



By the Book



Writers on Literature
and the Literary Life
from *The New York Times*
Book Review



Edited and
with an
Introduction by
Pamela Paul
Foreword by
Scott Turow



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Foreword by

Scott Turow

I arrived at Amherst College as a freshman in 1966, possessed by the dream of becoming a novelist, which was immediately when I learned that there were no classes in creative writing in the curriculum. (Naturally, I could have discovered the same thing by paying more attention to the course catalog rather than to the splendid physical setting that had made me fall in love with the school. But I was seventeen.) In time, English professors explained to me that instruction in fiction or poetry writing was worthless, offering no more intellectual content than auto shop or basket weaving.

Eventually, the college relented and hired its first visiting writer, the fine English poet Tony Connor, in 1968. I consulted him eagerly, but he shook his head as soon as he heard me out.

“Scott, I know noo-thing about writing noovels,” he said in the potent accent of his native Manchester, “but if I wanted to be a noovelist, I’d stoof myself with noovels.”

I didn’t need Tony’s encouragement to read. I remember lying in bed for two weeks as a freshman, enthralled with *The Alexandria Quartet*, by Lawrence Durrell, whose four volumes I tore through to the detriment of my classes and assignments.

Yet Tony’s remark was a mandate to read another way. Novels, he was

telling me, were going to be my best teacher. From the work of other novelists I'd learn to define my taste, to judge what authorial strategies worked or didn't, to figure out how good sentences and paragraphs and stories were constructed. For years after that, I didn't merely read, I reread, then read again, writers and passages that filled me with wonder. Tillie Olsen. James Joyce. Robert Stone. I must have read Updike's *Rabbit, Run* five times and Bellow's *Herzog* even more than that, thinking about the choices that governed every word, each chapter. Over time, the comparison with my own work also made me recognize what was sadly out of reach.

To some degree, reading is an instrumental activity for all of us. While most readers don't try to mine the secrets of craft in the determined way I did, all of us experience a minute, incremental intellectual bonus every time our eyes cross a page. Neuroscientists almost certainly will be researching for decades how our sense for the nuances of language and syntax expands, how we gather and contrast constellations of ideas from what we consume as readers.

Yet for most of us, writers and readers, the passion for books goes in the category of an enigmatic and sui generis desire. Even for those of us who have made our way by putting words on paper, the commitment to literature has almost always preceded the urge to write. In my own *By the Book* interview (p. 242), I recount how my will to be a novelist began to form the first time I was totally captured by a novel. That was at age ten when I read *The Count of Monte Cristo*, by the older Alexandre Dumas. If it was that exciting to read a book, I reasoned, then it had to be even more thrilling to write one, to feel the story come to life inside you over an extended period of time. But it was a long while, with many more novels taking hold of me, before I actually tried writing fiction myself.

I read most of these columns as they appeared, because they have become my favorite part of *The New York Times Book Review*. I relish the company of other writers, maybe for the same reason dogs love other dogs. Yet over the years I've come to realize that what an individual writer has to say about his or her creative process will tell me as much about how to write as the body styling on a car is liable to reveal about how its engine runs. On the other hand, what someone reads is almost always telling. One of the saddest parts of the portended decline of physical books is losing the self-revelation that people casually—or sometimes with great calculation—make with the volumes they place in view on their shelves.

When the reader is a writer I admire, there is even more news contained in her or his reading habits. At a minimum, I'm likely to hear about or recall a book I think I should read, an opinion that gathers force when

the suggestion repeats what I've heard before. More subtly, a fine writer's reading passions are often a window into his or her mind and the deeper process of literary taste and judgment that may not be visible on the page.

Because Pamela Paul, who edited these columns for the *Book Review*, often put the same questions to a number of participants, I couldn't help being struck by certain answers. When I responded that among writers living or dead, I'd choose to hang around with Shakespeare, I knew I wasn't being particularly original, just honest. Yet I was cheered to realize that my fantasy was shared by at least ten other respondents, each of whom I greatly admire.

Even more interesting to me were the answers to the *Book Review's* question about the works individual writers found particularly remarkable or disappointing, especially the varied responses about James Joyce's *Ulysses*. One thing I thought I'd learned as a college freshman was that *Ulysses* held the number one ranking in the race for the title of Greatest Novel Ever Written. Outsized reverence for Joyce's work seemed to have begun decades before with T. S. Eliot's pronouncement, "I hold this book to be the most important expression which the present age has found." Even a novelist as seemingly different from Joyce as Hemingway had named *Ulysses* as the last book that had influenced his writing.

The summer after my freshman year I found myself working as a substitute mail carrier in one of the tony North Shore suburbs outside Chicago. The post office was an intriguing place (just see short stories by Eudora Welty and Herman Melville). I discovered, after a steep learning curve, that I could sort and deliver the mail on my route in less than the eight hours allotted for the job, but I made the mistake of returning to the post office early only once. I received a very colorful lecture from the chief clerk, who dragged me down to the employee lunchroom in the basement and explained how poorly my colleagues would regard me if I dared show up again before 3:15 p.m., when I was scheduled to punch out.

As a result, I hid in the only air-conditioned public building in town: the library. With an hour or two to spare each afternoon, I decided to improve myself by reading the Greatest Novel Ever Written. During my six weeks with *Ulysses*, I had a number of observations. First, I swooned over many of the most gorgeous sentences I'd ever encountered. Second, unlike other works by Joyce that I'd adored, like *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or "The Dead" in *Dubliners*, *Ulysses* didn't seem to be a novel in the narrow way I thought of that form, that is, as a story which would carry me along because of my emotional connection with one or more characters. I had to work at *Ulysses*, so much so that it seemed somewhat fitting that the taxpayers of

the United States were paying me \$2.52 an hour while I read it. Finally, it was startling but instructive that in an affluent community with a sky-high educational level, the library's lone copy of *Ulysses* was on the shelf every time I went to find it. I spent many years after that wondering whether Joyce's book could really be the greatest novel ever written if no one else in town wanted to read it.

As the frequent mentions of *Ulysses* in the pages that follow reveal, the novel is no longer the object of universal admiration within the literary community. It retains many fans, but there are also more than a few very fine writers who have their qualms—take a look at what Richard Ford says, for instance. The contrast with the continued reverence for Shakespeare from so many writers is striking. As I like to say, all literature is contemporary literature. It is read and preserved by those to whom it continues to speak. And the Bard's unique genius has stirred yet another generation, while Joyce's experiments seem to some experienced readers to be modernist failures.

But whether a given writer likes or abhors a given book, all writers probably would concede that, to an extent infinitesimal or great, they are who they are because of every one of the books with which they've "stoofed" themselves during their lifetimes.

Introduction by

Pamela Paul

We all want to know what other people are reading. We peer at strangers' book covers on an airplane and lean over their e-books on the subway. We squint at the iPhone of the person standing in front of us in the elevator. We scan bestseller lists and customer reviews and online social reading sites. Asking someone what she's read lately is an easy conversational gambit—and the answer is almost bound to be more interesting than the weather. It also serves an actual purpose: we may find out about something *we* want to read ourselves.

When I launched *By the Book* in *The New York Times Book Review*, it was an effort to satisfy my own genuine, insatiable desire to know what others—smart people, well-read people, people who are good writers themselves—were reading in their spare time. The idea was to stimulate a conversation over books, but one that took place at a more exalted level than the average watercooler chat. That meant starting big, and for me that meant David Sedaris. Who wouldn't want to know which books he thinks are funny? Or touching or sad or just plain good?

