

Eric Seiley
Generativity After 50
15 December 2019
10, 195 Words

English Books in an American Tub

Nick Hornby, the writer, has forgotten more books than I've read apparently. But not by much if I am to believe his literary confessions. Which he warmly and humorously shared over several afternoons thru his feature articles penned for Believer magazine – the very same I recently finished reading in compilation form as *10 Years in the Tub: A Decade Soaking in Great Books.*

Like Hornby, I grew up pre-internet, so reading physical books, with actual paper pages and bound cover, is about as ingrained a hobby as cellphones have become with today's youth. And as life affirming. Like my own daughters who have iPhones grafted to their hand at all times, I keep a book with me wherever I go. Ironically, the older I get the more I prefer staying home though to soak in tub while reading. Even if the book pages get wet.

Hornby talks about his reading life being a malleable event. Subject to the stratagems of English family life and the mercurial skill of his favorite soccer team, the Arsenal Football Club, being able to reach the finals. Unlike Hornby, my own reading life has never been malleable, but a steady state. A vital source. Until middle age when all those too familiar pressures of raising a family, owning a home, building a career, and attending to the prerequisites of suburban middle class existence began intruding. By the time I turned fifty, I'd developed a serious lack of adaption and interest in new

authors and novels. Not dissimilar to how writers describe writer's block. I just couldn't find anyone I wanted to read or who could hold my interest for very long. Which eventually, in frustration, I chalked up to poor writer's craft rather than my own reading habits becoming lazy.

"The literary luster has finally dulled across the literary world," I opined to my older daughter, Olivia. "The proof," I expressed, "being how much more adept at the millennial nothingness of social media this new generation of "writers" has become rather than developing their skill to pen a brilliant story of literary achievement."

"No one uses pens anymore, Dad, or even knows how to write in cursive. That's pretty antiquated," Olivia rejoined as if this explained everything that was wrong with my opinion.

Nick, I was sure, would agree with me. But he wasn't so convinced suggesting "sometimes the fault of not liking a book or author is due to the reader being too uptight and not the writer's inferior product." I couldn't wholeheartedly agree, but I did admit falling into bad habits and easy distraction had led to a stagnated reading life. Which left a bit of a dent in my psyche. A problem I wasn't comfortable with, not having experienced such a thing since my teen years trying to fathom *The Magus* by John Fowles and being left completely frustrated and unable to read for several months. I was now post-fifty and equally disgruntled.

"Reading should be relaxed and in no hurry," I explained to my youngest daughter, Grace, when I realized she was skim reading her assigned book for English class and not gleaming much information from it because she was more intent on returning to her latest Disney show obsession. "A gift, not a duty."

But was I being honest? I was post-50 and not setting much of a better example. My girls knew the shows I liked to stream, but not what authors or books I was most

recently trying to read. And those I was reading, with a few exceptions, I wasn't getting much enjoyment from. And it was sure to go on that way for a while had I not, on a random occurrence, found myself at the mall without a book and an afternoon to kill. I picked up Hornby's *10 Years in the Tub* from the sale bin figuring it would be easier and quicker to reading a few articles discussing books than actually invest in a full novel.

Nick wrote, I read, and I had an epiphany. Something about what he wrote just struck a chord.

"It's okay," Nick offered, "To not like a book, whether written well or not, simply because you're too busy. Or the book too full of itself. Books should be read, but sometimes the circumstances of your life are more important and preclude this."

I suddenly, after a long time, felt inspired to read again. And not just short pieces, but full books. To find the joy and not take my readership, or the books on my shelf, so seriously. So, I purposed, if I wanted to be the open hearted bibliophile I once was, I should lose the elitist attitude Hornby suggested might possibly be stuck in a very dark place up my body in stick form and be more willingness to read for efficacy's sake. Less "grumpy old man" set in his rigid ways and more seasoned reader willing to expand his boundaries for propriety's sake once again.

And so, as an experiment, I determined to speak with friend and stranger alike -- millennial to boomer to essentially anyone still determined to read – for one whole year asking for recommendations and reading every book recommended no questions asked. Well, a few questions, but still with the intent of being open and accepting. For all of 2019 – immediately acquiring each book, stacking them on my "to read" shelf in my library, and taking notes as I read each one – and reading till the stack reduced and the shelf was bare one year later. A year of reading indiscriminately excluding, of course, those suggested which I'd already read.

I was pleasantly surprised by the vastness of reader's experiences out there. Also very disappointed. Some books recommended, I just knew I wouldn't like. I mean, how many frat boys across the Greek system believe Bret Ellis Easton's American Psycho is brilliant? Or how many deluded teens and frumpy housewives binge-ing any Stephen King novel believe they are reading "good" books? Still, I forgave most of them because, hey, they were reading. And to be fair, occasionally a book did come along that didn't sound like my kind of book but ended up blowing my proverbial mind. William T. Vollman's *Seven Dreams* series of historical fiction alone amazed me for its scope and proliferation -- enough to restore my faith in the art form. Or World War Z by Max Brooks. This book destroyed my preconceived notion millennial writers were inferior to their 20th century counterparts. I'd stack World War Z against any Jules Vern adventure story in imagination and fun any day. To the point I had to concede maybe *some new century authors* still respected the art form and were sufficiently talented to grant hope for the future. The Time Traveler's Wife by Audrey Niffenegger and Olive Kitteridge by Elizabeth Stroud came along and I still think about them for the wonderful little gems they were. Thank you Sheila and Michael respectively wherever you are for suggesting them. But overall, I found far too many recommendations led to far too many disappointments over likes – about three out of every four. And far too many poorly talented, compromised writers like Patricia Cornwell, James Patterson and Dan Brown. Each and every one of them should be forced to wipe their tushy with the vast amount of paper product they wasted on such pulp drivel. While suffering annoying paper cuts in a salt bath during the process! For a thousand years!

By the end of the year, I'd finished two dozen books in total after attempting nearly six dozen. Why only twenty-four books? Because most weren't worth reading no matter what Hornby says. And the fault with those turds do lie exclusively in the hands of

their shitty authors – you know who you are – along with the conspiratorial help from this century’s built-for-speed-disposable-quantity-turn-a-buck publishing house system.

