Oregon Trails: Boys Read, Too

Thomas Leonhardt
oskibear70@gmail.com

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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 book. 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), Anthony 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 truly 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., 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 streamer 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...
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 gargantuán thing, its size is almost all you can talk about. In fact, you hear a great deal of “big data” (not the band but actual data), and I will talk about. We continue on page 59.