

# OF READING AND ME

*Roy Meador*

**E**VEN HENRY DAVID THOREAU, normally astute in the commonsense department, sometimes offered useless counsel as he did in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* when he advised, “Read the best books first, or you may not have a chance to read them at all.”

Who decides what’s “best” anyway? And suppose you were five years old discovering reading at a house without books in a little Oklahoma town without a library or bookstore (what were those) somewhere among the southern hills of Oklahoma during a Depression folks and scholars were going to call The Great. What then? There was no possibility of reading any particular best books first. At tiny Blair, Oklahoma, in those barely-past-frontier days you read what you could get when the getting wasn’t easy and the pickings were mighty slim. Benjamin Franklin, another advocate of literary quality, appreciated what it meant to suffer book deprivation when young. I have “often regretted,” he wrote, “that at a time when I had such a Thirst for Knowledge, more proper Books had not fallen in my Way.” I did little regretting along those lines since I was so grateful for the books that did fall in my way.

A lot of years later, I still read what I can get, although a book-insulated house with a personal library of around 20,000 volumes plus access to used and new bookstores and at least a dozen large libraries including the William L. Clements and others at the University of Michigan does broaden and facilitate selection. Now I certainly could read the best books before it’s too late if anyone could convince me what they are. In fact, I *do* read the best books, thank you kindly Henry David, through the elementary rationalization of defining whatever I pick up to read as the world’s ultimate best for me at that reading moment.

The dawn hours have long been my favorite reading times. The last two mild August 2001 dawns I’ve spent with my best book of the moment, Larry McMurtry’s *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* (1999) subtitled “Reflections at Sixty and Beyond.” In part the book is a reminiscence of his growing pains and pleasures at a northern Texas locale not much different from the Oklahoma country I absorbed and suffered as a boy and remember affectionately as an adult. The McMurtry memoir became my current “best book” because his other volumes of essays and recollections echoed memories and depicted places eerily reflecting my own. McMurtry’s early novels *Horseman, Pass By* (1961) and *The Last Picture Show* (1966) were artful chronicles of fancied people and places

I knew well. I marveled that in those “fictions” he could eavesdrop on our Oklahoma lives so accurately from miles away in darkest Texas.

In addition to bitter and sweet memories of Archer City, Texas, which McMurtry as a bookseller in recent years has quixotically populated with antiquarian bookstores, *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* is also a detailed account of the author’s long love affair with reading starting with a gift of nineteen boys’ books when he was six followed by binge-reading at the Rice University library. “I grew up very limited but with a very straight road to travel, the road to education. I needed only go where the books were, and I went,” he recalled beyond sixty. McMurtry’s reflections on his reading which my own experiences closely paralleled set off this personal attack of thinking about reading and me.

#### THE FIRST BOOK OF 20,000+

It was on television (where else) I heard myself as a reader threatened in Dennis Potter’s *The Singing Detective*: “. . . a reader! You come under the protection of the Endangered Species Act, you know.” Maybe we book readers are a species dancing on the precipice of extinction, but I choose to doubt it. Among my books are some old and durable enough to have been read by several generations.

Benjamin Franklin, for instance, is on a nearby shelf with a stout-hearted *Autobiography* printed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Early in what might be saluted as America’s first classic, Ben wrote, “From a Child I was fond of Reading, and all the little Money that came into my Hands was ever laid out in Books.” One of my copies over two centuries old was read by countless others before me; I have no reason to doubt it will be read by countless others after me. Happy reading, Ms. or Mr. Future.

The first book I remember actually reading entirely to myself was also the first book I owned, *One Hundred Best Poems for Boys and Girls*, compiled by Marjorie Barrows and dedicated to her mother, which I thought was nice, and published by Whitman Publishing at Racine, Wisconsin in 1930. Whitman obviously printed a mighty host of copies since copies often turn up at book sales, and I generally pick them up for sentiment’s sake and pass along to new young readers.

The book became mine on my sixth birthday, a gift from my father. Where he got it in almost bookless Blair and where he promoted the dimes to pay for it I never learned. With erratic earnings from the WPA, paper hanging, carpentry, cotton pulling, and related labours barely

subsidizing a rented roof and rations, books for us were unattainable luxuries. Even if there had been books to buy, which there weren't in Blair, empty pockets couldn't have fed a beginning reader with book hunger. I was always impressed that my father somehow acquired *Best Poems* which memory calmly insists was the finest present ever received on a birthday.

I guess I could read when *Best Poems* reached me, because I began devouring the contents and memorizing the poems immediately. "I do not remember when I could not read," claimed Franklin in the *Autobiography*. Good for you, Benjamin, frankly I remember quite a bit from pre-reading days. Yet even in the absence of books, I somehow picked up the knack of reading, which I readily admit to this day is by far the most valuable knack I have. (No matter what your other skills are from programming computers to writing sonnets or reciting *Casey at the Bat*, reading is probably the most valuable knack you have too).