The year didn’t proceed anything like I imagined, book-wise, but I did learn a lot. And was able to expand my limitations, gratified with the opportunity to finish my little reading experiment. It definitely improved my repertoire and broke me out of my molded literary world.

Here then are several selections from my year of “reading in the tub,” thanks to Nick Hornby’s inspiration.

January 2019

1. 10 Years in the Tub (2013) by Nick Hornby. Well, if you don’t know why this book starts the list then you missed the entire point and should go watch social media or hit yourself in the head with a ballpeen hammer or something generally nuanced like that. Either way I think it’s time you moved away from the reading springboard and dive back into your merry internet. BTW, I still keep a copy of Hornby’s book in my car just to dip into for fun.
2. Juliet, Naked (2010) by Nick Hornby. I believe starting with one of Hornby’s published fictions shows respect and was the right choice. Sadly, not so much the book. I purchased Juliet, Naked from Costco on a rainy afternoon after a friend recommended it. And in Nick’s favor, I did finish the entire book in a single day without being bored at any particular point. *Juliet, Naked*, I would say, is not a great book. But I liked it because Nick always finds a way to express the truth of human experience, especially in matters of the heart. Not as poignantly as he might want, but the story does stay with you a bit. The problem is, like

Grisham and Crichton before him, every Hornby novel I've read reads like a movie script in literary form. Which, inevidently, they are each turned into. I've held a long believed theory that, like physicians, writer's should specialize in areas they are best. Nick, as one example, is a far superior editorial forum writer for Believe magazine than, say, as a novelist. Though he can do both, his articles tend to convey the greater wit, intelligence, and insight.

3. Profiles in Courage (1956) by John F. Kennedy. JFK researched and wrote this 1956 volume of short biographies describing acts of bravery by eight United States Senators who defied the opinions of their party not only to do what they felt was right, but in the face of severe criticism and loss in popularity because of their actions. At least that's what the interior book flap claimed. Then Senator Kennedy (JFK) also won the 1957 Pulitzer Prize in Biography for this feel-good, American politics cheerleader book. Which I first read in 1991 after a fellow servicemember raved about it and remember enjoying the outlandish tales about American Senators, especially John C. Calhoun, who populate the book. But a second read, recommended by a local politician of course, and I felt this book was not worthy of a Pulitzer. More like history-lite as a beach read. It's somewhat niche with decent research, historical interest, and readable quality. But not particularly mind blowing or insightful. Cheap inspiration for the civic minded I'd say. Stephen King for the two-faced politician. And it reads like a required text for every high school history and civics class trying to keep students from being bored. I assume it could be both, but I am also sure Jacque Barzun and Carl Sandburg should roll over in their graves. I wonder how much this little pamphlet set the Kennedy family back monetarily bribing the Pulitzer panel of judges to choose this little treacly affair? Hmmm? Shameful.

4. *This Boy's Life* (1989) by Tobias Wolfe. My high school English teacher, Ms. Adams first recommended I read this knowing I had a thing for coming of age novels. But, at the time, I went with *East of Eden* and never returned to Wolfe's book. I was familiar with it having watched the 1993 movie, starring Robert DeNiro and a young Leonard DiCaprio, when a chance run into with an old cop buddy, Dave, at Vanity Fair mall in San Jose led to us sitting down and talking books and movies. Dave, who always had a great love for J.D. Salinger and *Catcher in the Rye* re-recommended this book.

5. *Motoring with Mohammed* (1991) by Eric Hansen. "There are lots of travel writers out there," the clerk at Books, Inc. in Mountain View explained, "and seemingly more popping up every week. But Hansen is the best." So I bought *Motoring with Mohammed* in paperback (yuck! I hate paperback) because I was between shifts at my hospital and needed something to read. *Motoring with Mohammed* is a cultural travel book containing 18 essays exposing you to other places, times, and cultures in fun and interesting ways. Hansen truly does a wonderful job taking you with him on his journeys. Which is the whole point I suspect.

6. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (1964) by Hubert Selby Jr. *Last Exit to Brooklyn* was a little known 1989 movie, based on Selby's 1964 book, I first saw when I was in my deeply affected, "indie" movie phase at nineteen years of age. And I had a crush on the actress, Jennifer Jason Leigh, ever since seeing her in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Miami Blues*. But I hadn't read the novel. Nor honestly, did I realize there was a novel the movie was based off of when I was younger. Reading *Last Exit to Brooklyn* became part of my "gangs of New York" reading trifecta which included *The Wanderers* by Richard Price, *The Warriors* by Sol

Yurick, and *The Lords of Flatbush* by Leonore Fleischer. All of each I'd previously seen the movies adapted from the books. You may also include *The Outsiders* or *Rumble Fish* by S.E. Hinton if you like, but I'd already read Hinton in high school and, therefore, did not include here.

Last Exit takes a harsh and uncompromising look at the lower classes of Brooklyn during the 1950s though I honestly can't say how true to life its portrayals actually were. The book certainly felt true and received a great deal of criticism for being too raw. Too realistic for 1950.

Written in a brusque, everyman style of prose that takes a bit getting used to, *Last Exit* flows quickly from degenerate character to degenerate character each misguidedly looking for love and acceptance. Selby never seems to judge them, but it is hard for the reader not to. Especially considering how easily you could see yourself making the same choices under the same circumstances. Or feeling superior knowing you would not have had you lived in Selby's Brooklyn. At least you hope you would not have. Which is a testament to Selby's authorship.

Not necessarily an essential book to read, but legitimate and worthwhile, nonetheless. Oh and a warning; TraLaLa, as the maternal conscious of the group, will definitely break your heart.

Selby has a couple other novels I am interested in reading but don't know if I want to go down that rabbit hole just yet. *The Room* (1971) which Wikipedia describes as "one of the most violent and disturbing books ever written" and *Requiem for a Dream* (1976) which tells the tale of four interconnected lives each of whom suffer the destructive power of addiction.

