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Oregon Trails — What's On Your Nightstand?

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My favorite section of *The New York Times Book Review* is called “By the Book.” The column editor asks general book-related questions of a writer or celebrity and then throws in a few more questions that are based on the person’s genre, or a writer, or area of expertise.

Being neither famous nor accomplished, I am never going to be interviewed by *The New York Times* but I enjoy matching the celebrity choices with my own. Why not interview myself?

The first question in the column never varies: “**What books are currently on your night stand?**”

I am almost through **J. D. Salinger’s** *Nine Stories*. I re-read them every so often and even though I know some parts almost by heart, I never cease to be amazed at **Salinger’s** use of everyday details to make the most mundane event seem special. I never tire of “For Esme — With Love and Squalor” and wish that I had met Esme. I am always horrified by the low-keyed, casual way that **Salinger** develops “A Perfect Day for Banana Fish.”

There is my 1911 edition (ten years after it was first published) of **Thomas Mann’s** *Buddenbrooks*. It was mailed to me by a bookseller, who knows I read German, as a gift. The original was published in two volumes. My copy, bound in an illustrated green buckram, contains both volumes and runs to almost a thousand pages printed in fraktur. *Buddenbrooks* is the story of the decline and fall of a prominent German *Bürger* family in 19th-century northern Germany. The names of some of the characters and the use of local dialect (low German) is reminiscent of **Dickens**.

Then there is **David Lodge’s** *Thinks...*, an academic comedy set in **Lodge’s** native England. **Lodge** is a darkly humorous novelist (See *Deaf Sentence*) and critic. I began reading **Lodge** after taking his creative writing course at **U C Berkeley** when he was a visiting professor (see *Trading Places* for his fictional account). Although he was listed as the instructor, he never read a word that I wrote. **Lodge** lectured and a TA met with the class and critiqued our stories and poems.

For variety and quick reads, I have four **Penguin** anthologies: *The Penguin New Writing* and *Penguin Parade*. It is pleasant to hold them, their flexible but sturdy WWII paper seems perfect for the “new stories, poems, etc. by contemporary writers.” Some of those now not-so-contemporary writers include **Katherine Anne Porter**, **Stephen Spender**, **W. H. Auden**, **Irwin Shaw**, and **James Gould Cozzens**.

When too tired to read at length, even a short story, I open *The Diary of a Country Parson, 1758 – 1802*, by **James Woodforde**.

There are two other books in German, **Jean Amery’s** *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (*Beyond Guilt and Atonement*) is a collection

of essays by a Holocaust survivor and *Der Geteilte Himmel* (*The Divided Heaven*), by **Christa Wolf**. **Wolf** is the most popular and important writer to come from the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (East Germany).

For quieter, more thoughtful moods I can open *A History of Philosophy* by **Frederick Copleston, S.J.** I am now on *Volume II: Mediaeval Philosophy: Augustine to Scotus*. Sound boring or intimidating? It is quite interesting, actually, especially compared to volume one featuring Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. I had to learn the Greek alphabet to make the book more interesting.

For lighter fare, I am reading *The Lonely Skier* by **Hammond Innes**.

How do you decide what to read next?

Sometimes I will read a review (*New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *New York Review of Books* — what would we do without *New York*?) that grabs my interest, almost always a non-fiction work, and I regularly look at the new book shelves of my public library. Most current fiction leaves me cold but there are any number of good non-fiction books being published. I also have a list of books to read and, of course, I have hundreds of my own books to choose from and to read or re-read as the mood strikes.

Do you belong to a book club?

No. I want to choose what I read and besides, discussing a book in a group is too much like being in a classroom. I’ve enjoyed reading German novels much more after leaving school than I did when the same work was assigned.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you like to know?

Christopher Morley. I’d want to know more about some of my favorite books written by him: *Human Being*, *The Man Who Made Friends With Himself*, and *Where the Blue Begins*. We’d talk about other things, too, including his friendship with **William McFee**, another of my favorite authors. Maybe he could join us and I could ask about *Captain Macedoine’s Daughter*.

What was the last book that made you cry?

Lassie Come Home, by **Eric M. Knight**. I read it aloud to my wife and daughter, and when I got to the end of the story, I lost it. Books otherwise don’t make me cry but reading aloud to others can be an emotional experience, so who knows what tear-jerkers are out there waiting to be read aloud.

What’s the last book that made you laugh?

Forrest Gump by **Winston Groom**, not to be confused with a film of the same name and a prime example of Hollywood’s talent for ruining a good story. **Groom’s** Viet Nam era tale made me laugh out loud several times and I laughed again at the same places when I re-read the book years later. The book is a Viet Nam vet’s (**Groom’s**) cynical look at the society that sent him overseas.

You’re hosting a literary dinner party. Which three writers are invited?

James Jones, William Styron, and Willie Morris.

They might drink more than they would eat but it would be an unforgettable meal. All three are gone now but for a feel of what the evening might be like, read *James Jones: a Friendship* wherein you will find all three men. I would hold the dinner party in **Jones’s** Paris apartment and would try to simply listen and enjoy and not try to keep up with them.

Who’s your favorite fictional character?

Horatio Hornblower. He might be the only fictional character with his own biography thus proving to some people that he was not fictional at all but a real person. Else, where did all those details come from that **C. Northcote Parkinson** provided? There were even portraits, for goodness sake.

I met Hornblower while I was still in high school. I admired his pluck and courage when he was a mere midshipman and I envied his skill at whist. Overall, I admire his sensibilities as a human being and that is one reason that I continue to re-read the series. I do not recommend any film representation, not even **Gregory Peck’s**. Once again, Hollywood doesn’t get it.

Do you have a favorite novel of all time?

The Grapes of Wrath by **John Steinbeck**. There are many other novels that I am glad to have read but having recently re-read **Steinbeck’s** masterpiece, I’ll put it at the top of the list. It was even better the second time, but the intervening fifty years or so may have influenced my greater appreciation.

What’s the best book you’ve read this year (2015)?

Captain Macedoine’s Daughter, by **William McFee**. A close second is **Edmund Wilson’s** *Memoirs of Hecate County*. I have a shelf of **Wilson’s** diaries and criticism. I had no idea that he wrote fiction, fiction that was banned in not only Boston but New York City, too. The sex scenes that got it banned could be shown on television nowadays. And close behind are *The Caine Mutiny* (the movie based on it is actually passable but still no substitute for the book) and *The Naked and the Dead* (skip the movie, read the book) by **Norman Mailer**.

Other questions appear from week to week but no time or space. If you belong to a book club, might I suggest that you jointly read “By the Book” (they are available in the online version of *The New York Times*) and take turns answering different questions each time you meet. I suggest that it would lead to bookish conversations and insights and you wouldn’t feel as if you are back in school. Not that that is a bad thing. 🌿