The only book that went with us from abode to abode, including a railroad car, was a volume of scary stories called the *Bible* that adults seemed to view with amazing seriousness and read aloud at astonishing times. Did I get the reading knack courtesy of King James' translators from *Genesis* to *Revelation*? I don't think so, because I don't recall paying any attention to that mysterious anthology about wandering people, the perils of disobedience, and the dividends of piety until much later.

I read *Best Poems* again and again, but never to pieces. I was fanatically careful with that first book which I feared might be the only book I'd ever have, and for a good while it was. Repeated readings planted dozens of the one hundred poems as permanent residents in me. Possessive wisdom whispered low that if I really wanted to hold on to a special set of words, I'd better memorize them.

I can still in a calm mood under friendly skies do a passable job of reciting to myself many of those poems that I fiercely imbibed from my sixth birthday on. I test myself with eyes closed to shut the world out aboard airplanes, buses, and easy chairs on "Sea-Fever" by John Masefield, "Raggedy Man" and "Little Orphant Annie" by James Whitcomb Riley, "Animal Crackers" by Christopher Morley, "Lake Isle of Innisfree" by William Butler Yeats, "Owl and the Pussy Cat" by Edward Lear, "Time, You Old Gypsy Man" by Ralph Hodgson, and of course my favorite poem from six to at least ten, "Pirate Don Durk of Dowdee"

by Mildred Plew Merryman. The Dowdee Pirate with a dagger, dirk, parrot, and purple tattoo took such a hammerlock on my adolescent imagination that now, if I casually answer carelessly when asked to name my favorite poets I'm still apt to say Whitman, Keats, Frost, Stevens, Coleridge, Tennyson, Millay, Dowson, Thompson, Shakespeare, and Mildred Plew Merrryman, who has been scandalously ignored to the outskirts of downright neglect by poetry professors.

In reality this is essentially a non-problem since I'm almost never asked to name my favorite any things including poets.

#### FINDING FAVORITE BOOK HAUNTS

Libraries and bookstores entered my life much too late. I was ten when I had my Columbus moment of greatest discovery as I stumbled on my first library. And I was a teenage reader before my widening gyre (see Yeats' "The Second Coming") took me to bookstores in Oklahoma City. I was amazed to find businesses that offered nothing but books, not even pencils, Big Chief tablets, Nehi soda or fishing worms. Oklahoma from my perspective never even remotely lived up to Oscar Hammerstein's lyrics—but the 46<sup>th</sup> state introduced me to my first library and bookstores. Therefore, Oklahoma, OK!

When I was ten, my year of the public library, my personal library doubled in size. *Best Poems* was joined by a story book, *The High School Freshman*, given to me by my Third Grade teacher Miss Gilchrist for doing well in a Jackson County spelling contest. My two-volume library rode along that year with our two rooms of furniture in the back of a borrowed truck when we moved some forty miles north to the live-wire city of Clinton (named for an early-day eminence not a future president) which straddled Route 66, was host to the Frisco and Santa Fe railroads, and boasted three movie houses which opened daily, not just weekends! Lively Clinton was a bustling, practically modern city of five thousand boosters where George Follansbee Babbitt would have found his niche.

To me at ten Clinton after Blair was Xanadu, Shangri-La, Oz, and Wonderland. We arrived in mid-Autumn, and fighting off big-city terrors, I explored widely. I saw my first parade on Armistice Day, November 11, and was impressed by the novel concept of people, horses, stage-coaches, bands, and old soldiers marching down Main Street while other people stood on the sidewalks, watched, and occasionally cheered. Who thought of that, and what could it all mean?

Parades almost immediately lost their savor forever after, because in a large room at the back of Clinton's City Hall I happened on rows and rows of books. I had never seen anything like it before in person or pictures. It was a paradise of reading, a tumult of books, likely a stingy king's palace. The door was open; I shyly ventured in summoned by books.

A small woman at the desk, my first librarian, Miss Darnell, behaved strangely indeed. She didn't order me to leave; she looked me over, smiled, and asked if I wanted a book. I nodded, afraid to speak and plenty puzzled by the question. Then she asked me what ranks high among the world's vital queries. She asked if I had a library card.

So it all poured out. With bug-eyed fascination, I learned what a library is. I learned that it was a kind of community club to which even I could belong if I didn't dog-ear books and brought them back on time. "Bring them back?" I wondered. Then I learned the phenomenal fact that I could take the books home and keep them two weeks. I learned about library cards and received the first of many. Sometimes two hours not two weeks was how long I kept a book before taking it back to borrow another. Since that beginning at the back of City Hall, I've borrowed thousands of books from dozens of libraries which are still my perpetual sanctuaries for great adventures, thrills, beauty, and indispensable learning.