In coming up with the questions for David Sedaris, and then for those who followed, I decided to keep some consistent—What book would you

recommend to the president to read?—while others would come and go. If you're going to find out what books John Grisham likes, you've got to ask about legal thrillers. When talking to P. J. O'Rourke, you want to know about satire.

Similarly, the range of writers for *By the Book* had to sweep wide, to include relative unknowns and new voices alongside the James Pattersons and Mary Higgins Clarks. That meant poets and short story writers and authors of mass market fiction. And while the most obvious, and often most desirable, participants would be authors themselves, I didn't want to limit the conversation to book people.

For that reason, I went to Lena Dunham (not an author at the time) next. I asked musicians like Pete Townshend and Sting, scientists and actors, the president of Harvard, and even an astrophysicist. Cross-pollination between the arts—and the sciences—is something many of us haven't experienced since our college days, and I wanted to evoke some of that excitement of unexpected discovery—in the subjects, in the questions, and in the answers.

Once the ball got rolling, an unexpected discovery on my part was the full-throttle admiration our most respected public figures have for one another. Colin Powell marveled over J. K. Rowling's ability to endure the spotlight. Michael Chabon, Jeffrey Eugenides, and Donna Tartt were all consumed by the Patrick Melrose novels of Edward St. Aubyn. (He, in turn, was reading Alice Munro.) Writer after writer extolled the reportorial prowess of Katherine Boo. And then Boo, who told me she read the column religiously, praised Junot Díaz and George Saunders and Cheryl Strayed when it was her turn.

When I'd meet writers at book parties or literary lunches, they'd thrill over what other *By the Book* subjects had said about their work. In her interview, Donna Tartt told me how much she looked forward to reading Stephen King's new novel—before he'd raved about *The Goldfinch* on our cover. In a world that can feel beset by cynicism, envy, and negative reviews, *By the Book* has become a place for accomplished peers to express appreciation for one another's art.

Then there are the humanizing foibles. The books we never finished or are embarrassed never to have picked up, the books we hated, the books we threw across the room. It's not just us. Many writers confess here to unorthodox indulgences (Hilary Mantel adores self-help books) and “failures” of personal taste (neither Richard Ford nor Ian McEwan has much patience for *Ulysses*).

Reading the interviews gathered together for the first time, I found myself flipping back and forth between pages, following one author to another, from one writer's recommendation to another's explication of plot, like browsing an endlessly varied, annotated home library in the company of thoughtful and erudite friends. I learned about mutual loves, disagreements, surprise recommendations, unexpected new voices, forgotten classics. Let the conversation begin.

By the Book

David Sedaris



What book is on your night stand now?

I was a judge for this year's Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, so until very recently I was reading essays written by clever high school students. Now I've started Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy*. His last book, *Foreskin's Lament*, really made me laugh.

When and where do you like to read?

Throughout my twenties and early thirties—my two-books-per-week years—I did most of my reading at the International House of Pancakes. I haven't been to one in ages, but at the time, if you went at an off-peak hour, they'd give you a gallon-sized pot of coffee and let you sit there as long as you liked. Now, though, with everyone hollering into their cellphones, it's much harder to

read in public, so I tend to do it at home, most often while reclining.

What was the last truly great book you read?

I've read a lot of books that I loved recently. *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, by a woman named Barbara Demick, was a real eye-opener. In terms of "great," as in "This person seems to have reinvented the English language," I'd say Wells Tower's *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned*. What an exciting story collection it is, unlike anything I've ever come across.

David Sedaris is the author of *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, *Naked*, *When You Are Engulfed in Flames*, and *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls*, among other books.

Do you consider yourself a fiction or a nonfiction person? What's your favorite literary genre? Any guilty pleasures?

I like nonfiction books about people with wretched lives. The worse off the subjects, the more inclined I am to read about them. When it comes to fictional characters, I'm much less picky. Happy, confused, bitter: if I like the writing I'll take all comers. I guess my guilty pleasure would be listening to the British audio versions of the Harry Potter books. They're read by the great Stephen Fry, and I play them over and over, like an eight-year-old.

What book had the greatest impact on you? What book made you want to write?

I remember being floored by the first Raymond Carver collection I read: *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. His short, simple sentences and familiar-seeming characters made writing look, if not exactly easy, then at least possible. That book got me to work harder, but more important it opened the door to other contemporary short story writers like Tobias Wolff and Alice Munro.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

I would want him to read *Is There No Place on Earth for Me?*, Susan Sheehan's great nonfiction book about a young schizophrenic woman. It really conveys the grinding wheel of mental illness.

What are your reading habits? Paper or electronic? Do you take notes? Do you snack while you read?

I sometimes read books on my iPad. It's great for traveling, but paper versions are easier to mark up, and I like the feeling of accomplishment I get when measuring the number of pages I've just finished—"Three-quarters of an inch!" I like listening to books as well, as that way you can iron at the same time. Notewise, whenever I read a passage that moves me, I transcribe it in my diary, hoping my fingers might learn what excellence feels like.

What is your ideal reading experience? Do you prefer a book that makes you laugh or makes you cry? One that teaches you something or one that distracts you?

Yes, all the above.

What were your favorite books as a child? Do you have a favorite character or hero from one of those books? Is there one book you wish all children would read?

There was a series of biographies with orange covers in my elementary school library, and I must have read every one of them. Most of the subjects were presidents or founding fathers, but there were a few heroes thrown in as well: Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett. I loved reading about their early years, back when they were chopping firewood and doing their homework by candlelight, never suspecting that one day they would be famous. I wish all children would read *Is There No Place on Earth for Me?* That way they'd have something to talk about when they meet the president.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn't? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

Boy, did I have a hard time with *Moby-Dick*. I read it for an assignment ten years ago and realized after the first few pages that without some sort of a reward system I was never going to make any progress. I told myself that I couldn't bathe, shave, brush my teeth, or change my clothes until I had finished it. In the end, I stunk much more than the book did.

What's the funniest book you've ever read?

The staff of *The Onion* put out an atlas that gives me a stomachache every time I read it. I can just open it randomly, and any line I come upon makes me laugh. For funny stories it's Jincy Willett, Sam Lipsyte, Flannery O'Connor, and George Saunders. Oh, and I love Paul Rudnick in *The New Yorker*.

What's the one book you wish someone else would write?

I'd love to read a concise, nonhysterical biography of Michael Jackson. I just want to know everything about him.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know? Have you ever written to an author?

I'm horrible at meeting people I admire, but if I could go back in time, I'd love to collect kindling or iron a few shirts for Flannery O'Connor. After I'd finished, she'd offer to pay me, and I'd say, awestruck, my voice high and quivering, that it was on me.

If somebody walked in on you writing one of your books, what would they see? What does your work space look like?

When stuck, I tend to get up from my desk and clean, so if someone walked in they'd most likely find me washing my windows, or dusting the radiator I'd just dusted half an hour earlier.

Do you remember the last book that someone personally recommended you read and that you enjoyed? Who recommended you read it, and what persuaded you to pick it up?

My sister Amy and I have similar tastes in nonfiction, and on her recommendation I recently read and enjoyed *Tiger, Tiger*, by Margaux Fragoso.

What do you plan to read next?

