me at the right time. The book in my queue for this column is an excellent example of this phenomenon. But before I reveal the author and book title this story has just a bit of a circuitous path.

If you have been a follower of this column from the beginning you might remember **Joy**, my British friend who lives in Eleuthera, Bahamas. I had the opportunity recently to visit and join her for the Tuesday morning gathering at the **Haynes Library** in Governor's Harbor, Eleuthera. Naturally, most of our time together was spent discussing books we had read. **Joy** reads primarily non-fiction and one of her recommendations was **Sinclair McKay's** new novel *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park: The WWII Codebreaking Centre and the Men and Women Who Worked There*. Once back home I ordered the paperback version from **Amazon** as it was not available in a Kindle edition. Soon I was immersed in a story of dedication, patriotism, and the code of silence among the men and women who broke the Enigma code used by the Germans

during World War II. **McKay** chose to tell the personal stories within this greater story from the viewpoint of many of the individuals who were recruited to work at Bletchley Park. The result is a very intimate, genuine, and detailed account of this amazing story. Sidebar: Bletchley Park was once owned by **Joy's** great uncle.

These code breakers respected their "vow" of silence and never received the recognition and fame like the generals, statesmen, and leaders from this world war. **Sir Winston Churchill**, however, is in the group of people that history remembers as a great leader and statesman from the World War II period. He served as **Prime Minister** of the United Kingdom from 1940-1945 and again from 1951-1955. A great orator, he was able to inspire his people during the very dark periods of World War II. But **Sir Churchill** also had another claim to fame — the 1953 **Nobel Prize in Literature**. His book entitled *The River War: An Historical Account of the Reconquest of the Soudan* is the current title in my queue. **Sir Churchill** was a member of the 21st Lancers serving in the Sudan and had participated in the British cavalry charge at the Battle of Omdurman in 1898. His interest in writing about war campaigns was emerging during this time and while in Sudan he wrote accounts for the *Morning Post*, a London newspaper. Wikipedia's says *The River War* ... "provides a history of the British involvement in the Sudan and the conflict between the British forces led by **Lord Kitchener** and Dervish forces led by **Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad**, heir to the self-proclaimed **Mahdi Muhammad Ahmad** who had embarked on a campaign to conquer Egypt, to drive out the

non-Muslim infidels, and make way for the second coming of the Islamic Mahdi."

And now the connection comes full circle. I have started reading this book published over one hundred years ago about Muslims, infidels, and fanaticism at the very time our country has sustained yet another assault. The book is lengthy and I have not finished it as I write. I need to take time with this one. Only from an understanding can there be peace. And I look forward to the time where understanding prevails.

Military history might be one of the last genres of books I would choose to read. But I leave you with three quotes illustrative of the Nobel Committee's description of "his mastery of historical and biographical description as well as for brilliant oratory in defending exalted human values."

"Solitary trees, if they grow at all, grow strong; and a boy deprived of a father's care often develops, if he escapes the perils of youth, an independence and vigour of thought which may restore in after life the heavy loss of early days. It was so with **Mohammed Ahmed**.

"The moment was at hand. Then, and not till then, the third wave came — the wave of fanaticism, which, catching up and surmounting the other waves, covered all the flood with its white foam, and, bearing on with the momentum of the waters, beat in thunder against the weak house so that it fell; and great was the fall thereof."

"The movement which **Mohammed Ahmed** created did not escape the common fate of human enterprise; nor was it long before the warm generous blood of a patriotic and religious revolt congealed into the dark clot of a military empire." 🐾