If I had known I would be reminiscing about the experience decades later, I'd have recorded the titles of my first library books. I think they were two story books with animals as the main characters, but such archival prescience was not mine at ten. I was a reader not a recorder.

Larry McMurty in *Walter Benjamin at the Dairy Queen* called Houston his first city as Clinton was mine. His big discovery there was the spacious William Marsh Rice University open-stack library. "Every time I stepped into the Rice library I felt a mingled sense of security and stimulation—a rightness of some sort. I felt that I had found my intellectual home."

Precisely! It worked exactly the same for me at the less spacious open-stack Clinton Public Library and at every other library I've called home across the U.S., on Pacific and Caribbean Islands, in Asia, Europe, and eventually I once hoped Mars after reading Ray Bradbury, though I'm starting to have doubts about my prospects for a library on Mars.

The only complaint I've ever seriously had about libraries is that most

don't stay open twenty-four hours a day. When I emerged from the navy in the 1950s after the Korean War, I spent six months reading literature, philosophy, history, and side dishes of harmless, I hoped, pabulum at the University of Illinois Libraries in Urbana. The Illinois Libraries were open long hours then, but not, alas, all night. I collided with the same dilemma at Columbia University and the New York Public Library. But I lived in New York then, had library cards, and could indulge to my heart's content in nocturnal reading of borrowed books with WQXR-FM music as a reading background poultice of sound.

After my reading youth in Clinton, during subsequent wandering wherever I found a library, I looked for and often located bookstores. The semi-rational urge to have and to own books made me as an adult a better or at least more frequent customer of bookstores than of libraries. "Semi-rational" I say with a nod to Larry McMurtry's argument that Don Quixote was the first bibliomaniac in literature and a prototype for most crazy collectors. McMurtry noted, "There are, of course, sober, practical men who collect books, but most of the really interesting book people I've known, whether dealers, scouts, or collectors, have mainly been a little mad." I for one am happy to be interesting. Aren't you?

Even in Clinton during the 1940s, book ownership received an epinephrin jolt of encouragement with the wondrous, surely divinely inspired coming of irresistibly cheap paperbacks at the newstand and drugstore. Leading what became a splendidly endless parade were the colorful, genuinely handy Pocket Books with a myopic, reading kangaroo as their colophon. The earliest Pocket Books starting in 1939 actually had sewn signatures and a conspicuous "25c" price prominently printed. Tagging close behind Pocket Books were the Bantam, Dell, Popular, Avon and other nascent paperback lines.

McMurtry was also an eager recruit for paperbacks who visited the druggist's regularly to check on new arrivals. Didn't we all. He viewed as a symbol of the paperback era the cleavage-exposing cover of Mickey Spillaine's *I, the Fury* and was duly impressed. Weren't we all? Aboard the U.S. Navy ships the *I, the Fury* paperback had a near epiphanic potency as a reading stimulus among sailors.

The 1940s brought wartime prosperity. So I had no trouble earning quarters for paperbacks and developed a chronic zeal to buy, read, and own all I could. Pocket Book No. 1, *Lost Horizon*, took me to Shangri-La

in 1940. Pocket Book No. 7 set me down on *Wuthering Heights*. Paperbacks introduced me to Bernard Shaw (*Pygmalion* and *Major Barbara*), Somerset Maugham (*The Moon and Sixpence*), Graham Greene (*Ministry of Fear*), J. D. Salinger (*Nine Stories* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, a milestone yarn that turned fifty in 2001), Robert Penn Warren (*All The King's Men*), Howard Fast (*Citizen Tom Paine*), Ernest Hemingway (*The Sun Also Rises*), and many others.

I didn't keep track, but I've a strong hunch my decades of reading have included paperbacks three to one over hardcovers. Added to the paperback total must be the Armed Services Editions that I gobbled up and kept during a stint as a ship librarian. As a collector, though, while running down and retaining prized paperbacks, my impulse has been to favor hardcovers with sewn signatures and cloth-covered boards because they seem more likely to hold together beyond a single cautious reading.

While the *tempus fugit* axiom rules, time certainly flies, but it doesn't always leave progress in its wake. Sadly the manufacturers of most twenty-first century hardcovers with pages flimsily glued and paper-covered boards sabotage the impulse to collect most contemporary hardcovers. Modern paperbacks, over-priced but still cheaper than hardcovers, may in fact offer longer shelf life than the so-called hardcovers that are often now little more than pretentious, card-boarded paperbacks camouflaged with emotionally flirtatious or intellectually seductive focus-group approved dust jackets.