I'm looking forward to the new Michael Chabon book. I loved *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*.

Childhood Inspiration

C. S. Lewis was the first writer to make me aware that somebody was writing the book I was reading—these wonderful parenthetical asides to the reader. I would think: "When I am a writer, I shall do parenthetical asides. And footnotes. There will be footnotes. I wonder how you do them? And italics. How do you make italics happen?"

—Neil Gaiman

What really made me want to be a writer was the Hardy Boys series, and also daily newspapers. My mom says I learned to read on the sports pages of the *Miami Herald*.

—Carl Hiaasen

Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, which my grandmother gave me when I was nine years old and very impressionable. These were surely the books that inspired me to write, and Alice is the protagonist with whom I've most identified over the years. Her motto is, like my own, "Curiouser and curiouser!"

—Joyce Carol Oates

The truth is that the most beloved and the most formative books of my childhood were comic books, specifically Marvel Comics. Fantastic Four and Spider-Man, The Mighty Thor and The Invincible Iron Man; later came Daredevil and many others. These combinations of art and writing presented to me the complexities of character and the pure joy of imagining adventure. They taught me about writing dialect and how a monster can also be a hero. They lauded science and fostered the understanding that the world was more complex than any one mind, or indeed the history of all human minds, could comprehend.

—Walter Mosley

Lena Dunham



What book is on your night stand now?

Right now I'm looking right at Mary Gaitskill's *Bad Behavior*; the new Diane Keaton autobiography; *Having It All*, by Helen Gurley Brown (research); and *The Consolations of Philosophy*, by Alain de Botton—all in various states of having-been-read-ed-ness.

When and where do you like to read?

On the big couch by sunlight in the afternoon when I should be working. While I get my hair and makeup done on set. In bed. Always in bed.

What are your reading habits? Paper or electronic? Do you take notes? Do you snack while you read?

I loved my Kindle, but then I broke it, so I am back to my first love, paperbacks. And you know what? I don't miss that little machine, even though it was saving me pounds in my luggage. That leaning tower of books by my bed pleases me to no end to look at and rearrange. I snack while I do most things. I like gluten-free crackers and soy cheese, even though I'm not allergic to the traditional version of either.

What was the last truly great book you read? Do you remember the last time you said to someone, "You absolutely must read this book"?

I am obsessed with *The Private Diaries of Catherine Deneuve*, in which we learn intimate details about working with titans of the French New Wave and she talks smack about Bjork. Her prose is elegant and defiant and very, very French.

Lena Dunham is the creator, producer, and star of HBO's *Girls* and the author of *Not That Kind of Girl*.

What's your favorite literary genre? Any guilty pleasures?

I love biographies and autobiographies, especially of famous (and famously complicated) women. Barbra Streisand, Leni Riefenstahl, Edna St. Vincent Millay. *Minor Characters*, by Joyce Johnson, with all that Beat generation gossip told from the eyes of a sweet 'n' sour teen. Spiritually leaning self-help is obviously my guilty pleasure (not that guilty: I like Ram Dass, Deepak Chopra, and especially Mark Epstein's Buddhist psychology books). I also like extremely speculative books in which psychics explain what happens before we're born /after we die (Sylvia Browne, master psychic). I have to read *Eloise* once a month or I'll perish.

Have you ever read a book about girls or women that made you angry or disappointed or just extremely annoyed?

I don't have a taste for airport chick-lit, even in a guilty-pleasure way. Any book that is motored by the search for a husband and/or a good pair of heels makes me want to move to the outback. If there is a cartoon woman's torso on the front or a stroller with a diamond on it, I just can't.

And what's the best book about girls you've ever read?

Catherine, Called Birdy, by Karen Cushman. *Lolita*, by Vladimir Nabokov.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

The *Guide to Getting It On!* seems like it would have something to offer anyone, although if Obama's singing is any indication he's got it covered.

One of the movies you included in your BAM film festival is *Clueless*, which was based on *Emma*. What's your all-time favorite movie based on a book?

The worst?

The Group is a favorite adaptation. It's gaudy and sexy and a mess in the best way. I can't watch the *Eloise* movie or I will also perish.

What book makes you laugh?

Without Feathers, by Woody Allen, makes me giggle like a baby. *Holidays on Ice*, by David Sedaris. *How to Have a Life-Style*, by Quentin Crisp.

What were your favorite books as a child? Do you have a favorite character or hero from one of those books? Is there one book you wish all children would read?

I have tattoos from children's books all over my arms and torso. The biggest one is of Ferdinand the bull, which Elliott Smith also had, but his was a different page. What a good message that book has! Just be yourself and don't gore anyone with your horns if you don't feel like it.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn't? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

This question is so up my alley because my history is dotted with shameful unfinisheds. *The Great Gatsby*? I put it down in eighth grade and haven't picked it up again. Should I not be saying this? Will I be sent away somewhere awful? I often don't finish books, even ones that I like.

Would you like to write a book? If you could write a book about anything, what would it be?

Who doesn't want to write a book? I wish it were a mystery novel set in a quietly seething college town, but alas it would likely be memoir.

What's the one book you wish someone else would write?

I wish my mom would let me type and edit her journals from when she was my age, but she doesn't trust me that they're a fascinating account of the inner life of a young artist in 1970s SoHo. I also wouldn't mind reading Bill Murray's memoirs or an instructional guide to getting dressed by Chloë Sevigny.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know? Have you ever written to an author?

This is not exactly an answer to your question, but I wonder fairly often how Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath would be doing in the age of better living through chemistry. I love both their work dearly. I wrote a letter to Nikki Giovanni in middle school, care of her publisher, using many different-colored pens. I didn't hear back but do not hold a grudge.

What do you plan to read next?

I am woefully unread in the areas of history and politics and have a grand plan to read *A People's History of the United States*, *The Power Broker: Robert*

Moses and the Fall of New York, and some other books that might hack away at my ignorance. I am also looking forward to David Stockman's upcoming book on the financial crisis, because I met him at a party and thought he was a very compelling character. I am going to go back and read *The Triumph of Politics: Why the Reagan Revolution Failed* (I am not a libertarian, but I will read a book by one). I just pre-ordered Sheila Heti's book *How Should a Person Be?* and *Love, an Index*, poetry by Rebecca Lindenberg, because I read excerpts of both and found them stunning in different ways. If you couldn't tell, I mostly like confessional books by women.

On *Ulysses*

Every few years, I think, "Maybe now I'm finally smart enough or sophisticated enough to understand *Ulysses*."

So I pick it up and try it again. And by page ten, as always, I'm like, "What the HELL . . .?"

—Elizabeth Gilbert

I know I don't love *Ulysses* as much as I am supposed to—but then again, I never cared even one-tenth so much for the *Odyssey* as I do for the *Iliad*.

—Donna Tartt

Overrated . . . Joyce's *Ulysses*. Hands down. A professor's book. Though I guess if you're Irish it all makes sense.

—Richard Ford

I'd swap the last dozen pages of "The Dead" for any dozen in *Ulysses*. As a form, the novel sprawls and can never be perfect. It doesn't need to be, it doesn't want to be. A poem can achieve perfection—not a word you'd want to change—and in rare instances a novella can too.

—Ian McEwan

James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In June of this year I reread this ever astonishing classic with my neuroscientist husband, who had not read it before, in preparation for a trip to Dublin, which overlapped, just barely, with the annual Bloomsday celebration. (And my favorite chapter? "Ithaca.")

