

2014

Oregon Trails: Boys Read, Too

Thomas Leonhardt
oskibear70@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Leonhardt, Thomas (2017) "Oregon Trails: Boys Read, Too," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 26: Iss. 4, Article 82.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6929>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Oregon Trails — Boys Read, Too

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

I was reading someone's list of the best 100 books, and I have seen countless other such lists of best books, books that everyone ought to read, books to round out your personality, great books to give you a great mind. Posh and pittle. I could make my own list of best books, and perhaps I will, but then I got to thinking about books I read as a boy before I began keeping a list. I can't remember all of those books but it seems to me that the ones that I remember are the best ones that I read by default. Certainly I can argue that if not the best, at least the most influential.

Going back to grade school days, there were a handful of books that kept me reading and by doing so, made me a better reader. **Grandmother Leonhardt**, for Christmas and my birthday, would send me **Whitman** editions of books that she bought at **Woolworth's** or **Rose's**, but most of my reading (I was an Army brat) came from post libraries and school libraries had strong collection, too, in the 1940s and 1950s.

The first library that I ever used was on **Camp Stoneman**, an Army base near Pittsburg, California. I was eight years old with the run of the post on my brand new bicycle along with several other Army brats. We had a summer routine that included the Post Theater where the G.I. in charge let us in for free as long as we sat in the very first row. We also rode to the swimming pool when it was open to dependents. There was a service club, too, where we made ceramic spoon holders and ash trays (this was 1951 and everyone in the Army smoked or it seemed that way). And there was the post library. I must have had a card, but I don't remember it. I do remember borrowing three books (there must have been more) — *The Arabian Nights* (children's version) with its tale of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, *Andersen's Fairy Tales*, and *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. They remain good reading, but as an eight year old, I found nothing gruesome about most of the thieves killed in jars filled with boiling oil. *The Little Match Girl* appealed to me at a literal level and made me sad but not angry with the society that allowed such tragedies. And the **Grimm** stories were just magical with death and violence of no consequence to me, and I don't remember being edified by any morals to the stories.

In 1952, when I began the fourth grade, I discovered, in a school library in North Carolina, the **Bobbs-Merrill Childhood of Famous Americans**. I can still see their rough blue bindings and remember some of the titles such as *Tom Edison, Boy Inventor*; *Meriwether Lewis, Boy Explorer*; *Clara Barton, Girl Nurse*; and *Sacagawea, Bird Girl*. I read about **Abigail Adams, Jane Adams, Louisa May Alcott, Lucretia Mott, Molly Pitcher**, and **Mary Todd Lincoln**. I read about the boyhoods of **Jim Bowie, Daniel Boone, Tom Jefferson, George Washington, Abe Lincoln, Luther Burbank, Kit Carson, George Carver, Lou**

Gehrig, Stephen Foster, Ben Franklin, and Robert E. Lee, among others. I could read one in a sitting, and as I look at them now (and they are readily available at any decent second-hand book store), I see why. But they were as fascinating to me then as the books of fairy tales were just a year earlier. My reading interests were changing, and after the biographies, I was a perfect candidate for *Random House Landmark Series* where I could learn more about **Washington, Lincoln, Ben Franklin, John Paul Jones**, and other great Americans. But there was history, too. I read about **Lee and Grant, the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Monitor and the Merrimac, Kit Carson and the Wild Frontier, and The Barbary Pirates** by **C.S. Forester**, one of my favorite authors and perhaps a reason that the Hornblower books captivated me when in high school. **Random House** had some first-rate names to write these books, also readily available although out of print. To name a few that ring a bell for me there were **Sterling North, Bruce Bliven, Jr., John Gunther, Jim Kjelgaard** (I read his dog books, too), **Hedding Carter, Anthony West, Quentin Reynolds, J. Frank Dobie, and William O. Douglas**.

I read as many of both series as I could, biographies and histories that came alive to me. But by the time I got to the sixth grade, fiction replaced fact, and I discovered the world of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. I did not differentiate between *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a book considered to be one of the great American novels. I saw it only as a continuation of the Tom Sawyer book that I loved, not only as a namesake with an Aunt Polly, but as a boy who could identify, more or less, with Tom except that I had parents, liked school, and didn't like going barefoot. But as for playing games outdoors and near or in bodies of water, well, I was ready to join right in with Tom and Huck. And on the basis of these two books, I also read and enjoyed *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Howard Pyle brought Robin Hood to life. I have never been able to really enjoy a portrayal of Robin Hood on the big screen, although I did enjoy the television series done in the 1950s. But even there the television Robin Hood paled in comparison with **Howard Pyle's** version.