7. *Farther Away* (2011) by Jonathan Franzen. I really don't like Franzen no matter what the New York Times Book Review says. And reading *Farther Away* did

little to change my opinion about him. He comes across like an egotistical gas bag in love with his own narrow minded, douchebag opinions. In all fairness, I did read The Corrections and Freedom when they first were published years ago and hated both of them. Not because they weren't well written. They were. In fact, Franzen's prose is as lovely and flowing as any John Irving novel. And there is nothing particularly un-compelling about his plotlines, characters, or book progressions. But he is bleak and cynical. And something about the way he always has a sexually deviant character in his books comes across as more than a bit creepy. Ironically, Irving is also known for including sexual peculiarities in his novels which, for him, generally come off as endearingly quirky. Don't ask me why Franzen, who stylistically copies Irving, has the opposite effect, but I suppose that would make for a good compare and contrast essay. Sadly, for me, there is not much redemption to be found in a Franzen novel. And the only reason I picked up Farther Away was because the CZU fires had displaced me and my family from our home for a few weeks and I had to leave all my books at the house so had nothing to read while I stayed in a hotel in Mountain View. In hindsight, I should have taken the week off from work and travelled to our townhouse in Lake Tahoe. That would have been time much better spent.

February 2020

8. The Complete Western Tales (2004) by Elmore Leonard. If you know my position on authors who write better within specific forums, i.e. the short story (Halpern) versus the novel (Steinbeck) versus new journalism (Mailer), then you won't be surprised to learn Elmore Leonard is arguably a much better short story writer than novelist. And his complete western tales are a welcome return to form. Leonard's rough prose creates atmosphere throughout his more charming

fugitive stories (*Out of Sight*), southern crime tales (*Fire in the Hole*) and gangster infusions (*Get Shorty*). Now all conveniently packaged in the wild west.

9. *The Testaments* (2019) by Margaret Atwood. I really like Atwood ever since reading her dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) back in 1987. Well before it was adapted into an operatic feminist tale for the modern generation of post-millennial, *Netflix and Chill* streamers. Atwood's other historical fiction novel, *Alias Grace* (1996), also being one of my other favorite psychological mysteries. And so when I learned *The Testaments*, Atwood's sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale*, had been published at the beginning of the Covid pandemic, it seemed a no-brainer to purchase and read. Only problem is, the pandemic has ended and the book is still sitting on my shelf waiting to be read. No particular reason why. I just haven't gotten around to it yet.
10. *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006) by Max Brooks is the great surprise of the entire year.

A self-avowed fantasy reader whom I was chatting up at a local coffee shop the other day recommended this book. Traditionally, I am not much interested in fantasy nor do zombie books rank high on my literary ladder of desired reading. But, since I promised I would expand my reading repertoire by reading any book recommended to me, I bought this one on my coffee shop acquaintance's say so. And discovered *World War Z* falls into the same category as Hornby's *Reading in the Tub* for its pure ability to surprise and entertain. I so enjoyed reading Brook's book I turned back to the first page immediately after finishing and read it through a second time! And was still surprisingly moved at how innovative the

story and depth of character were. Especially for a fantasy zombie book which bore little relation to the movie of the same name starring Brad Pitt.

Bonus information alert! Author Max Brooks, I learned, is the son of the wonderful actor, producer, director Mel Brooks. Mel being the writer director of the greatest monster comedy movie ever made, Young Frankenstein! Now there's a fun connection.

Side Note: Sadly, Max's second novel, Devolution (2020), which I read later in the year in July, didn't score super high and devolved down my list. Devolution was an enjoyable beach read sure enough, nicely written with an interesting story, and certainly nothing to be down about, but it just didn't have the same impact as Max's first novel, WWZ.

Okay, I was a bit saddened by the letdown. But I would still recommend both novels. Another sad note, though Max has continued to write, he has changed mediums and is now working in the "graphic novel" phase of his career. Or as I like to call them, comic books for adults. Another letdown. Max is bating one for three.

11. Collected Stories Vol I (1989) by Richard Matheson. Richard Matheson is iconic in the world of science fiction for being the original prolific voice behind most sci fi themes and tropes in existence today. Before Asimov. Before Ellison. Before Bradbury. In fact, Matheson's closest comparative progenitor would be Philip K. Dick. Both were similarly not great in the prose department, but so highly original in story creation and interesting concepts, their somewhat rough writing skills are excused.

Volume one, along with volume two and three, contain 86 of Matheson's original short stories arranged chronologically for publication by Matheson himself. Too many stories to name, but his best-known works are here including the Twilight Zone adapted episodes ("Nightmare at 20,000 feet," "Button Button," and "Third from the Sun") and film adaptation, "I am Legend." Reading Matheson, as far as I am concerned, remains essential for any person claiming to love science fiction who does not want to be known as a poser.

12. The Collected Stories (1992) by William Trevor. When I do not know an author's work or know whether I will like reading them or not, I always start reading their short stories first. Short stories being a fairly good representation of an author's skill, style, and reader compatibility.

I was unfamiliar with British novelist William Trevor, not having heard of him previously, until Hornby mentioned him in 10 Years in the Tub, and made him sound interesting to read. And so I bought The Collected Stories which was billed as "bringing together most of the stories found in seven (seven!) of his [Trevor] earlier short story collections."

Now I like a good British author same as the rest and so I felt positive I would like Trevor. But it was February, with too many short days not to be out and about, and so didn't want to spend the day's small amount of sunlight sitting indoors reading. Nor was I in the mood for a British novelist's densely baroque prose. Especially after the quick paced fun I had reading Brook's WWZ and Elmore's Western shorts. So on the shelf Trevor went to wait for the next long summer's day of sunlight when I would find myself with ample time to read to my heart's content and a good British author sounding like just the ticket.

13. Atlas Shrugged (1957) by Ayn Rand. It is near difficult to find a living person who claims to love Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged and actually have read the damn tome. And equally hard to filter out all the people who claim to understand Atlas Shrugged who aren't just being hypocritical posers. I am not one of those people and openly admit I have never read further than the third chapter of Atlas Shrugged.

