

SOME THOUGHTS ON BOOK LISTS

Roy Leeson

THERE ARE WRITERS, ILLUSTRATORS, DESIGNERS, PUBLISHERS, and a whole plethora of others that contribute to the production of a book, but ultimately it takes readers to complete the cycle. Other than cobbling together my childhood memoirs, I have never written a book, but I do love to read. There really isn't anything much more satisfying than a well-written book. Unlike many other pleasures, one can savour a good book for a long time. However, my memory sometimes loses track of what I've read and when. Many a time, I have fumbled about in a conversation trying to remember an author's name or the title of a book. To solve this not too serious dilemma, I started, a few years ago, to keep a list of every book read.

The list that I keep is fairly simple with the title, author, month read, category (Bio, Sci-Fi, Travel, etc.), published date, rating (1 to 10), and brief comments. I enter the information on an Excel spreadsheet, which may be sacrilegious to any Luddites or technophobes out there, but it does allow me to easily retrieve information on a specific book or to spot trends or peculiarities in my reading habits. For instance, of the 300 books read over the last three years, 55 % have been non-fiction. This is good because I do believe the old adage that truth is stranger than fiction. On the negative side, I see that less than 20% are by female authors and only 10% were published before 1960. Clearly, I need to tweak my reading habits a bit to beef up those numbers.

My rating system leaves a bit to be desired as was pointed out recently by a friend who was perusing my list. She asked why I had very few ratings under five and no tens. I replied that if I wasn't enjoying a book I didn't finish it and it didn't appear on the list. Thus, I never read a truly awful book. My rating system is somewhat intuitive but also analogous to judging wine or beer. I consider the style, plot/thesis, organization and overall readability. I am reserving my tens for that perfect book which, unfortunately, I haven't come across since starting the list. Having said that, I have encountered some very good books over the past three years. About a third of the books on my list have received ratings of eight or above. A few worth mention are: *A Primate's Memoir; Paris, 1919; The Beak of the Finch; Guns, Germs and Steel; McCarthy's Bar;* and *To Say Nothing of the Dog*.

I should point out that I read for enjoyment and to some extent to escape life's travails. My list does not include much in the way of the

great classics as I have read many of those far back in the mists of time. My serious side now reads non-fiction while my escapist side reads fiction. Thus, I can enjoy a serious discussion of evolution or history but have trouble getting into some of the high literature of the day. However, readers have widely different tastes and this should not mitigate against starting up their own lists. I actually keep another list as well, this containing the titles of books recommended by friends or book review articles but not yet read. It is comforting to know that should I run out of something to read, I can visit the library or book store to pick up a title on my unread books list.

On a philosophical level, I think that there is nothing more defining about humans than the ability, and perhaps need, to analyze, categorize, and keep track of things or events that are important to us. So, start up a books-read list or catalogue your collection. You'll enjoy your books even more than before and possibly venture out in new directions.

Roy Leeson is a relatively new Alcuin member who lives in Victoria, B.C. He is an avid reader and, the editors now hope, an avid writer. Below is part of one of his current spreadsheets.

YEAR	MOS	NONFICTION					FICTION					MO AVG	8+ RATING	
		NF	TR	AB	BIO	S/T	FIC	MY	S/F	S/T	G/T			
2001	3	1	3	8	2	14	8	3	1	12	26	8.67	4	
2002	12	18	3	19	6	46	17	17	11	45	91	7.58	30	
2003	12	30	7	13	7	57	24	15	15	54	111	9.25	33	
2004	9	20	9	12	4	45	13	9	5	27	72	8.00	23	
Total	36	69	22	52	19	162	62	44	32	138	300	8.33	90	
													30.0%	
													Up to end of Sept.2004	