When I was in the seventh grade we had quiet reading time each afternoon and the one book that I remember reading during that time was *Heidi*. If you've never read the book, the movie version, a real tear jerker, will pass as good entertainment, but again, the book has such magic that the only thing better than reading it would have been to be up on an alpine meadow with Heidi, Peter, and their goats,

sharing cheese and bread toasted over an open fire and washed down with fresh goat's milk.

I was probably thirteen years old when I read *Treasure Island*. I could imagine a pirate hiding behind my bedroom door just waiting for me to enter. I became Jim Hawkins as I read the book and was as fearful as he was as he hid in the apple barrel amid a bunch of pirates who would have gladly cut his throat rather than have him betray them. And as for the Disney film, it is pretty good and can be enjoyed as a true adaptation and in color, too.

I enjoyed *Treasure Island* so much that I checked out *Kidnapped* and found it almost as good a yarn even though I understood nothing about Scotland and its politics of the time.

Years later reading the **John Buchan** adventure tales I was reminded of *Kidnapped* and despite a rather pious upbringing, **Buchan, later Lord Tweedsmuir**, must have read R.L.S. as he was growing up.

When in the 8th and 9th grade in Virginia, then considered Junior High School, I became a baseball fan and would listen on the radio to New York Yankee and Brooklyn Dodger games at night when reception was good. I would play ball in pickup games and was one of those picked last, but I at least got to play. Little League was out of the questions, but in lieu of playing on a real team with real uniforms, I read the baseball books of **John R. Tunis** and **John R. Cooper**. Playing vicariously was better than sitting around feeling sorry for myself, and it even added something to the major league stories and box scores that I read each day. The books I remember as paperbacks, but my memory may fail me here, are two **Cooper** books, *The Southpaw's Secret*, and *The Phantom Homer*. Both are hard bound and *Southpaw* even has a dust jacket. Both are **Mel Martin** baseball stories and are still fun to read.

Some friend of my mother's gave me and my sister about twenty Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys books. I read both series without worrying that I should stick to the boys and leave the girls alone. Both series translated well to movies and television, but the books put my imagination to work, as did the radio programs of the 1940s and 1950s.

My favorite author from junior high school was **Howard Pease**, a Stockton, California native who grew up near the Stockton Channel.

"And we used to play down the channel on a half-submerged hulk of a steamer that had once been used on the river... We had one person be a captain, somebody a first mate, another would be an engineer. We knew a lot about boats. So I thought about writing up stories about some smaller children playing on a half-submerged hulk along the river and with

continued on page 58

an old captain on it whom they called *Captain Binnacle*. It is actually my past experience when I was a boy from ten to fourteen." (p. 227, **Jennings, Shirley May**, *A Study of the Genesis of the Twenty-two Published Children's Novels* by **Howard Pease** (Stockton, University of the Pacific unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1969).

The main character in several of the **Pease** novels is **Tod Moran**. I recently bought and re-read *The Jinx Ship* (reprint and not a first) and understood why I read every book of his in the junior high library. **Pease** wrote well and with an adult vocabulary so the notion that he wrote "children's" novels is a bit misleading and inaccurate. He wrote high-sea adventure stories that kept me spell-bound to the last page. He is a highly collectable author, so it is rare to find his books for sale. I don't collect him, not yet, but the prospect is there. Maybe next year. Maybe my favorite second-hand book shop will come into a collection and we can negotiate a deal.

So far my reading had included only one truly great book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but I saw it only as a boy's adventure. I was not to discover literature until I attended Department of Defense high schools in West Germany. My eureka moment came when I

saw *The Grapes of Wrath* on a shelf in the high school library. I thought (don't laugh) that it was about the War Between the States, and in a way it was. I loved the book and began reading everything I could find by **Steinbeck**. When he won the **Nobel Prize for Literature** in 1962, I was as happy as if I had won it myself. I still read **Steinbeck**, and I am as moved as ever by his writing.