—Joyce Carol Oates,

on the last great book she's read

I bet it's great, but I wasn't smart enough to make it through James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

—Penn Jillette

Neil Gaiman



What book is on your night stand now?

There are a few. My current audiobook (Yes, they count; of course they count; why wouldn't they?) is *The Sisters Brothers*, by Patrick deWitt. It was recommended by Lemony Snicket (through his representative, Daniel Handler), and I trust Mr. Snicket implicitly. (Or anyway, as implicitly as one can trust someone you have never met, and who may simply be a pen name of the man who played accordion at your wedding.) I'm enjoying it—such a sad, funny book about family, framed in a Wild West of prospectors and casual murder.

My “make this last as long as you can” book is *Just My Type: A Book About Fonts*. It's illuminated a subject I thought I understood, but I didn't, and its chapter on the wrongnesses of Comic Sans came alive for me recently visiting a friend at a Florida retirement community, in which every name on every door was printed in Comic Sans. The elderly deserve more respect than that. Except for the lady I was visiting, widow of a comics artist. For her, it might have been appropriate. On the iPad there are several books on the go, but they are all by friends, and none of them is actually published yet, so I will not name them.

When and where do you like to read?

When I can. I read less fiction these days, and it worries me, although my recent discovery that wearing reading glasses makes the action of reading more pleasurable is, I think, up there with discovering how to split the atom or America. Neither of which I did. (I clarify this for readers in a hurry.)

Neil Gaiman is the author of *Coraline*, *The Graveyard Book*, *Odd and the Frost Giants*, *The Wolves in the Walls*, and *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, among other books.

What was the last truly great book you read?

The Sorcerer's House, by Gene Wolfe, amazed me. It was such a cunning book, and it went so deep. A foxy fantasy about a house that grows, with chapters that are the Greater Trumps of a tarot deck.

The latest graphic novel I read was *Dotter of Her Father's Eyes*, by Mary M. Talbot, drawn by Bryan Talbot. I have known the Talbots for thirty years—Bryan drew some Sandman comics—and admired Bryan's work for almost forty years. (How old is he? How old am I?) I wasn't expecting such a beautiful, personal mingling of biography (of Lucia, James Joyce's daughter) and autobiography (Mary's father was a Joycean scholar) told so winningly and wisely. It's short but is, I think, truly great.

Are you a fiction or a nonfiction person? What's your favorite literary genre? Any guilty pleasures?

My guiltiest pleasure is Harry Stephen Keeler. He may have been the greatest bad writer America has ever produced. Or perhaps the worst great writer. I do not know. There are few faults you can accuse him of that he is not guilty of. But I love him.

How can you not love a man who wrote books with names like *The Riddle of the Traveling Skull*? Or *The Case of the Transposed Legs*?

I get into arguments with Otto Penzler, of the Mysterious Bookshop in New York, when I say things like that. "No, Neil!" he splutters. "He was just a bad writer!"

Otto still takes my money when I buy Keeler books like *The Skull of the Waltzing Clown* from him. But the expression on his face takes some of the fun out of it. And then I read a paragraph like:

For it must be remembered that at the time I knew quite nothing, naturally, concerning Milo Payne, the mysterious Cockney-talking Englishman with the checkered long-beaked Sherlockholmesian cap; nor of the latter's "Barr-Bag," which was as like my own bag as one Milwaukee wienerwurst is like another; nor of Legga, the Human Spider, with her four legs and her six arms; nor of Ichabod Chang, ex-convict, and son of Dong Chang; nor of the elusive poetess, Abigail Sprigge; nor of the Great Simon, with his 2,163 pearl buttons; nor of—in short, I then knew quite nothing about anything or anybody involved in the affair of which I had now become a part, unless perchance it were my Nemesis, Sophie Kratzenschneiderwümpel—or Suing Sophie!

And then I do not give a fig for Otto's expression, for as guilty pleasures go, Keeler is as strangely good as it gets.

What book had the greatest impact on you? What book made you want to write?

I don't know if any single book made me want to write. C. S. Lewis was the first writer to make me aware that somebody was writing the book I was reading—these wonderful parenthetical asides to the reader. I would think: “When I am a writer, I shall do parenthetical asides. And footnotes. There will be footnotes. I wonder how you do them? And italics. How do you make italics happen?”

These days kids understand fonts and italics, and computers mean that the days of literary magic are done. But back then, we had to hand-carve our own fonts . . . well, more or less. I did have to learn the mysteries of copy-editing symbols, when I was a young journalist.

P. L. (Pamela) Travers, who wrote the *Mary Poppins* books, made me want to tell stories like that. Ones that seemed like they had existed forever, and were true in a way that real things that had actually happened could never be.

There were a handful of other authors who made me want to be a writer. And I think what they all had in common was that they made it look like fun. G. K. Chesterton, who delighted in painting pictures in sentences, like a child let loose with a paint box. Roger Zelazny, who reshaped myth and magic into science fiction. Harlan Ellison and Michael Moorcock, Samuel R. Delany, Ursula K. Le Guin (although she intimidated me), and Hope Mirrlees, who only wrote one good book, *Lud-in-the-Mist*. But if you write a book that good you do not need to do it again.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

One of mine. Preferably on a day when he gets asked a really awkward question at a press conference he'd rather not answer. So he'd distract them by going, “The economy? Bombing Iran? Wall Street? You know . . . I read this really great book the other day by Neil Gaiman. Has anyone here read it? *American Gods*? I mean, that scene at the end of chapter one . . . What the heck was going on there?”

Look, JFK made the James Bond franchise by talking about how much he liked the books. I can dream.

What are your reading habits? Paper or electronic? Do you take notes?

I like reading. I prefer not reading on my computer, because that makes whatever I am reading feel like work. I do not mind reading on my iPad. I have a Kindle, somewhere, but almost never use it, and a Kindle app on my

phone, my iPad, and on pretty much everything except the toaster, and I use that, because I am besotted by Kindle's ability to know where I am in a book. I've been using it to read Huge Books of the kind I always meant to read, or to finish, but didn't, because carrying them around stopped being fun. Books like *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Do you prefer a book that makes you laugh or makes you cry? One that teaches you something or one that distracts you?

Yes.

Wait, do you think those things are exclusive? That books can only be one or the other? I would rather read a book with all of those things in it: a laughing, crying, educating, distracting book. And I would like more than that, the kind of book where the pages groan under the weight of keeping all such opposites apart.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel you were supposed to like, and didn't? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

No. Perhaps because there have been few books in recent years I actually broke up with, realizing we were not right for each other. There are instead books I have stopped seeing, and vaguely intend to finish one day, the next time I run into them, but they are vaguer, more general things.

I remember the first book I didn't finish, though. It was *Mistress of Mistresses*, by E. R. Eddison. I was around seventeen, and I'd finished every book I'd started before then. It was inconceivable to me not to. I'd read and mostly enjoyed Eddison's *The Worm Ouroboros*, a fantasy epic written in a lush, thick, cod-Elizabethan style that started off irritating and then became part of the fun. I bought *Mistress of Mistresses* and abandoned it a third of the way through. It was gloriously liberating, the idea that I didn't have to finish every book.