I did read The Fountainhead when I was 19 years old, after a master sergeant in the Air Force heard me proselytizing to my fellow airman about conformity and thought I was cribbing Rand's philosophy on individualism. I promise you I was not, but I did read The Fountainhead at her suggestion and felt validated for having had similar thinking. Not to mention finding one of the greatest, top ten favorite books to read and recommend.

"A man's ego is the fountainhead of human progress. The future is very much in our hands and in our actions." - Ayn Rand.

What 19-year-old boy on the precipice of manhood wouldn't eat up this kind of philosophy. Believing we control our own destiny. 35 years later, having lived long enough to know failures and success', joys and regrets, I am much more cynical about Rand and her beliefs. The future is not always "in our hands" and we won't always successfully overcome the fear individualism challenges us to. I can still see the importance of such an ideal, even in my old age, and feel it is important for younger readers to believe choice and action determine future consequence. But, in reality, such circumstances aren't always under their control.

If you have not read Atlas Shrugged or The Fountainhead, I would recommend The Fountainhead. You're welcome to try Atlas Shrugged since I cannot say

anything against having only read three chapters. But I have read *The Fountainhead* three times cover to cover, with a fourth planned for the end of this year, and still love it. It may sound strange, but *The Fountainhead* has the most interesting romance between its protagonists you have to read to believe. I also contend that *The Fountainhead* is arguably the better novel compared to its preachy sibling.

14. The book of Acts. English Standard Bible. My Tuesday night bible study group, BSF (Bible Study Fellowship), has started the season with Acts.

March 2020

15. *The Warriors* (1965) by Sol Yurick and #16, *The Wanderers* (1974) by Richard Price

The Warriors and *The Wanderers* are part of my “gangs” of the 70’s reading retrospective along with *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *The Lords of Flatbush*. Each book representing a different stylistic view of gang and street life from the 1950’s to the 1970’s respectively.

I don’t know if I had the reading experience the authors intended with either *The Warriors* or *The Wanderers* having first seen both movie adaptations well before reading either book. *The Outsiders* I read early on in my youth before the book and movie became so iconic. The book has since become required reading in most middle school English classes. (Except for my daughter who only pretended to read her copy and then try to bluff me into believing she had read it not realizing I had. We had an argumentative discussion about not lying that day).

I read S.E. Hinton's Rumble Fish and Tex after Outsiders, but even as a juvenile found her books to be, well, fairly juvenile. Today, Hinton's novels are categorized as YA Lit (Young Adult Literature) which seems more appropriate. On a lark, I also discovered Hinton's Hawk's Harbor in a book sale bin a decade ago and read it. It turned out to be a nice little vampire tale similar to Stephen King's Salem's Lot.

Reading The Warriors, however, was more surprising than I imagined since it was different from its movie adaptation (though you can certainly see where the plot and characters from the movie came from). I enjoyed the book, but the movie improved and enhanced the story making it the better choice. While The Wanderers as a novel was better than the movie in many ways, the movie was able to bring out greater sentiment between the characters. Not to mention the excellent way the movie created tension leading up to the very satisfying football field fight scene.

A very fast read at 239 pages, The Wanderer is rough and juvenile at the same time. There are poignant moments such as Buddy Borsalino's Wedding Day signaling the end of the Wanderer's neighborhood alliance as each member realizes their childhood friendships have come to an end. But then the author introduces a last chapter. I first assumed it would be an epilogue (which would have been better than what the author had in mind). And, in all fairness he does telegraph what is coming with the last chapter titled, "Coda: A Rape." I don't know what Price's point was intended to convey by closing the book with one of the main character's first love being raped later that night after the wedding. The rape felt out of place and utterly unnecessary. It also ruined the ending of an otherwise fine beach read.

16. Still Wild, Short Stories edited by Larry McMurtry Still Wild continues my recent interest in the western short story.

17. Don Quixote by Miguel Cervantes. This is my white whale. The book I have always promised myself to read, but am too intimidated to actually start reading.

18. I Must Say; My Life as a Humble Comedy Legend by Martin Short. I must say I am surprised how little humor was on the page and how arrogant Short came across. I was sad to say I disliked the book because I have enjoyed Short's career. Jimminy Glick, SNL, and even his efforts at leading man in the movies, Cross My Heart and Pure Luck.

I Must Say was intended to be my beach read for the day. I dropped Gracie off at a 3rd grade classmate's birthday party (at a place called Glow in Harvey West Park) and had two hours to sit and wait. Thinking it would be an enjoyable afternoon sitting in the reading for a few hours turned out to be a big disappointment. Short writes methodically, with little of his rumored story telling skill, as he works his way from the early stages to the later stages of his career all the while dropping celebrity names up till his most recent collaboration with Steve Martin. What surprised me most was how conceited Short comes across. Not that he shouldn't be I suppose considering his career, but his reputation has not been this. Rather than humility and graciousness, he spews a non-chalant I-am-a 1-percenter and you are lucky to hear all my stories detailing my "average" Hollywood life of parties and movies and mingling with famous people. Oh well, not a book to keep or recommend. I donated it to Goodwill on the way home.

A side note: I had dinner Trevor and Tracey Kendall this week, both of whom are fellow book lovers. Tracey caught me by surprise when she asked if I had been to the new bookstore, Bad Animal, which recently opened in Santa Cruz. I was more surprised a bookstore had opened (since used bookstores are a dying establishment), but we went, and I loved it. It was a small, well curated book shop combined with hipster/yuppie bistro bar for the discerning adult. While drinking a Discretion Black Lager, I wound my way through the shelves finding many a book to read as much as books I had read. All the while discussing authors and books with friends. I bought Tracey a collection of Joan Didion since she was unfamiliar with the tenements of New Journalism. In turn, she encouraged me to read Don Quixote by Migel Cervantes; a book I, of course, knew of, but had never actually read. The whole evening felt like 1960's authors hanging out in a Paris bistro arguing over the great American novel. A true treat for sure.

