

Favorite Books VIII

Reading suggestions by Wisconsin legislators & legislative staff, June-August 2009

www.legis.wisconsin.gov/lrb/pubs/tapthepower.htm

The following titles and book reviews were gathered as an activity for National Library Week 2009. Submitted by legislators and legislative staff, the reviews were not altered except to edit for length or to correct typographical errors. Web sites of interest to book club groups, and to readers in general, are also included. Many more reading suggestions can be found in the previous seven issues of *Favorite Books*. All of the previous issues are listed on the Tap the Power Web page.

Fiction

“The Baroque Cycle Series,” Neal Stephenson, William Morrow, 2003-2004. This trilogy of books has fascinated me since the first of the year. The author blends a wicked sense of humor with intricately-researched historical detail spanning the 17th and 18th centuries. If you enjoy living in another time and place, prepare to have your swashes buckled and pick up these amazing books. *Quicksilver* (2003), *The Confusion* (2004), and *The System of the World* (2004).

***The Book Thief* / Markus Zusak, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006.** One of the best novels ever written about the Holocaust.

***A Confederacy of Dunces* / John Kennedy Toole, Louisiana State University Press, 1980.** “A spectacular, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by a master of comedy, beloved by readers and critics alike. The place is the French Quarter, the characters, denizens of New Orleans’ lower depths.”

***Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet* / Jamie Ford, Ballantine Books, 2009.** In 1986, Henry Lee is walking past the Panama Hotel in Seattle, which has been boarded up since World War II. He notices a crowd gathering, and when he approaches, he sees that the new owner is carrying boxes out of the basement, boxes of personal items belonging to Japanese families evacuated to internment camps during the war. The novel shifts between 1986 and 1942 and the changes in Henry’s life and the lives of those around him, especially the minority populations.

***Water for Elephants* / Sara Gruen, Algonquin Books, 2006.** This is an engaging love story set in the context of depression-era circus life. When Jacob Jankowski’s life seems to fall apart, he doesn’t so much run away with the circus as the circus runs away with him – he jumps a train at night and, in the morning, discovers it is a circus train. It is told in flash-backs interspersed with the ruminations of Jacob at age 80-something, railing against his imprisonment in a nursing home. The final plot twist is at odds with the grim details of the main story, but it left me laughing out loud. It is a fast and fun read.

***When Madeline Was Young* / Jane Hamilton, Doubleday, 2006.** This is a beautifully told story of family ties and loyalties. Quoting from the dust jacket, “When Aaron Maciver’s beautiful young wife, Madeline, suffers brain damage in a bike accident, she is left with the intellectual powers of a six-year-old. In the years that follow, Aaron and his second wife care for Madeline with deep tenderness and devotion as they raise two children of their own. ...” To me, the book also spoke of how, when, and from whom we learn the important lessons in our lives.

Nonfiction

***The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why It Matters* / Rose George, Metropolitan Books, 2008.** Another book that should be read by policy makers concerned about the world.

***Duty: A Father, His Son, and the Man Who Won the War* / Bob Greene, William Morrow, 2000.** The story of a father, his son (the author), and the man who won the war (Paul Tibbets). Just before his father’s death, the author met Colonel Tibbets (pilot of the Enola Gay). Through this friendship, Greene gained an understanding of his father’s sense of duty and honor. This is a profoundly moving and historical tribute to the World War II generation – Greene hadn’t planned to write this book, but I am glad he did. Here is an excellent summary by the author: www.lawac.org/speech/pre%20sept%2004%20speeches/greene.html

***The Game* / Ken Dryden, Wiley, 2003.** Dryden provides insights into the development of the greatest of all sports (reviewer’s opinion), including the evolution of the rules and their effect on the game, the “business” of hockey, and a critique of how tolerance for fighting has diminished the game. Although hockey fans will almost certainly enjoy the book for the “insider’s” perspective on a number of legends of the game, *The Game* can also appeal to fans of almost any sport because of the quality of the writing and the insights that go beyond any particular sport.

***The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* / Annette Gordon-Reed, W.W. Norton & Co., 2008.** A fascinating look into American history from a seldom-heard perspective. ⇒

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Favorite Books VIII Continued

***Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution—And How It Can Renew America* / Thomas L. Friedman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.** The author “takes a look at two of the biggest challenges we face today: America’s surprising loss of focus and national purpose since 9/11; and the global environmental crisis, which is affecting everything from food to fuel to forests. In this groundbreaking account of where we stand now, he shows us how the solutions to these two big problems are linked — how we can restore the world and revive America at the same time.”

***Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* / Margaret Atwood, Anansi Press, 2008.** Although the topic of “debt” is in the news, Atwood has a much broader concept of debt in mind as she explores debt as a social construct. Through perspectives including religion, literature, history, and personal experience, she asks what we as human beings owe to each other and whether we can really ever pay back what we owe. One of the world’s most respected authors, Atwood has a writing style that is engaging, and many times humorous and entertaining.

***The Prince of the Marshes and Other Occupational Hazards of a Year in Iraq* / Rory Stewart, Harcourt, Inc., 2006.** Offers honest, unbiased commentary from an insider’s perspective and comes highly recommended to anyone interested in a candid account of the Iraqi war. Stewart delivers beautiful accounts of the people and geography of Southern Iraq despite the chaos. He doesn’t hide the failings of the American lead coalition, the military, or the Iraqi people, but he keeps a positive and energetic tone throughout.

Biography/Autobiography

***King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* / Adam Hochschild, Mariner Books, 1999.**

A compelling chronicle of the atrocities committed in the Congo while it was a colony of Belgium at the turn of the last century. King Leopold of Belgium managed to cultivate a reputation as a humanitarian while at the same time brutally exploiting the native people and natural resources of the Congo to fill his own coffers. The book provides a seldom-heard historical perspective on conditions in central Africa today.

***Personal History* / Katharine Graham, Random House, 1997.**

This is an autobiography that chronicles the life and career of one of the most powerful women in the history of journalism. Graham became the owner of *The Washington Post* after her husband committed suicide and led the paper through several challenges that were significant, not only for the press, but also in U.S. history, the most famous being the Watergate scandal. It is a well-written, thoughtful book that is as interesting for its content as the style in which it is written. The prose reveals a woman heavily influenced by the gender roles of her time, yet put in a position of authority and consequence, resulting in a story that is both completely unique, yet resonant with the stereotypical images we have of women in the 1950s and 1960s.

***The River of Doubt: Theodore Roosevelt’s Darkest Journey* / Candice Millard, Doubleday, 2005.** “After his humiliating election defeat in 1912, Theodore Roosevelt set his sights on the most punishing physical challenge he could find, the first descent of an unmapped, rapids-choked tributary of the Amazon. ... Three men died, and Roosevelt was brought to the brink of suicide. *The River of Doubt* brings alive these extraordinary events in a powerful non-fiction narrative thriller that happens to feature one of the most famous Americans who ever lived.” A thrilling and exciting read.

***Write It When I’m Gone: Remarkable Off-the-Record Conversations with Gerald R. Ford* / Thomas M. DeFrank, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2007.** The title of this book stems from a casual 1974 face-to-face conversation in which then Vice President Ford speculated about President Nixon’s future. Stunned by the carelessness of his remarks, Ford did not allow fledgling reporter DeFrank to leave until promising to: “Write it when I’m dead.” This book contains interviews and conversations throughout their 32-year friendship. True to his promise, DeFrank did not write the book until Ford was gone. It is an intriguing and revealing book.

Related Web Sites

American Library Association:

www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/library/libraryfactsheet/alalibraryfactsheet23.cfm “Recommended Reading.”

Book Group Buzz: <http://bookgroupbuzz.booklistonline.com> “A Booklist Blog. Book group tips, reading lists, & lively talk of literary news from the experts at Booklist Online.”

Cable News Network LP: www.cnn.com/books/reviews/ “Book Reviews.”

TheCapitol.net: www.thecapitol.net/Recommended/bookspolit.htm “Political and Government Classics.”

GoodReads: www.goodreads.com and **Shelfari:** www.shelfari.com Two (unrelated) social networking sites for book lovers. Share your reading lists and reviews with online friends.

LibraryThing: www.librarything.com An online service that allows users to catalog their personal libraries. Both free and subscription accounts are available.

The New York Times – Books: www.nytimes.com/pages/books Link to best sellers, Sunday book reviews, “Paper Cuts: A Blog About Books,” and much more.

Read On, Wisconsin!: <http://readon.wi.gov> Aimed primarily at student reading levels, this site promotes literacy by recommending books to parents, teachers, and librarians.

ReadingGroupGuides.com: www.readinggroupguides.com The online community for reading groups.

Wisconsin Library Association: www.wla.lib.wi.us/readers/WLAC/lac.html Wisconsin Literary Awards.