But mostly, I did. If I started it, I'd read it to the end: until I found myself a judge of the Arthur C. Clarke Awards in the UK, and obliged to read every science-fiction book published in the UK in the year of eligibility. I was a judge for two years. The first year, I read everything. The second year, I read a lot of first chapters and took delight in hurling books across the room if I knew I would not be reading the second chapter.

Then I'd go and pick them up again, because they are books, after all, and we are not savages.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know? Have you ever written to an author?

As a teenager I wrote to R. A. Lafferty. And he responded, too, with letters that were like R. A. Lafferty short stories, filled with elliptical answers to straight questions and simple answers to complicated ones.

He was a sui generis writer, the oddest and most frustratingly delightful of American tall-tale tellers. Not a lot of people have read him, and even fewer like what he wrote, but those of us who like him like him all the way. We never met.

The last time I wrote to Lafferty, he had Alzheimer's and was in a home in Oklahoma, shortly before his death, and I do not believe he read or understood the letter, but it made me feel like I was doing something right by writing it and sending it.

What's the best comic book you've ever read? Graphic novel?

Ow. That's hard. I think I love Eddie Campbell's *ALEC: The Years Have Pants* best of everything, but it's a hard call.

Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's *From Hell* is pretty wonderful, after all. *Watchmen* had a bigger influence on me than anything else, reading and rereading it a comic at a time as it was published, as did the *High Society* and *Church and State* sequences of Dave Sim's *Cerebus*.

And Will Eisner's *The Spirit* is funny and sad, educational and entertaining (read the books, ignore the movie).

I'm about to start building giant lists of comics and graphic novels here, so I will stop. (Quick! Read anything by Lynda Barry!)

There. I stopped.

What do you plan to read next?

The Night Circus, by Erin Morgenstern. I have so many proof copies of the book, given to me by people certain that if I read it I would love it, that I feel guilty. They stare at me from all over the house. I resisted when Audrey Niffenegger told me I had to read it, but when my daughter Holly told me how much she loved it, I knew I would have to succumb.

The Gift of a Book

When I was nine, I was given a set of slightly abridged classics for Christmas, and the same again when I was ten. My mother got them from a mail-order catalog. We weren't a household that owned many books so it was a novelty to fill a whole shelf. There were plain cloth bindings and no pictures.

(That's just the way I like it; I make my own pictures, thanks.) That's when I became enthralled by Robert Louis Stevenson, and failed to like Dickens, and met the Brontës. They were clever abridgments, too, as I came to realize when I read the full texts later. (Imagine, *Jane Eyre* without the embarrassing bits.)—**Hilary Mantel**

Gender Outlaw, by Kate Bornstein. I got it for my birthday last year from my daughter after a family discussion on the merits of transgender surgery. It's a fascinating and illuminating memoir by a transgender playwright.—**Caroline Kennedy**

A copy of *Libra*, with a nice inscription, that Don DeLillo sent me in 1989. I must have asked my publisher to send him a finished copy of my first novel; there's no way to explain the gift otherwise.

But after spending my twenties working in near-total isolation and revering DeLillo from afar, I couldn't believe that I had something signed to me in his own human hand. At some level, I still can't believe it.—**Jonathan Franzen**

I'm not currently teaching, but it's a wonderful feeling when a former student gets a book published and sends me a copy. This happened last year with a woman named Bianca Zander, whose terrific first novel is called *The Girl Below*. It's about a young woman who returns to London after a decade in New Zealand and confronts strange events from her past.—**Curtis Sittenfeld**

Peter the Great, by Robert Massie. It kicked off my obsession with Russian history.—**Jeannette Walls**

Not long ago, I had an amusing experience meeting the author of a book I received as a gift nearly two decades ago—a book that in many ways changed my life. Almost twenty years ago, I was halfway through writing my first novel, *Digital Fortress*, when I was given a copy of *Writing the Blockbuster Novel*, by the legendary agent Albert Zuckerman. His book helped me complete my manuscript and get it published. Two months ago, by chance, I met Mr. Zuckerman for the first time. I gratefully told him that he had helped me write *Digital Fortress*. He jokingly replied that he planned to tell everyone that he had helped me write *The Da Vinci Code*.—**Dan Brown**

On December 7, 1999, I left the bedside of my editor Faith Sale, just before she was removed from life support. We had been like sisters. Two hours later, Stephen King called and asked my husband, Lou, and me to meet him at his hotel room. It was his first public foray after being nearly killed by a van six months before. He gave me an advance reading copy of *On Writing*. A couple of years before, we had talked about the question no one asks us in interviews: language. He had been thinking of doing a book on writing, and I had said, "Do it." He now asked me to look at the dedication. It was for me. We then went to see the premiere of *The Green Mile*, about a man on death row who can heal people, including those dying of cancer. That night was both enormously sad and gloriously uplifting.

—**Amy Tan**

Mary Higgins Clark



What book is on your night stand now?

Dante to Dead Man Walking: One Reader's Journey Through the Christian Classics, by Raymond A. Schroth.

When and where do you like to read?

I like to read anywhere. I never go to a doctor or dentist without a book in my bag. At home I used to love to read in bed but fall asleep too easily. So my favorite spot is a roomy wing chair with a footstool in the family room. If I'm working on my own book, I'll be reading background material in my third-floor office at home in Saddle River.

What was the last truly great book you read?

After many years, I just reread *Pride and Prejudice* and understand why it is, and always will be, a classic.

Are you a fiction or a nonfiction person? What's your favorite literary genre? Any guilty pleasures?

Fiction or nonfiction: honestly, both. I love to read historical biographies, and of course I cut my teeth on suspense, starting with *The Bobbsey Twins and Baby May*, in which an infant is left on the doorstep. The babysitter had been in a daze because a can of tomato soup had fallen on her head, and she keeps trying to steal the baby back. After that it was the Nancy Drew series, and I was hooked.

Mary Higgins Clark has written suspense novels, collections of short stories, a historical novel, children's books, and a memoir.

You once worked as a stewardess, and presumably you have traveled quite a bit. Any observations about what people read on airplanes and how that's changed over the years? What do you like to read on the plane?

When I was a flight stewardess with Pan American a thousand years ago, everyone was carrying a book. Now everyone seems to be carrying a computer or looking at the television. A few years ago, I got on the plane and smiled to see a woman deeply engrossed in one of my books. I settled myself and a few minutes later glanced back. She was in a dead sleep. On a plane, I like to catch up with what my suspense writer friends are up to and grab their latest on the way to the plane.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

The Constitution, with emphasis on the First Amendment.

What is your ideal reading experience? Do you prefer a book that makes you laugh, or makes you cry? One that teaches you something, or one that distracts you?

I want to be emotionally involved with the characters, to laugh or cry with them, to yearn for things to turn out right for them. I don't think there is any book that can't teach you something, even if it is how not to tell a story.

What were your favorite books as a child? Did you have a favorite character or hero?

The Good Earth, *A Girl of the Limberlost*, *The Secret Garden*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Favorite character was Jane Eyre after I saw the first movie and before I read the book.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel you were supposed to like, and didn't?

Honestly not fair to answer. If I start a book that I'm supposed to like and don't like, I put it down. Maybe if I gave it a longer shot I might have loved it. We'll never know.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know? Have you ever written to an author?

For years I admired Morris West from afar. Then I met him briefly at a cocktail party. His agent, a personal friend of mine, called the next morning: "Mary, where did you go? After the cocktails, Morris said, 'Let's collect

Mary Clark and go to dinner.” I wanted to kill myself. I had slipped away to a teacher’s retirement dinner. But later, on a publicity trip to Australia, I visited him and his family at home. Years later he asked me for a blurb for his new book. I was thrilled.