April 2020

19. Paris Trout (1988) by Pete Dexter may feel familiar to anyone who has read To Kill a Mockingbird, but this southern story has a decidedly more distorted view. Low key in many of the ways Mockingbird is not, the nuance of the novel creeps in, haunting your thoughts for weeks after reading. I believe Paris Trout arguably has the worst villain I have read since probably Dicken's Fagin. And I still am unsure just what makes him tick or what satisfaction he derived from such cruelty. Was he a misguided protector of a bigoted society, unintentionally calling out the hypocrisies and inconsistencies in this southern social drama or was he the villain hurting others because he could not assimilate and felt misunderstood and unloved. Or was he just born a prick? Dexter offers a few clues, but the reader ultimately has to decide.

I admire Dexter's authorial bravery for his willingness to write an irredeemable, incorrigible character as his main protagonist without falling victim to de-humanizing him. Paris Trout is very human and very much one of us if he is anything. Where To Kill a Mockingbird opines the gentile, fading values of a bygone Southern era, Paris Trout examines the darker side to that same coin. Or the fun house mirror if you prefer. Where Atticus Finch inspired us to see each other as individual people of equality and act accordingly, Trout reflects an individual man protected by societal covenant who refuses stewardship to those same societal conventions.

Like many a good author, Pete Dexter never seems to judge anyone he writes about. He only reflects each characters' values, and concealed prejudices, as they are drawn tighter and tighter into Trout's powerful orbit. And despite their freedom to choose, each character is left to play out as their particular personalities dictate, prejudices and bigotry along with intertwined desires et.al. There are motives to be sure, both understood and misunderstood, but Dexter never attempts to explain what they are to the reader. Instead, he leaves you to ponder whether any person truly has a choice or whether they, as are we, always doomed to follow our motives regardless to the very end.

20. Cloud Atlas (2004) by David Mitchell strikes me as a potentially great book if I could fully submerge myself into the story. But you have to work for it. It requires patience and persistence to follow the puzzles till, ultimately, the rewarding conclusion. The first few chapters take a little getting used to as Mitchell sets up six different, but decidedly inter-related characters whose lives stretch and impact each other across several different timelines. Mitchell writes well, and creatively, but this book of plot and character takes some

concentration. Which I wasn't up for at the moment. After three chapters, I set it down for a later time.

Slaughterhouse 5 (1969) by Kurt Vonnegut is a heartbreaker of the slow burn variety though not for the obvious reasons. The first time I read it in high school (junior year required reading), I dug the Tralfamadorian component most. I mean what teenager can't understand how the main character, Billy Pilgrim, desires to escape from the reality of who he is versus whom he would like to be. Throw in the "hot chick" starlet whom only has eyes for you and you have a book a teenage boy will read. However, at 16 years old, I did struggle with Pilgrim's motivations during the World War Two portion of the story. As a POW, I understood he was at the mercy to his captors and their angry treatment of him and his fellow POW's. But I couldn't understand why he would allow himself to be debased so extensively. Well beyond even what his fellow POWs sufferingly allowed. To the point that even they resented Pilgrim for the choices he was making. I argued that very point with my English teacher, who eventually gave me a B+ for my paper on Slaughterhouse 5, but suggested I was missing Vonnegut's point.

I will write this. I have re-read Vonnegut's book on two more occasions, in my 20's and in my 30's, and still cannot say I completely understand why Pilgrim allows himself to be further debased beyond even the humiliation offered. I considered the possibility he was offering up himself as a scapegoat to detract the guard's attention away from his fellow soldiers, but Pilgrim at 18 years old didn't have that kind of insight. Sometimes a person can turn the tables on their captors by embracing the humiliation and, therefore, exposing their tactics for

the misguided and shallow abuse they offer. But, again, Pilgrim didn't strike me as this self-aware or altruistic.

Kurt Vonnegut has since admitted Pilgrim to be a thinly disguised character of himself. Which extends to the adult Billy Pilgrim in the second half of the book. As an grown up myself, I could still empathize with Pilgrim, but quite a bit less charmed by his unwillingness to deal with reality. I understood his desire to escape, but I also began to resent the selfish act of escapism Pilgrim projects which does a great dis-service to his (i.e. Vonnegut's) real wife and real children. Yes, it is true. I do not believe the Tralfamadorians to be anything but projections of a psychotic break. Okay, so your experiences in the war fucked you up. Okay so you married an unimaginative, frumpy woman hoping she would make you happy. Okay so you have children increasing your financial burdens. Okay so you're a bit disappointed in life. You still have responsibility to the people in your life, disappointed or not. A responsibility beyond your self which makes escapism the most selfish act.

Who knows? Maybe I will have a different perspective when I read Vonnegut's book again in my 50's.

A side note: Fan theories from the internet can be an interesting lot. One particularly compelling fan theory connects Ronald Dahl's Willy Wonka and his characters from the 1964 book, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, with the characters in a 2013 post-apocalyptic science fiction action film, *Snowpiercer*, directed by Bong Joon Ho. I will spare you the details, but you should look it up. It's a very interesting and exciting theory that turns both stories on their head, so to speak.

I have a fan theory about Slaughterhouse 5. Not very ground My fan theory is Billy Pilgrim, from Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse 5, and Sam Lowry from the

movie Brazil are doppelgangers. I recently watched a YouTube film theory video in which a theorist convincingly postulated how the movie Snowpiercer was, in reality, a sequel to Ronald Dahl's book Charles and the Chocolate Factory (also known by its 1969 movie representative Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory). Now I look for connections everywhere. Thus Kurt Vonnegut's 1969 book Slaughterhouse 5 and Terry Gilliam's 1984 film Brazil were extensions of the same story and character. If I were a youtuber, I would make a film detailing the following similarities:

The main character in Slaughterhouse 5, Billy Pilgrim, is based semi-biographically on Mr Vonnegut's own war experience as a prisoner of war during WWII which included the bombing of Dresden, has an out of body experience in order to deal with his post traumatic experiences during the war. A fantasy projection of an intelligent mind unmoored from reality and fighting to make sense out of the senseless, demeaning experiences from the war and, to a lesser extent, his marriage to a domineering woman.

21. The Name of the Rose (1980) by Umberto Eco. What could be better than a Franciscan monk detective investigating murders at an Italian abbey in the year 1327? Thank Umberto for this engrossing historical fiction. Then go watch Sean Connery be an excellent Sean Connery in the 1986 movie which, incidentally, also features a young, charismatic Christian Slater playing a young, charismatic, vulnerable monk-trainee and an early career Ron Pearlman playing a hulkingly disgusting monk.

