

A woman wearing a grey hijab and a brown jacket is shown in profile, holding a green book. The book cover has white text. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

book
smart

Your Essential
Reading List
for
Becoming a
Literary Genius
in 365 Days

jane mallison

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Preface

There are worse crimes than burning books. One of them is not reading them.

—Joseph Brodsky

THE GREAT Italian poet Petrarch confessed in a letter to a relative that he had an insatiable desire (*una inexplebilis cupiditas*) for books. He expanded on his longing with the statement that “Books delight us profoundly, they speak to us, they give us good counsel, they enter into an intimate companionship with us.”

Petrarch, of course, was writing in the mid-fourteenth century and had no access to printed books, much less to films, video games, reality television, or netsurfing. And yet his words resound strikingly today to all who find that reading and books continue to exercise an indefinable witchery. The news of the death of the book—or, indeed, the death of the author—is greatly exaggerated. Love of reading lives on in the hearts of many of us, all who are proud to brand ourselves as bibliophiles, benign bibliomaniacs, or even nonrecovering biblioholics. (I take this last term from Tom Raabe’s delightful 1991 book *Biblioholism: The Literary Addiction*.) Eschew the term *bookworm* and replace it with the more exotic *Corrodentia*, a toothy order of insects that devours books.

Finding a Good Book

A secondary trait of committed readers is the pleasure we get in passing on the joy we have got from a book. (I like the phrase of Barbara Fister of the Alaska Library Association, who says that the practice of devouring what others have read or are reading makes reading “a contact sport.”) I enjoy passing on titles of books to friends, and people often remain in my memories

because they introduced me to a certain author. (Thanks, David Lipscomb, for Robertson Davies, and thanks, Tom Van Essen, for Kate Atkinson!)

Beyond recommendations, what are other ways of finding a good book? I have vivid memories of a chancy procedure. At sixteen, I often went to my public library in Kingsport, Tennessee, with my best friend, Margaret Gruver. There we took turns being led, eyes shut, to a shelf where we chose a book. I discovered Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* that way, but I also consumed a lot of junk. If you're over sixteen, don't try it. Thomas Wolfe, "the gargantuan writer with gargantuan appetites," in the fine phrase of Richard Marius, took on yet another system. He seriously aspired to read all the books in Harvard's Widener Library. (Take a look at the interesting *Widener: Biography of a Library* by Matthew Battles.) Life is just not long enough for this method of book selection, be it Dewey decimal or Library of Congress. Even Petrarch, whose personal library of several hundred books was large for its day, sorted out a select group that he labeled "*libri mei peculiare*s"—his special friends, the ones he wanted to turn to most often.

Yes, we must all seek varying ways to trawl the ever-rolling sea of books to net those books that will bring us the most benefit or pleasure and spare us the "wilderment and despair" that Thomas Wolfe eventually experienced as he faced the shelves of serried volumes. Those suggestions from personal acquaintances are wonderful as are recommendations from librarians or book dealers: I have a friend who swears by a Canadian bookseller who, once he learned that John much admires the mysteries of Ian Rankin, was able to put him on to several other authors he enjoys.

Sometimes, though, we exhaust the immediate resources of friends, even those who, like Gertrude Stein, find reading "synonymous with living" and in-the-flesh professionals. Bestseller lists have both their uses and their limitations, and listings of the "top ten" of books of various sorts can, of course, be found online: I easily discovered categories as specialized as "banned books" or "submarine thrillers," but list fatigue sets in quickly when you peruse a mere catalogue of names.

This book is designed to offer you the names of some 120 "good reads" as well as quite a few extra suggestions slipped in here and there.

It also presents a vestige of a system to help you read more and read to greater effect. There is much to be said for serendipity, reading as fancy takes you, picking up whatever comes to hand. There is also considerable weight on the other side of the argument. Robert Burton, the great seventeenth-century author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, had this to say: “I have read many books but to little purpose, for want of good method; I have confusedly tumbled over divers authors in our libraries with small profit for want of art, order, memory, judgment.” Burton is of course overly modest (great writers ultimately put everything to use), but a little system as you confront “divers authors” can help.

The Joys of Being Well-Read

As a well-read person, I certainly feel satisfaction when I recognize a literary allusion in a newspaper article or when I can identify an older author’s influence on an emerging writer. And how satisfying it is to see myself as a part of the wondrous continuum of lovers of books through the centuries—Brother Petrarch, Sister Stein. Still, all these things seem as external as P. J. O’Rourke’s charmingly cynical statement “Always read something that will make you look good if you die in the middle of it.”

The condition of “being well-read” seems too static, a sealed-off definition. Passionate turners of pages can never feel “been there, done that.” We need to know where our next book is coming from. Having read and continuing to read—we need them both.

The joys of reading—let me count the ways. One joy of reading: the stimulation of our own thinking. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s utterance “Books are for nothing but to inspire” is pithy as is his assertion in a different essay that some books take rank in our lives with parents and lovers. Franz Kafka stuns us with his statement about our need for books that wake us up “with a blow on the head,” books that strike “like an axe at the frozen sea within us.”

A second joy, the vicarious gaining of experience, is voiced by Ernest Hemingway in his article for *Esquire* magazine entitled “An Old News-
man Writes: A Letter from Cuba.” “All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and after-

wards it all belongs to you.” How else can I hang out with bullfighters? Be a teenager on a raft going down the Mississippi? Marry the owner of Pemberley—or dream I went back to Manderley?