#### **I KNOW I HAVE THAT BOOK SOMEWHERE**

Let it be stressed that with all books, whatever their format, hardcover or paperback, what has always mattered to me is can I read them, do I want to read them, will I, given world enough and time, read them. Remove my literary epaulettes and drum me out of the fanatical collectors consortium; but I've never had a yen for any book I didn't want, hope, and intend eventually to read. Admittedly some of my books have been waiting a mere matter of decades for that attention. Let ye who have no unread books over six months old cast the first stones. Collector and bibliographer Mark Samuels Lasner spoke for me when he counseled, "Learn about your books and you will do a better job in your collecting." He advised against collecting a book you don't plan to read.

Andrew Marvell figured he could put up with coyness from his mistress given world enough, and time. What we reading collectors no less

urgently require along with books enough is space. Many cheerfully addicted readers become book accumulators, as I was from the start and to the maximum extent possible determined by room and revenue. What I read or anticipate reading with profit and pleasure, I pine to own so I can revisit treasured passages anytime—if I can relocate the books they’re in. My house, not far from a big university and its hospitable libraries, has inevitably proven too small. There simply isn’t sufficient room for the books without cramming, stacking, and piling them upstairs and down in three-deep rows.

But let’s not despair. I sort of know generally where my different collections are. Reasonably accessible are the long runs of Modern Library, Modern Library Giants, Oxford World Classics, Everymans, Viking Portables, and Library of America. Extensive book hefting and shifting are alas occasionally demanded to put my hands gently on needed volumes from specialized collections and individual authors—literature, theatre, books on books, the West, the Algonquin Round Table wits, E.B. White, James Thurber, Ben Franklin, Mark Twain, H.M. Tomlinson firsts acquired *en masse* from an aged collector who bought them as they appeared, travel classics, U.S. Navy, Israeli writers, atomic physics and several other sciences, biographies, *et al.* The list is still lengthening.

Sometimes books I need are so deeply interred, I find it simpler to buy a second copy for current use rather than perform an archaeological dig through Alpine stacks in what might turn out to be a futile search for the buried treasure. Is that nuts? Maybe McMurtry was being kind with “a *little* mad.” Yet the fact is when time allows and energy suffices, conducting such an exploration is nearly always rewarding. Even if the book I seek never shows up during a diligent search session, I practically always rediscover forgotten volumes and gratefully exclaim to the delighted Cosmos, “Didn’t know I had that! How sweet it is!”

On recent safaris into my crowded book jungles instead of what I sought, I resurrected forgotten copies, all firsts, of aging possessions. How shrewd of destiny’s guiding hand to know I was inexplicably in the mood to read them. One was *Profile by Gaslight* (1944), edited by Edgar W. Smith, a notable Sherlock Holmes anthology which contains among many jewels Howard Collins’ essay on Holmes’s reading and Rex Stout’s powerful argument that “Watson Was a Woman.” Another rediscovery is *On the Art of Writing* (1916) by Arthur Quiller-Couch, economically known



as Q who edited Horace Rumpole's favorite quote-quarry, the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. The volume of essays delivered at Cambridge early last century provides Q's keen insights to help us "persist in striving to write well." Why did I let that little book of writing wisdom be shunted aside? A third find of a set-aside volume is *An Unhurried View of Erotica* (1958) in which Ralph Ginzburg amiably takes on the bizarre folly of censorship. I think I'm ready to let him take it on again with me in the audience, starting with Anatole France's suspicion that "of all sexual aberrations chastity is the strangest."

Turning up these dividends from dredging among my books makes it clear I could invest years exploring the contents of my own book house and profitably reading what I find. I really don't need to frequent sales and shops for more books to crowd among the others. Fat chance that'll happen. Whatever the sale, wherever the bookshop, I wouldn't miss it.

#### SO CALL ME READER

Many tube and Internet addicts today consider book getting and reading a quaint custom for the likes of Q, you, and me. Tube and Net folks tend to view book collecting as an aberration deep inside the boundaries of the peculiar. To them I proffer that ancient formula of congenial tolerance, "They say, What say they, Let them say," and keep on reading.

A while back I entered a competition in which the challenge was to write a one-hundred word autobiography. The prize was a set of books, hence my interest. Here's what I submitted:

"Call me Reader, I read at home in Oklahoma, My first book was a book of poems. I memorized it. I was six; my vocation had arrived: Reading. I read at Columbia and USC; reading set me free. In Manhattan I reaped and sowed and found books to read on Old Book Row. I read aboard ships to go afar from war. I read on every job I had; was I bad? With book in hand, my tale is told, I read and cheerfully grow old."

I didn't win. I forgave the judges for having an off day. And just as Miniver Cheevy kept on drinking, I'll keep on reading.

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*Roy Meador, a free-lance technical writer, researches and writes extensively about books and authors. He writes and adds to his collection in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This article is reprinted with the kind permission of the author and with the permission of Book Source Monthly where the article first appeared in February 2002.*