A rare combination where both the book and movie are satisfying in their own ways. Read the book first. Even though you will know the ending, the movie's performances and cinematography will accent your appreciation.

MAY 2020

Don't Ever Get Old by Daniel Friedman (a beach read, but won't go back for seconds)

The Last Boy; Mickey Mantle and the End of America's Childhood by Jane Leavy

The Given Day by Dennis Lehane (started. Not in the mood yet)

Wind River (2017) (movie) with Jeremy Renner and Elizabeth Olsen

Don't Ever Get Old is a murder mystery written by Daniel Friedman, circa May 2012, involving a senior citizen protagonist, his eponymous sidekick grandson, "Tequila" and the Nazi gold that corrupts many a character's soul. It is a surprisingly good "beach read" of a book. Fast paced with a cantankerously funny old man, a former policeman and detective, who begrudgingly sets out to find a little Nazi gold smuggled out of Germany at the end of WWII by his arch nemesis, Henrick Ziegler. Author Daniel Friedman, who is not a Nazi, an old man or a former police officer, does subtlety capture one thing in his lead character that only career police officers will recognize; a stoic, nihilistic attitude toward the world that alternately pushes people away while challenging them to look past the hard exterior to the sincere heart behind the image. I can tell you I am an older man, a war veteran, a former police officer and a former police detective who identified with the sentiments of Friedman's lead character. And so, I read on. Normally, I wouldn't read murder mystery novels. True police work destroyed my ability to suspend disbelief when it comes to crime, the "criminals" who commit them and crime being able to fit into a nice fictional narrative without severe alterations. But, Don't Ever Get Old, though a murder mystery with typical plot twists

and consistent progress toward the “whodunnit” of the plot, does get one thing right. The protagonist Buck Schatz’s demeanor. That, along with a quick narrative pace makes Don’t Ever Get Old worth reading if you find yourself by the pool one lazy, sunny day.

WIND RIVER is a chilling thriller that follows a rookie FBI agent (Elizabeth Olsen) who teams up with a local game tracker with deep community ties and a haunted past (Jeremy Renner) to investigate the murder of a local girl on a remote Native American Reservation in the hopes of solving her mysterious death. Written and directed by Taylor Sheridan, WIND RIVER also stars Gil Birmingham, Jon Bernthal, Julia Jones, Kelsey Asbille, and James Jordan.

JUNE 2020

Olive Kitteridge by Elizabeth Stroud (disappointed. Liked the concept but felt incomplete.)

Empire Falls by Richard Russo (re-read. Better the second time around. Raised my inner critique of the book to a higher level).

Knives Out (2019) (movie) with Jamie Lee Curtis, etc.

If Richard Russo, while in a melancholy mood, wrote Spoon River Anthology the result would be Olive Kitteridge by Elizabeth Stroud. Please do not feel I am being unfair to Ms Stroud since she has previously published several novels, but the distinction that she won the Pulitzer Prize for Olive Kitteridge offers the opportunity to be critical of her work. Olivia Kitteridge contains sixteen beautifully written, poignant, and insightful character studies loosely connected by the same town and the central character, Olive Kitteridge. And though I really enjoyed several of the “chapters,”

ultimately the book felt like a bit of an unfinished letdown. Like a much richer experience could have been had had Ms Stroud completed the narrative between the chapters. The book itself felt more a very detailed character prep for a novel yet to be written. No doubt Elizabeth Stroud has talent; her prose is fluid and poetic and she has a clear sense of character. But, in the end, I wanted more of a conventional plot to complete each chapter's character story.

Side note: This was the first novel I have read by Elizabeth Stroud. The whole while reading, I kept thinking of Spoon River Anthology in the way she pieced the chapters together and Richard Russo's Empire Falls for his sense of character and story. She writes very similarly to Richard Russo, but where Russo sees the more uplifting side of sad characters disappointed with life, Stroud's characters reflect the melancholy of sad characters disappointed with life. The flip side of the same coin as the old saying goes.

Thanks to Ms Stroud, I had a strong urge to re-read Empire Falls; a book I had not read since, what, 2003? I am so glad I did! I found I enjoyed Empire Falls a great deal more on the second reading. Up till now, Nobody's Fool has been my favorite Richard Russo novel, but I believe Empire Falls to be his best novel to date. Since Empire Falls, Russo has continued to write and publish several novels, but none have re-captured the peak of Empire Falls and Nobody's Fool.

I finally watched Knives Out and enjoyed it for being the type of movie having character and plot without requiring padded costumes; something of a rarity in today's CGI filled superhero worship movies of the current time. Don't think it's a rarity though. They did the same thing with Westerns oversaturating the market in the 50's and 60's till finally petering out in the 1970's. I did hear an interesting comment from a fairly well known actor (whose name I can't recall at the moment) regarding the current status of his craft. He intoned how today's acting preparation, thanks to the type

requested, requires more time spent at the gym working out than study-ing the craft. He isn't wrong. We do have an over-extended dirge of action and fantasy escapist style movies more interested in the movement of fit people than any real plot, character and inspirational art. Documentaries strive for that role nowadays.

JULY 2020

A People's History of the Vampire Uprising by Raymond Villareal (disappointed. Not great)

Devolution by Max Brooks (an enjoyable beach read).

A Fighter's Heart by Sam Sheridan

East of Eden by John Steinbeck (an annual read every July to commemorate the first time I read the book on my 18th birthday. This July will be my 34th annual reading).

I was inspired to read A People's History of the Vampire Rising by Raymond Villareal thanks to Max Brooks and his surprisingly good novel, World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War. Vampire Uprising was reviewed as similar in structure and narrative style to World War Z which had a post-documentary fiction style told from the perspective of survivors who had involved in the affair. And since Max Brook's second novel, Devolution, was on back order, I decided to try Vampire Rising.

Side Note: Max Brook's second novel, Devolution, arrived one day after I started Vampire Rising. But since I had started Villareal's take on the vampire epidemic, I decided to stay with it and keep Brook's novel in reserve.