What are your reading habits? Are you a fast or slow reader? Do you take notes? Do you read print or electronic?

I’m a fast reader. I only take notes if it’s for research purposes. I love the convenience of electronic, especially when I’m traveling, but love best the feel and smell of a print book.

What book made you want to become a writer?

I was writing from the time I could put words in a sentence. My one gift has been to be a storyteller.

Which of the books you’ve written is your favorite?

That would be like asking me which of my children is my favorite.

What’s your favorite movie based on one of your books?

Sadly, I’m still waiting.

What’s the best suspense novel you’ve ever read?

The Woman in White, by Wilkie Collins. Runner-up, *Rebecca*, by Daphne du Maurier.

What do you plan to read next?

The latest P. D. James. She’s a marvelous writer and at age ninety-one gives me hope for my own future of continuing to be a storyteller.

I'd Love to Host a Literary Dinner Party With . . .

José Martí, because he lived so many lives and because he was such a fantastic writer and because, damn it, he was José Martí (he also lived in the New York City area, so that will help the conversation).

Octavia Butler because she's my personal hero, helped give the African diaspora a future (albeit a future nearly as dark as our past), and because I'd love to see her again. And Arundhati Roy because I'm still crushing on her mind and on *The God of Small Things*.

—Junot Díaz

Sappho, for a bit of ancient gender politics; Aphra Behn for theater gossip; and George Eliot because everyone who knew her said she was fascinating. All women, because they know how to get talking about the nitty-gritty so quickly and are less prone to telling anecdotes. I'd have gone for Jane Austen if I weren't convinced she'd just have a soft-boiled egg and leave early.

—Emma Thompson

Well, I eat dinner with writers a lot, and—like eating with children—the experience can really go both ways. I'd probably make it potluck, and then invite the best cooks who are (or were) also good company. If you were to assign writers an Invitability Score (prose style × kitchen chops × congeniality at the table), Ben Marcus (*The Flame Alphabet*) is always going to rate pretty high.

—Michael Chabon

First I call Shakespeare. “Who else is coming?” Shakespeare asks. “Tolstoy,” I answer. “I'm busy that night,” Shakespeare says. Next I call Kafka, who agrees to come. “As long as you don't invite Tolstoy.” “I already invited Tolstoy,” I tell him. “But Kundera's coming. You like Milan. And you guys can speak Czech.” “I speak German,” Kafka corrects me. When Tolstoy hears that Kundera's coming, he drops out. (Something about an old book review.) So finally I call Joyce, who's always available. When we get to the restaurant, Kafka wants a table in back. He's afraid of being recognized. Joyce, who's already plastered, says, “If anyone's going to be recognized, it's me.” Kundera leans over and whispers in my ear, “People might recognize us too if we went around with a cane.” The waiter arrives.

When he asks about food allergies, Kafka hands him a written list. Then he excuses himself to go to the bathroom. As soon as he's gone, Kundera says, “The problem with Kafka is that he never got enough tail.” We all snicker. Joyce orders another bottle of wine. Finally, he turns and looks at me through his dark glasses. “I'm reading your new book,” he says. “Oh?” I say. “Yes,” says Joyce.

—Jeffrey Eugenides

I know I should use my time machine to go deep-canonical, but the prospect of trying to navigate a dinner party with Herman Melville, Charlotte Brontë, and Honoré de Balzac—figuring out what I could say to them, or what they could say to each other—is beyond my capacities as a bon vivant. Instead, I think I'd want to hang out with three guys I just missed out on knowing, a group more “relatable” to twentieth-century me—Don Carpenter, Philip K. Dick, and Malcolm Braly. They're all, as it happens, semi-outlaw types with Marin County connections, so they'd probably have a good time if thrown together. And I could flatter myself and claim I've been implicated in the revival of each of their posthumous careers, so we'd have something to raise a glass or spark a joint to. I'd be thrilled to let them know they're in print.

—Jonathan Lethem

Drew Gilpin Faust



What book is on your night stand now?

Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*, Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, *The Civil War: The Second Year Told by Those Who Lived It* (Library of America). I always seem to be reading several books at once.

Where and when do you like to read?

Everywhere and anywhere—but always at night before I go to sleep.

What was the last truly great book you read?

Not having read *Huckleberry Finn* since high school, I returned to it last summer—ordering it on my Kindle on a bit of a whim. I was astonished to find how much of what I had been teaching and studying about race and slavery in American history was already there in a book published in 1884. The book offers as well striking—and eerily modern, or perhaps postmodern in their critical renderings of “reality”—insights into the masks and dissimulations that structure social order.

Are you a fiction or a nonfiction person? What's your favorite literary genre? Any guilty pleasures?

Both. I am a historian, so of course I read history. But now as Harvard president I have license and reason to read across the fields represented at the university. I also enjoy contemporary fiction, and I am a detective story addict.

My responsibilities as president include international travel, and for me, trip planning always includes reading. I have recently been immersed in books about India, which I visited in January. I have explored both

Drew Gilpin Faust is the president of Harvard University and the author of *Mothers of Invention*, among other books.

fiction and nonfiction: current affairs, history, art and architecture, and some wonderful novels—Mistry, Desai, Rushdie, Ghosh.

What was the best book you read as a student?

Albert Camus's *La Peste*—*The Plague*—had an enormous impact on me when I read it in high school French class, and I chose my senior yearbook quote from it. In college, I wrote a philosophy class paper on Camus and Sartre, and again chose my yearbook quote from *La Peste*. For a student during the 1960s, existentialism's emphasis on meaning as the product of action and engagement was very alluring.

What were your favorite books as a child? Did you have a favorite character or hero?

I have always loved animals, and as a child, I read a lot of horse books. I had a particular favorite called *Silver Snaffles* that my mother gave away. I looked for a copy for decades and won't soon forget the excitement I felt when I saw its familiar blue cover across the room in a bookcase of children's literature in G. Heywood Hill's legendary rare-book store in London just a few years ago. Now it is mine once again.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know? Have you ever written to an author?

Emily Dickinson. She is such a puzzle. Her startling genius seems to have come from nowhere. She lived her life as a recluse; her work remained essentially unpublished and undiscovered until well after her death. Yet she turned language and poetry on end.

What are your reading habits? Do you take notes? Do you read electronic or paper?

I often read nonfiction with a pencil in hand. I love the feel, the smell, the design, the weight of a book, but I also enjoy the convenience of my Kindle—for travel and for procuring a book in seconds.

What is the best book you've read about academia? Or a book that prepared you for academic life in some way?

Amanda Cross's murderous take on academic life has provided me with a great deal of pleasure.

In a more serious vein, I much admire Clark Kerr's *The Uses of the University*, which was originally delivered as a series of lectures at Harvard in 1963 and has been amplified in several editions since. It remains the

best explanation of how the American research university emerged and evolved, and why its commitment to the critical perspective and the long view is so important to our present and future.

Is there any book you wish all incoming freshmen at Harvard would read?

Kathryn Schulz's *Being Wrong* advocates doubt as a skill and praises error as the foundation of wisdom. Her book would reinforce my encouragement of Harvard's accomplished and successful freshmen to embrace risk and even failure.

