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Oregon Trails-Collecting What You Read and Why

Thomas W. Leonhardt
oskibear70@gmail.com

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O
n April 16, I attended a special recep-
tion 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 & Dunway Society, were announced
and all participants were honored and asked to
say a few words about their collections. The
essays with annotated bibliographies are avail-
able (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 Con-
test. 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 Col-
lections 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 hav-
ing 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
in 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 articu-
late 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 collect-
ing, 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 illustrat-
ed 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 illus-
trated 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 col-
collecting their favorite books
and thinking about what
they can collect and why and hence. 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 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 suste-
nance 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 over-
stuffed chair situated among other comfortable
chairs and sofas, and read until time for my
meeting.

I have no idea how many college and uni-
versity 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 idio-
syncratic titles to suit the mean-
ning 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
turn to their 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 compan-
ions on bookshelves, piled on desks, littering
any available plane surface so that at a whim,
the desired volume can be picked up, readily
continued on page 77

Column Editor: Thomas W. Leonhardt
(Retired, Eugene, OR 97404) oskibear70@gmail.com

Little Red Herrings
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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
show a certain curiosity that deserves praise. They
may also frustrate 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 thou-
sand 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 con-
firm that a) we’re still not telling the library
story very well; b) that all of 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. They studies
are not the library’s Armageddon, nor should they
be shoved down Alice’s Rabbit Hole of nonsense.

But 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.

Continue reading page 77

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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. Hmmm, 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.

Booklover — Boston Strong

Column Editor: Donna Jacobs (Research Specialist, Transgenic Mouse Core Facility, MUSC, Charleston, SC 29425) <jacobsdf@musc.edu>

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. 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 war world. 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 enterprises; nor was it long before the warm generous blood of a patriotic and religious revolt congealed into the dark clot of a military empire.”

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