Side Side Note: I have read 50% of Villareal's book and am becoming bored. Long monologue chapters offering little salient or interesting details have begun to wear the

narrative style thin. I am tempted to put it down. I will try a few more chapters and if no better, just skip to the end. Other than one chapter narrated by an FBI agent whom had infiltrated a Gloaming (aka "vampire") safe house, most of the chapters have not been particularly exciting.

I put down Vampire Rising out of boredom after reading about 250 pages. The mendacity of the earlier chapters felt like they were setting up the payoff of action to come. Only problem was, the payoff never arrived; the set up just felt like it went on and on. As though the author had become too fascinated with the set up and forgot to kick the plot into the second or third act. I skipped to the end and read the last chapter. I am glad I did because, one, it confirmed the author was still writing in "set up" mode and, two, if I had invested more time to slog through the remaining 200 pages just for THAT ending! Man! Would I have been upset! What an anti-climatic ending; the story just petered out.

Good news! Deevolution was fun! Fun to read and fun to finish! A beach read certainly, but Max Brooks creates fun stories which imbue his characters with more depth than just about any other author in this field (take that Villareal). I promised myself at the end of last year I would expand my reading; Max Brooks has made me glad I did.

I grabbed A Fighter's Heart by Sam Sheridan from a discount bin at my favorite bookstore in Los Gatos mostly because it concerned boxing and mixed martial arts so looked potentially interesting. Ever since discovering F.X. Toole and Rope Burns back in 2001, I have loved a good boxing story. There are reams and reams of non-fiction print about boxing of course, well over a century covered in newspaper and print magazines, but the field of boxing fiction is not so deep. The authors who have written boxing fiction though can be surprising. I recently discovered Robert E. Howard (of

Conan authorship fame) wrote boxing stories. I have yet to try Howard, but I do have a modest collection of stories including A.J. Liebling's The Sweet Science and Norman Mailer's hubristic, The Boxer. The sport itself, which I also trained in (amateur of course) when I was stationed overseas in Okinawa in 89-91' and then again at Santa Cruz Boxing in 2018-2019, can be deceptive. It presents on the surface as simple and somewhat violent, but when you start training you realize how incredibly nuanced boxing can be. It is called the "sweet science" for a reason.

A Fighter's Heart is an autobiography and so not truly fiction, but this is largely due to the author, Sam Sheridan's, efforts not readily fall into the trap of most sport autobiographies. I have discovered a great deal of sport autobiographies are destroyed when contending with the authors own vanity and ego; so much so that the narrative more often comes across like clichéd fiction than the journey of an author into and through his or her own sport. Vanity, along with ego, are a belief and way of behaving which is associated with pride in your appearance, status, achievements, or abilities. And it is valueless. What is supposed to be a positive reflection of self-respect is generally projected negatively in a misplaced desire for veneration and validation. Since most sports, and certainly boxing, lend themselves naturally to allegory, the line between sport reality and sport fiction become more easily blurred. When you add the propensity for the "common man" to hero worship athletes of greater gift and skill along with the athlete's misguided need to feed off such attention, you have the perfect recipe for hubris. Athletes, and the authors who venerate them, are no less susceptible to such foible as were the early Greek philosophers who contended with the story and scale of Greek gods. Sheridan, though, seems willing to dispense with the egotistical trap (for the most part), only lightly treading on the allegorical, to find a more journalistic approach to through his journey in the world of fighting. He admirably sets the tone early with his description of the Thai approach to fighting. "In muay Thai, the

better the fighter, the more humble and good the person; and you feel the goodness, humbleness and happiness radiating off ----." You don't necessarily feel Sheridan, in the beginning, is yet as good, humble or happy as he would like, but you do sense his desire to be so. And thus his journey through the world of fighting and, I believe, the point to his autobiography; fighting sports should affect each of us like a crucible by fire; positively propelling our nature toward the better, more humble goodness of a person who has been tested. James, the half-brother of Jesus, intoned a similar sentiment when he wrote, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2-4 NIV)

AUGUST 2020

Rich Man, Poor Man by Irwin Shaw

Still Foolin' 'Em (Memoir) by Billy Crystal

House Party (1990) with Kid-n-Play (movie)

I vaguely knew the book Rich Man, Poor Man remembering it from when I was a kid. Mainly because my father insisted his children sit together in the living room while he and my mother watched the mini-series on television. I have no recollection of the mini-series since I was much too young to be interested. Nor, for some odd reason, has Irwin Shaw crossed my reading list.

What is a mini-series you ask? I guess I should explain to you few millennials reading this. A long time ago, in the ancient days of the 1970's, families gathered around a square wood box sitting immovable in the living room so they could watch shows on

“television” for entertainment. Families gathered around the tv while individual shows “aired” (televised) at a set time on a specific channel for specific periods including regular interruptions for advertisements, called “commercials,” broke up the show every 10 minutes for 90 seconds per break. What was a “commercial?” Oh? Well, let us save that for another time. Back to the mini-series. For a time during the 70’s and 80’s, mini-series were developed once or twice a year, usually based on popular “epic” books of the time like Shogun, Roots, the North & the South and so on, with the goal of dominating the Nielson ratings during sweeps week. Nielson ratings? Sweeps week? Oh that’s a tough one to explain. Maybe go google “sweeps week” or “miniseries” or watch a youtube video or a tiktok or whatever you crazy kids learn with nowadays. I would like to finish writing this review today. What is writing? Son of a #*&@!?!

Anyway, I picked up a used copy of Rich Man, Poor Man from a bookstore in Saratoga on a whim (as part of my effort to expand my reading repertoire) and read the first 200 pages quickly. I was surprised how nicely constructed the prose was and liked the narrative style (I enjoy stories when the reader is introduced to character back stories, through inner monologues, as the plot is advanced forward. Irwin Shaw, I came to find out, was considered more of a populist writer in his time than his fellow novelists. But he may have been underrated by the critics (and fellow novelists). I will let you know when I finish the book (of some odd 800 pages). Apparently, there is also a sequel to Rich Man, Poor Man titled Beggar Man, Thief. But I plan on reading Shaw’s WWII book, The Young Lions, before this.