What do you plan to read next?

After I finish the pile on my night stand, I may take up Karl Marlantes's *What It Is Like to Go to War*. My curiosity about that question has animated a great deal of my own research and writing about the Civil War. Ernest Hemingway once declared that war "is the best subject." It is certainly one that has engaged me as both author and reader.

Guilty Pleasures

My guiltiest pleasure is Harry Stephen Keeler. He may have been the greatest bad writer America has ever produced. Or perhaps the worst great writer. I do not know. There are few faults you can accuse him of that he is not guilty of. But I love him.—**Neil Gaiman**

Books about the Inquisition and the Crusades are a guilty pleasure because I feel guilty reading bad things about the Catholic Church—though it's hard to avoid these days. Biographies of famous horses and lives of the saints are among my favorite literary genres.—**Caroline Kennedy**

Listening to the British audio versions of the Harry Potter books. They're read by the great Stephen Fry, and I play them over and over, like an eight-year-old.—**David Sedaris**

Spiritually leaning self-help is obviously my guilty pleasure (not that guilty: I like Ram Dass, Deepak Chopra, and especially Mark Epstein's Buddhist psychology books). I also like extremely speculative books in which psychics explain what happens before we're born/after we die (Sylvia Browne, master psychic).—**Lena Dunham**

My (very) guilty pleasure is tabloid journalism. I hate to say it, but I know the names of all the celebrities' babies.—**Elizabeth Gilbert**

I don't believe in guilty pleasures, I only believe in pleasures. People who call reading detective fiction or eating dessert a guilty pleasure make me want to puke. Pedophilia is a pleasure a person should have guilt about. Not chocolate.—**Ira Glass**

I'm the guy in the waiting room flipping through *People*. Bellow said that fiction was "the higher autobiography," but really it's the higher gossip.—**Jeffrey Eugenides**

My guilty pleasures are the usual—crime and suspense. But my literary conscience doesn't bother me about Ruth Rendell, P.D. James, Elmore Leonard, and Alan Furst.—**P. J. O'Rourke**

When I was a teenager my guilty reading was, of course, erotic stuff. At fourteen, living in Lebanon, I discovered the irresistible mixture of eroticism and fantasy reading *One Thousand and One Nights* inside a closet with a flashlight. Nothing can be compared to the excitement of a forbidden book. Today nothing is forbidden to me, so there is no guilt. Too bad!—**Isabel Allende**

My guiltiest secret is that every Thursday, I buy *People* magazine, *Us Weekly*, and the *National Enquirer*. If anyone asks about this, I will lie and maintain that I just said it to be funny. If people call when I am reading the *Enquirer*, I say, "Oh, lah de dah, I'm just lying here reading the new *New Yorker*."—**Anne Lamott**

My guilty pleasure is tough-guy-loner action novels, like the Jack Reacher series, where the protagonist is an outwardly rugged but inwardly sensitive and thoughtful guy who, through no fault of his own, keeps having to beat the crap out of people.—**Dave Barry**

Carl Hiaasen



What book is on your night stand now?

Raylan, by Elmore Leonard, one of my writing heroes. There is nobody better at lowlife dialogue. And also, by the way, not a cooler guy on the planet.

When and where do you like to read?

Unfortunately, I don't get to read nearly as much as I want because I'm always working on my own stuff, either the novels or newspaper columns. So I do most of my reading when I travel, on airplanes, at least until the meds kick in.

What was the last truly great book you read? Do you remember the last time you said to someone, "You absolutely must read this book"?

I had that reaction to *Swamplandia!*, by Karen Russell. It just blew me away. Everybody's idea of a great book is different, of course. For me it's one that makes my jaw drop on every page, the writing is so original. I just reread *The Sporting Club*, by Tom McGuane, and it might be one of the funniest American novels ever. *Bonfire of the Vanities*, by Tom Wolfe, is still dazzling.

Do you consider yourself a fiction or a nonfiction person? What's your favorite literary genre? Any guilty pleasures?

When I'm working on a novel of my own, I try to read mostly nonfiction, although sometimes I break down and peek at something else. I'm probably biased toward contemporary fiction and satire because that's what I enjoy most, which is natural when you're coming from a journalism background. Vampires, wizards, dragon slayers—pretty tame stuff when you live in a place like Florida.

Carl Hiaasen is the author of numerous books for adults and children, including *Bad Monkey*, *Star Island*, *Nature Girl*, *Skinny Dip*, *Sick Puppy*, and *Lucky You*.

What book had the greatest impact on you? What book made you want to write?

I remember being greatly affected by several books—*Catcher in the Rye*, *Catch-22*, and Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charley*, for starters. *Without Feathers*, a collection of Woody Allen’s early short stories, was a prized possession. But long before that, what really made me want to be a writer was the Hardy Boys series, and also daily newspapers. My mom says I learned to read on the sports pages of the *Miami Herald*.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

The Monkey Wrench Gang, by Edward Abbey. It would definitely transport Obama out of the Beltway.

What are your reading habits? Paper or electronic? Do you take notes? Do you snack while you read?

I don’t have an e-reader. One reason is that I like to dog-ear the page when I find a particularly good sentence or passage. Oddly, at recent book signings I’ve had readers ask me to autograph their Kindles or iPads. I even signed a few Nooks, I swear to God.

Do you prefer a book that makes you laugh or makes you cry? One that teaches you something or one that distracts you?

I don’t want to read any book that makes me cry. I get all the gloom I can stand from newspaper headlines. Novels should be a sweeping distraction—entertainment, to put it simply, and there’s no law against getting educated while you’re getting entertained. For authors, the best books to read are the humbling ones. You should put it down when you’re finished, thinking: “Geez, I’ll never be able to write like that. Maybe I should try ceramics.”

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn’t? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

In seventh grade, for some perverse reason, I decided to read the entire *World Book Encyclopedia*. I got about fifty pages into the first volume before moss started growing on my eyelids.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know? Have you ever written to an author?

I would have loved to have gone deep-sea fishing with Hemingway, as long

as he didn't bring the Thompson submachine. He liked to shoot his initials into the heads of sharks. Seriously.

Which of the books you've written is your favorite? Your favorite character?

Novels are like your children—you've got deep affection for all of them, but there's always something you wished you'd done a bit differently, or better. *Tourist Season* is dear to me because it was my first solo try, and then *Hoot*, because it was my first book for young readers. In both cases I assumed the thing would bomb.

I suppose my favorite character is Skink, a totally unhinged, roadkill-eating ex-governor. He shows up in several novels, usually written during election years when I'm feeling especially torqued.

If somebody walked in on you writing one of your books, what would she see? What does your work space look like?

The first thing you see outside my office is a doormat that says: LEAVE. My wife got it for me, and it works pretty well. Inside, my so-called work space looks like it got tossed by burglars. Meanwhile, my prolific friend Mike Lupica has an office corkboard covered with colored index cards upon which he's meticulously plotted whatever novel he's writing. It's very disturbing.

Do you remember the last book someone personally recommended you read and that you enjoyed? Who recommended you read it and what persuaded you to pick it up?

My oldest son, Scott, recently sent me a novel about a pair of hired gunslingers called *The Sisters Brothers*, by Patrick deWitt. It was just terrific.

What was the last book you gave to someone as a gift? And to whom?

Last month I sent a wonderful British memoir called *Blood Knots* to Peter Solomon, a friend of mine who loves fishing like I do. (Technically it wasn't a gift—a friend sent it to me and I passed it along.)