Hemingway was very popular in the late 1950s, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was the first of his books that I read. Alas, he killed himself a couple of weeks after I graduated from high school and had already won the **Nobel Prize**. I admire his writing, too, but there is nothing like a first love, so **Steinbeck** retains the number one position on my list of writers.

Four other authors deserve mention and maintain niches in my pantheon of best books.

James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy is as fine an example of what was called realism as I know of, but I had never heard of realism or any other ism other than communism in 1960. *Studs Lonigan* was an Irish Catholic who grew up in Chicago during the Great Depression, and the novels *Young Lonigan*, *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*, and *Judgment Day* deserve a place next to *The Grapes of Wrath*. I still remember scenes from that Trilogy after more than fifty years. I have a one-volume edition waiting to be read.

I identified with Phillip Carey, the protagonist in **W. Somerset Maugham's** *Of Human Bondage*. I had no club foot, no stutter, no reason at all to feel sorry for myself, but I was a teenaged boy with my own issues and pain. It's a masterpiece that even now deserves to be read, preferably by teenaged boys.

And finally, there is *Walden* by **Henry David Thoreau**. He awakened my critical thinking and gave me the courage to stand up and be counted at a time and in a place where conformity was not only safe but expected in spite of lip service to rugged individualism. Without **Thoreau** would I have *had* such a visceral and heartfelt dislike of the House Un-American Committee, one of the least American institutions that have ever existed?

No wonder that I still enjoy reading today. No, it is much more. As Thomas Jefferson expressed it so well for me, "Without books I cannot live." As I look at my short list, I think they can rightfully be called "Best Books," and a young person today could do worse. The world is very different now, but great literature, even merely good literature, transcends time and place. I wouldn't want a school to get hold of the list and require that students read my best books, but I wouldn't be averse if some kindly librarian, responding to a young reader hungering for more, to say, "why don't you try one of these?" And as with salted peanuts, you can't stop with just one. 🌰

Little Red Herrings — Collaboration is the New Black

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Orange may be the new black, but as I have seen only five minutes of that show, I can't really use it here. Besides, based on the five minutes I saw, I would assume it is a series written by males. Not since the **Victoria's Secret** catalog have I seen so many women wearing fewer clothes, or engaging in so many unmentionable acts. I'll stop there because my Victorianism is showing, I'm sure.

Collaboration for libraries may well be the new black but for a serious problem. To say that implies that collaboration is a new thing in libraries when it is as old as **Callimachus** himself. Libraries have always been about collaboration. It's just like everything else we do; we keep it as quiet as our buildings.

Some critics of the stodgy library stereotype have jumped on this as if collaboration were a new thing when it is a very old thing. That first library brought together "books" from everywhere in an effort to bring people together from wherever they were. The idea of a library, like the

idea of a university, was to help people put their heads together. Libraries did this with books first, then with journals, and now with just about everything else you can think of.

We're now collaborating about data and even talking about aggregating it to see if it will tell us a new thing. But therein is the problem. Because it is so big, it's hard to analyze; and like any gargantuan thing, its size is almost all you can talk about. In fact, you hear a great deal about "big data" (not the band but actual data), yet no one really seems to know much else to say about it other than it is big, and there's no good way to get your arms around it. But if we ever can, it will tell us the secrets of the universe.

Big data, like all other buzz words that you can think of, is really dangerous in isolation. If analyzed properly, it may be able to tell us something useful but until we get a better grip on it, we're better off focusing on what we have at hand (i.e., the local collection). I won't say that big data is a fad, but I will say it reminds one of a

missing chapter in a book. You can make great claims about it so long as it never shows up. If we can get a handle on it, it will doubtless lead to better and more expansive collaboration. A useful preliminary on big data is found here (http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/big_data; a contrary one, here <http://timharford.com/2014/04/big-data-are-we-making-a-big-mistake/>).

What is more important than big or little data is the collaboration of the library with the faculty, and area libraries with one another. Again, not a new thing but an old thing with new power. With software like **BePress's** Digital Commons, it's becoming much easier to connect the library with the faculty, faculty with one another, students with each other, and students with faculty. Once these are in place, the library, which should be at the forefront of this collaboration, can extend that sharing to libraries in the region. If enough of this takes place, we may be able to save open access after all.

Meanwhile, libraries are collaborating more with area libraries, and using consortium in the area to expand that collaborative prospect. While consortia have always made it easy to share costs, some are looking at sharing

continued on page 59