C. S. Lewis puts well a third joy in books: “We read to know that we are not alone.” The right book is always out there whether we seek consolation, distraction, amusement, or verification of our thoughts and feelings in ways we ne’er so well expressed, such as Vivian Gornick’s description of the claims of romantic love being “injected like dye into the nervous system of my emotions.”

How to Use This Book

Book Smart is organized by the months of the year. Here’s the basic plan for using it as your companion for a year of reading. January is an ideal starting point, but you can dive in at the month of your choice. Set yourself the goal of reading one book each month. You may have limited time to read on many days, but even a fifteen-minute stint can keep you involved with your book. (I also recommend interstitial reading—reading you can sneak in between the more substantive actions of the day, reading between the cracks.) Scan the write-up of each of the recommended books (they vary greatly in their scope and depth), and choose the one you find most appealing. At the end of a calendar year, your brain will be twelve books richer. If you can read more than one book per month, so much the better! The plan works for solitary readers, for two friends who make a plan to read together, or for a larger group such as a book club. (I long to believe there’s one wild completist out there who will set out to use the book for ten years.)

Alternatively, for those who prefer always to color outside the lines, ignore the monthly setup and customize the write-ups of these 120 books to suit your fancy. A few possibilities follow.

- Launch yourself on a plan to select your twelve books alphabetically by author’s last name (Chinua Achebe on the June list will be your starting point and A. B. Yehoshua from that same list your Ultima Thule; the midpoint falls between two very different books: Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* and David Levering Lewis’s biography of W. E. B. Du Bois.)

- Choose chronology, starting with Homer’s *Iliad* from the November list and ending with Claire Messud’s 2006 novel from the October list.
- Try going from the alpha to the omega of estimated seriousness or challenge (start, say, with James Thurber from the August list and aim toward Thomas Mann—just one possibility—on the March list).
- Take the horizontal approach of picking your favorite category and reading 100 percent of the books in that grouping; you’ll be able to read 20 percent of a second category as well in the span of a year.
- Start with Virginia Woolf’s classic nonfiction book *A Room of One’s Own* (in the April listing) and take on eleven other female writers in various categories.
- Follow in the steps of Ralph Waldo Emerson and write “Whim” on your lintel-post by choosing your favorite means of chance. You could cast the I Ching or devise your variant on the *sortes virgilianae*. Just as people used to open, randomly, Virgil’s *Aeneid* (see January), touch one line, and interpret it in light of their lives, so you might flip this book open anywhere and slap your finger on the write-up of a book you’ll then read that month. (Since all books described here are guaranteed to be books worth reading, you won’t experience a quagmire of so-so books, as I did back there in the Kingsport library.)

The Book Smart 120

Other than being worthy objects of your attention, what else characterizes these books? Two ground rules: (1) The Bible and Shakespeare are “givens,” so they don’t appear, and (2) with one exception, no writer is represented by more than one book. (Homer, the rule-proving exception, appears twice, but he may have been two different people, if he existed at all.) The great majority are novels, books that bring to mind Robert Coles’s fine phrase “the call of stories.” These novels range from

the cradle of the genre, seventeenth-century Spain (*Don Quixote* on the January list) and eighteenth-century England (four books on the September list) on up to 2006. There are four plays, scattered among four lists. Many of the January classical choices are poetry, and Milton (May), Juvenal (August), and Whitman (December) join them. Ninety percent of February is biography (Julian Barnes's book being a novel about biography), and other nonfiction books appear sporadically, like pop-ups (Thoreau in March, Woolf in April, Capote in May, Sedaris in August, Boswell and Thrale in September, Edmund Wilson in November, and Lewis Thomas, lone scientist, in December).

The problem of dinosaur dimensions: (1) the interesting categories of organization that were unconceived or unused (an all-Venice grouping lies on the floor) and (2) the excellent authors that are unrepresented. I identify with the operatic Don Giovanni, who notes that being faithful to one woman entails being unfaithful to all the rest. When I survey my own list, I shout phrases like "No Philip Roth?!" and I hear you, reader, saying, "I can't believe _____ isn't here!" (Supply your favorite outrage of omission.) See the introduction to the April list to explain the missing Jane Austen and George Eliot, and know that many splendid authors are omitted not for want of worth but for lack of room.

But I must conclude. I've just been given a copy of Liam Callanan's fresh-from-the-press novel *All Saints*. (The author's a man, the narrator's a woman—a phenomenon I haven't experienced since Norman Rush's *Mating*.) Can't wait to start it.

It's out there waiting for me, and for you—the old magic of books.

Acknowledgments

ALL THAT remains is the pleasant job of thanks. Grace Freedson and Karen Young are professional book women *extraordinaires*. Andrea Pasinetti, a young man once my student, now my friend, opened my eyes to an author new to me and contributed to the entry on that author, José Rizal. He also provided the epigraph for the introduction. Tom Sullivan, my teaching colleague, suggested good ideas for the June listing and supplied its title. I am blessed with more bookishly delightful friends than I can list, but I'm pleased to indite here a sextet of "reading women" in six different states of the union, with whom I've talked about books for more than twenty years: Katherine Sproles Barr, Mary Bevilacqua, Marilyn Bonner, Barbara Morrison, Marilyn Wulliger, and Louise Zak. I owe most to Kenneth Silverman, book smart, street-smart man. More learned than most, he still knows how to look up in perfect silence at the stars.

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