I recently re-watched the movie House Party (a 1990 film featuring a rap duo of the not too edgy, likable variety called Kid-n-Play) on HBO Max. Like Kid-n-Play, the movie is charming and holds up fairly well even after 30 years. There are a few “stars” before they became “big” cameos and several, “didn’t they used to be famous” actors filling

out older roles. Keep an eye out for George Clinton of the Parliament Funkadelic (though you can hardly miss him) stealing the movie with one scene (though Dick Gregory comes close himself).

SEPTEMBER 2020

Stories of Your Life and Others by Ted Chiang*

The Bad Side of Books; Selected Essays by D.H. Lawrence

Dune by Frank Herbert

I am still reading Rich Man, Poor Man by Irwin Shaw. After 450 pages (out of 790), the story remains interesting. And though I am enjoying reading it, the story feels a bit empty. As though it doesn't mean anything. There is no poignancy behind it. Some might say such a thing is unnecessary...and they may be right. A written story need not do much except entertain the reader by catapulting him or her into the story captivating them till the end; And Rich Man, Poor Man allows one to immerse themselves in the lives of the characters. But a beautifully written novel does more by intoning poignancy and meaning beyond the reader and story (thing East of Eden or Frankenstein or Great Expectations). Something more akin to a satisfying Thanksgiving meal with family and friends which nourishes beyond a day with memories of joy and thoughtful projection. A beautifully written novel without such deeper insight (like Rich Man, Poor Man) is akin to a meal eaten on any weekday evening; certainly enjoyable, but common and ultimately just one of many. So it is taking me some time to finish the novel.

In contrast, I picked up Ted Chiang's Stories of Your Life and Others after being evacuated from my home due to the CZU fires wiping out Bonny Doon in the Santa Cruz Mountains (and threatening to burn out Felton and Scotts Valley). I sequestered in a hotel in Mountain View while my girls took refuge at our townhouse in Kings Beach, Lake Tahoe. With a little extra reading time between work shifts, I started with Chiang's short story, "Story of Your Life." Reading it felt like a Thanksgiving meal, fulfilling and very satisfying. I had watched the movie "Arrival" and loved it for its haunting, original, and memorable storyline. Apparently, the movie was based on Chiang's short story "Story of Your Life." Now I see why. Excellent short story. Very haunting. I read the next short, titled "Babylon" and found it just as interesting with a haunting evocation of prose. What a wonderful collection!

Dune! DUNE! DUUUUUNNNNNNEEEEE!!!! I re-read Dune (probably my third time totally through) and found it ranked higher in my estimation of great books. Near the end of the book, Duke Paul Atreides aka Mau'Dib aka the Quisatz Saderach looks upon Count Fenring with empathy for being a "near-Quisatz Saderach" (?). Now Count Fenring has become the character I am most interested in and would like to know his back story. I first read Dune and Dune Messiah in 1989 while stationed at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, Japan. A fellow reader (can't remember his name, but I remember he also had a big X-Men comic collection under his bed) recommended Dune claiming it to be the all time best. I have to admit, it is and has gotten better over the years. I decided to re-read Dune on my way to reading the rest of the series for the first time (the next five).

October 2020

Dune Messiah by Frank Herbert

Knockemstiff by Donald Ray Pollock

This Is My God by Herman Wouk

Peter, Paul & Mary Magdalene: The Followers of Jesus by Bart D. Ehrman

I picked up Herman Wouk's nonfiction, This Is My God, from a local bookstore because I like the way Herman Wouk writes and I like theology. The Caine Mutiny and Inside, Outside are two of my favorite books of his. As I write this, I am motivated to take on his monstrous novel, The Winds of War and War & Remembrance.

I recently watched a Netflix movie, The Devil All the Time, and came away feeling slightly disturbed. The film had somewhat of a greasy, lurid feel to the characters without the benefit of redeeming motives. They were what their world made them. While the male characters were all sneering, leering vileness of sweaty lust, the female characters stubbornly held to their ignorant innocence in all whimpering bait as desirable flesh for the enticement to sin by the men. The movie theme aimed for a more modern, southern gothic noir style mixed with a dash or two of daytime soap opera sentiment. The tone being mildly rich, a bit cynical and bordering on the edge of superciliousness. I cannot say I liked the movie much but was suitably interested enough to seek out its source material; a book called Knockemstiff. I reviewed the author, Donald Ray Pollock, and his first short story collection, Knockemstiff, in my essay collection, Essays When I Am Dead, under the title Knockemstiff Does.

November 2020

Angle of Repose by Wallace Stenger

The Quiet American by Graham Greene

I am not a huge fan of westerns though I have read a few I enjoyed. But, in comparison to other genres, there seem to be relatively few classics. Lonesome Dove, by Larry McMurtry, would be at the top for me. Difficult to top McMurtry's Lonesome Dove series. I tried Winston Groom's new western but El Paso but had difficulty getting into it. There is something about the way Groom writes I have difficulty with. I had the same issue with his previous, well known book, Forest Gump. Wallace Stenger might have better luck so I will take on Angle of Repose after I finish the Quiet American by Graham Greene.

December 2020

Arguably Essays by Christopher Hitchens

My reading has slowed down during the winter months, but I was able to squeak out a book of essays written by Christopher Hitchens before the deadline. There have not been a great many books I have been interested in of late and could use a nice epic coming of age story to divest into. When I start feeling this way, I usually go back and read an old favorite. Of late, I have been looking at Pat Conroy's novels and am feeling the pull to re-read The Great Santini through to Beach Music.

Much of my leisure time of late has been spent writing essays and penning short stories. I have an outside idea about compiling a book of written works to leave for my daughters after I am gone, but don't know if they will necessarily find it interesting or not. The book would be titled Essays When I am Dead and is intended for the girls to have as they examine their relationship with their father from an older age than when they lived with their father. Maybe it will give them some insight. Or comfort. Or maybe they will laugh (which is okay) and toss the book in a drawer. I would love to

have had access into my father's thoughts. A better picture of him would have been a welcome change of insight.