What's the one book you wish someone else would write?

I'm waiting for the day when Rush Limbaugh's pharmacist writes a book.

What do you plan to read next?

The next thing I plan to read, for at least the hundredth time, is chapter nineteen of the novel I've been working on. Either that or volume two of the encyclopedia.

What the President Should Read

The Constitution, with emphasis on the First Amendment.—**Mary Higgins Clark**

The Best and the Brightest, by David Halberstam. Theories and grand ideas are important. But they seldom unfold as planned. People—it is all about people.—**Colin Powell**

The Best and the Brightest, by David Halberstam. Smart people make bad decisions about policy and then compound them by refusing to admit they were wrong. I wish George W. Bush had read it before invading Iraq.—**Anna Quindlen**

The president—any president—could usefully acquaint him/herself with Walt Kelly's cartoon strip of Pogo Possum living in the swamps of Georgia. Very perspicacious about politics. The prime minister might revisit Geoffrey Willans's *Molesworth*, which is so illuminating about the character and habits of little boys. I am not being rude. Both president and prime minister have to deal with a great quantity of childish behavior.—**Emma Thompson**

The president's already read *Team of Rivals*, and I can't think of anything better for him. I'd give our prime minister *Justice*, by Michael Sandel.—**J. K. Rowling**

Fifty Shades of Grey. Why should he miss all the fun? Plus, it might loosen him up a bit.—**John Grisham**

The Road to Serfdom, no matter who is president. But a president is a busy man, and Hayek's syntax is heavy going. Being a native German speaker, Hayek strings together railroad sentences ending in train wreck verbs.—**P. J. O'Rourke**

Your president is a complex case, a man of passion, courage, and oratory. And also, a diligent, prickly, practical law professor. I'd particularly keep him close to Whitman and Thoreau, those great American voices of openhearted humanity, daring, and liberty.—**Alain de Botton**

The Brothers Karamazov, by Dostoyevsky. I was required to read this book in English class during my freshman year at Haverford College, but I never finished it. I seriously doubt that Dostoyevsky ever finished it. So I figure if the president read it, he could tell me what happens.—**Dave Barry**

I'm convinced that anyone who takes that job doesn't need advice from me on anything. It would only make their life worse. But if I had to force him to read something, it would be *My Way of Life*, a pocket-reader version (edited by Walter Farrell) of the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas. God's wisdom comes in handy when you're the leader of the free world. I got that as a gift from the late Lt. Gen. William J. McCaffrey. His son, Gen. Barry McCaffrey, was a leader of American forces in the Persian Gulf war. The father, Gen. William McCaffrey, was a commander in the all-black 92nd Division in Italy. He understood what it meant to send men into harm's way.—**James McBride**

John Irving



What book is on your night stand now?

I don't read in bed, ever. As for the main character of my novel *In One Person*, Billy Abbott is a bisexual man; Billy would prefer having sex with a man or a woman to reading in bed.

Where, when, and how do you like to read? Paper or electronic?

I get up early. I like to read a little before anyone but the dog is up. I also like to read at night, not in bed but just before I go to bed. I don't read anything electronically. I don't write electronically, either—except e-mails to my family and friends. I write in longhand. I have always written first drafts by hand, but I used to write subsequent drafts and insert pages on a typewriter. Now (for the last two books) I write all my drafts by hand. It's the right speed for me—slow.

What was the last truly great book you read?

When I love a novel I've read, I want to reread it—in part, to see how it was constructed. The two novels I've reread this year are Michael Ondaatje's *The Cat's Table* and Edmund White's *Jack Holmes and His Friend*—a seamless use of time (most notably, the flash-forwards within the memory of the past) in the former, and a clarifying delineation of different sexual points of view in the latter. They are two terrific novels.

What's your favorite literary genre?

I hate the certainty with which literary works are categorized into one or another "genre"; this tempts me to say that my "favorite" genre is some-

John Irving is the author of *The World According to Garp*, *The Cider House Rules*, *In One Person*, and *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, among other books.

thing not easily categorized—such as same-sex foreplay in gardens, with dogs watching at a distance.

What book changed your life?

Great Expectations.

How old were you when you read it? And what changed?

I was fifteen. It made me want to be able to write a novel like that. It was very visual—I saw everything, exactly—and the characters were more vivid than any I had heretofore met on the page. I had only met characters like that onstage, and not just in any play—mainly in Shakespeare. Fully rendered characters, but also mysterious. I loved the secrets in Dickens—the contrasting foreshadowing, but not of everything. You both saw what was coming and you didn't. Hardy had that effect on me, too, but when I was older. And Melville, but also when I was older.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

I'm sure the president has read James Baldwin, but he may have missed *Giovanni's Room*—a short novel of immeasurable sadness. That is the novel he should read—or reread, as the case may be—because it will strengthen his resolve to do everything in his power for gay rights, and to assert that gay rights are a civil rights issue. The gay-bashing among the Republican presidential contenders may be born of a backlash against gay marriage; whatever it comes from, it's reprehensible.

What were your favorite books as a child?

My Father's Dragon, by Ruth Stiles Gannett.

Were you an early reader or did you come to it late? A fast or slow reader? Did you grow up around books?

I am a slow reader; when I'm tired, I move my lips. I almost read out loud. My grandmother read to me, and my mother—and my father. My father was the best reader; he has a great voice, a teacher's voice. Yes, I grew up around books—my grandmother's house, where I lived as a small child, was full of books. My father was a history teacher, and he loved the Russian novels. There were always books around.

You've often taught writing. What book do you find most useful to help teach aspiring writers?

There is no one book that students of writing “should” read. With young

writers, I tried to focus on the choices you make before you write a novel. The main character and the most important character are not always the same person—you have to know the difference. The first-person voice and the third-person voice each come with advantages and disadvantages; it helps me to know what the story is, and who the characters are, before I choose the point-of-view voice for the storytelling. Two novels I taught a lot were *Cat and Mouse* (Grass) and *The Power and the Glory* or *The Heart of the Matter* (Greene). They were excellent examples of novels about moral dilemmas; I find that young writers are especially interested in moral dilemmas—they're often struggling to write about those dilemmas.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel you were supposed to like, but didn't?

Everything by Ernest Hemingway.

What don't you like about Hemingway?

Everything, except for a few of the short stories. His write-what-you-know dictum has no place in imaginative literature; it's advice for a journalist, not for a novelist or a playwright. Imagine if Sophocles or Shakespeare or Dickens had heeded that advice! And Hemingway's sentences are short and simplistic enough for advertising copy. There is also the offensive tough-guy posturing—all those stiff-upper-lip, don't-say-much men! I like Melville's advice: "Woe to him who seeks to please rather than appall." I love Melville. Can you love Melville and also like Hemingway? Maybe some readers can, but I can't.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know?

There's nothing I need or want to know from the writers I admire that isn't in their books. It's better to read a good writer than meet one.

Have you ever written to an author?

I've written to many authors; I love writing to writers.

And do they usually write back? What's the best letter you've received from another writer?

Yes, they write back. Gail Godwin writes exquisite letters. James Salter, too—and Salter uses an old typewriter and rewrites by hand. His handwriting is very good. He uses hotel stationery, some of it very exotic. Kurt Vonnegut was a very good letter writer, too. As you might imagine, he