Oregon Trails: You Are What You Read

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6673

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Digital Conversations
from page 45

faculty and students who are interested in creating digital scholarship, whether they are local or part of a broader effort. For example, providing support to associations and societies that are reorganizing and reframing their efforts for support of digital communication by digital natives is a positive way forward. The nascent digital humanities movement is an exciting part of this effort.

If not-for-profit higher education can demonstrate that it has the capability to reorganize, reframe, and re-establish the knowledge, access to, and use of knowledge for the continued benefit of all, the advantages will accrue to the organizations who actively participate and to non-profit higher education more broadly. Librarians and libraries are in a position to help lead this effort. Change will happen with librarian leadership or without it. We suggest that a focus on expertise, needs, and expectations of digital natives is critical for success. Everything else is open for discussion!

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Endnotes
1. The second author (Kelley) created such a unit called The Digital Knowledge Center within the Milton S. Eisenhower Library at The Johns Hopkins University in 1995. A number of university libraries and some college libraries have followed suit.

References


The most valuable item on my desk is a 3” x 5” loose-leaf notebook that I have carried around for more than fifty years. It is a record of all of the books that I have read from 1962 to the present, a record of my intellectual development, changing needs and interests, and books that have nurtured me through impressions and re-readings.

I have long known that one’s memory is not to be trusted and when I’ve remembered first running across an author or a particular book, I have been off by several years more than once. I had long thought that the first Saul Bellow I ever read was The Adventures of Augie March, but it was Seize the Day followed by Henderson the Rain King and then Augie March.

The book has taken a beating over the years, and many of the punch holes have re-inforcements to keep them in place. The early pages contain two lines per entry with the title on the first line and the date finished, author, and number of pages on line two. In 1965 I changed the format to one line: date, title, author. I was a soldier in Germany then, a trumpet player in the 84th U.S. Army Band, and interested in furthering my education through reading and writing short reviews (book reports) in another 3”x5” loose-leaf notebook of each book that I read. That didn’t last long, but the few that I wrote survive and make me wish that I’d written more, that I had continued the exercise. But that last year in the Army became a very busy year for me, and I gradually stopped writing about what I read.

The first book that I read in 1963 earned a C- at Dartmouth, as a civilian. I was crashing in the room of a friend from high school who shared the space with a roommate. I had time on my hands. My friend’s roommate did not, so I wrote a paper on The Old Order by Katherine Anne Porter. I don’t remember if he paid me or not, and I don’t remember if having read Pale Horse, Pale Rider about three weeks earlier had any bearing on the paper or the grade. If the roommate was happy with the C, how could a college dropout complain?

Of the thirty-two books that I read in 1962, I managed only eight while in college that winter semester, and among them was the first of four Steinbeck books, The Winter of Our Discontent, a gift from another high school friend who remembranced to collect first editions and related Steinbeck items. My Morley collection now runs to about 90 items, none of which is exceedingly rare, but their presence comforts me. I’ll continue to read them and appreciate his often whimsical outlook on life, one of...
literate bemusement but with some biting social commentary, too, when called for.

I am dismayed at how poor my recall is of most of the books in my loose-leaf catalog but am pleased at how many memories are connected to either individual entries or a whole year’s worth that remind me of a phase of my life long past. The third book that I read in 1963 happened to be the first book I read as a soldier. I was in Basic Training at Ft. Dix, New Jersey in the days when the draft swept up not only high school graduates not in college or college dropouts, but college graduates. When I was seen reading Jane Eyre for pleasure (why else would I be reading a high school requirement as a buck private in the Army?), I must be a college man. Being a dropout and reading Jane Eyre only added to my status. You are what you read.

The next year in fall 1964, I was a member of the 84th U.S. Army Band stationed in Fulda, West Germany. I was a trumpet player who owned a stack of Bob Dylan records and was thus suspect in the eyes of a group made up of professional musicians and those with music degrees from college. I had come from a combat outfit and had not been assigned to a band straight out of Basic Training. I spent more time in downtown Fulda drinking beer with my German friends than I spent socializing with my fellow musicians, soldiers, countrymen. But one day I was caught reading Thomas Pynchon’s V. Don’t ask me how I came to know about the book or the author, but I had bought a paperback copy of the book at the PX and liked it from page one. I was asked if I would let a colleague read it when I was finished (September 25, 1964), and thus it began circulating around the band and once again my status was bumped up a notch by a book. You are what you read, redux.

1965 was my last full year in the Army. I skied in the Vorarlberg in Austria that January and spent a week on leave in Spain that July. The 84th combined with two other Army bands and went to the Netherlands for a week to participate in a NATO Tattoo. And in between, I played music for a living and spent as much time as I could find drinking beer and making friends with some German families who helped me improve my German. And I had time to read and a wonderful Post Library to supply me with books. I read Schiller’s Maid of Orleans in English seven years before I read it in German along with G.B. Shaw’s version. I read The Screwtape Letters and discussed it with a preacher’s son. I discovered Willa Cather (Death Comes to the Archbishop, My Antonia) and Walker Percy (The Moviegoer). There are 49 books listed for that year, the most I was to read until 1971 when I was a grad student.

I may not have read as many books a year while in the Army, but as I look at what I read, including books by Max Shulman, Peter Devries, and Simenon thrown in for pure entertainment, I was really preparing myself to finish college and go on from there. It was not a conscious effort by any means, but what drove me to read those books is the same force that pushed me through college.

When a soldier gets short, that is, has six months left in the Army, it is the company commander’s duty to have a conversation with the short-timer.

“Have you ever thought of re-enlisting, soldier?”

“Yes sir, I’ve thought about it, but I’m getting out when my enlistment is up.”

“What will you do with your life then?”

“I’m going back to college, sir.”

“That’s what they all say.”

You are what you read. ❄️