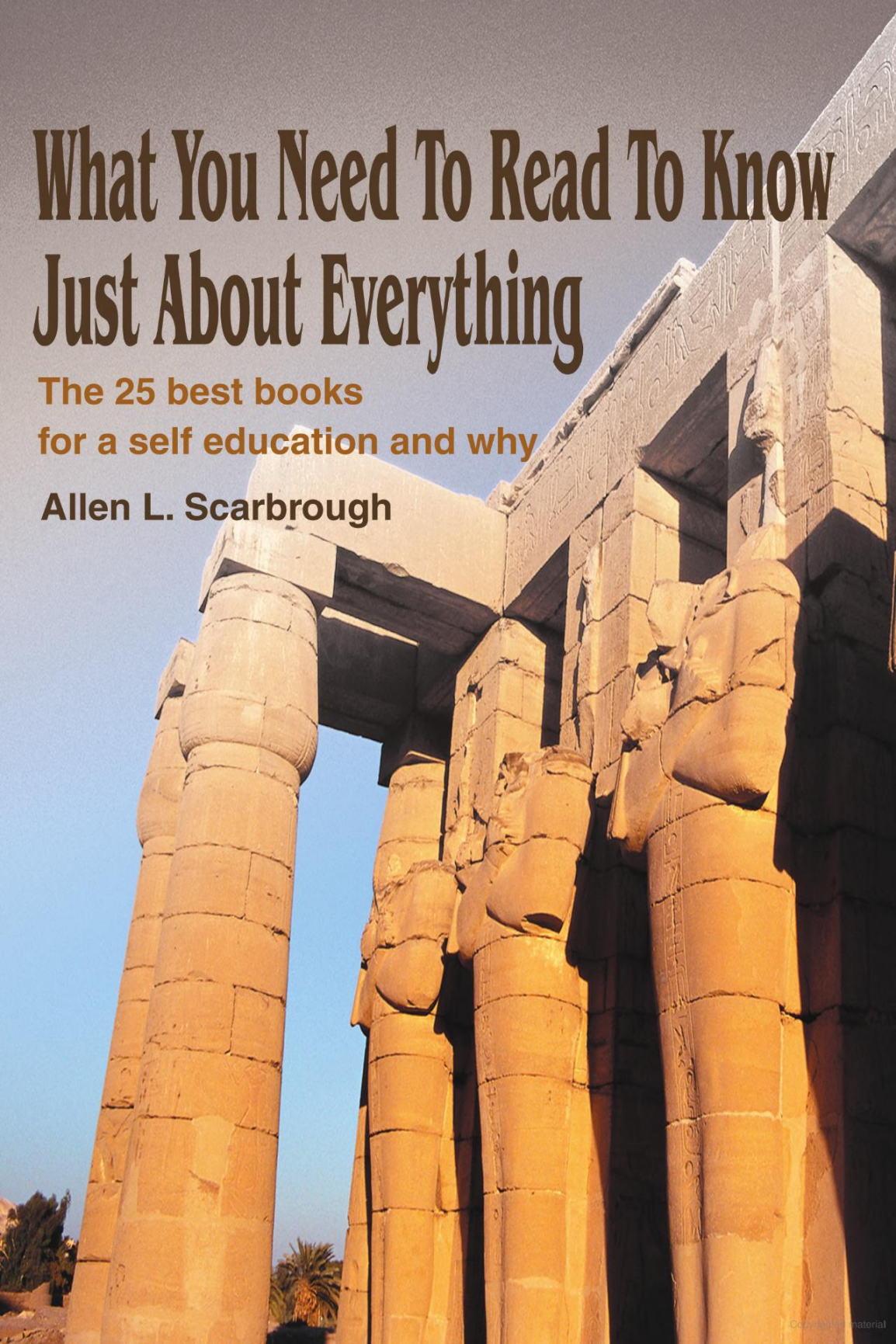


What You Need To Read To Know Just About Everything

The 25 best books
for a self education and why

Allen L. Scarbrough



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I N T R O D U C T I O N



Hello, and welcome to my world. The purpose of this book is to save you an incredible amount of time and energy in the struggle to become a person of learning. Some of us went to college, but came out of the experience lacking sophistication. Some of us skipped the whole experience and went straight to the job market, but now we are longing for a little of the finer things in life. In short, we all desire to be “well read” yet few of us are. The problem is time, where on God’s earth do we get the time to become a person of learning? I will offer some examples of how to make the time available before we get into the books.

First let me introduce myself and tell you why I feel qualified and able to write this type of book. I am first and foremost a voracious reader; forget that, I eat voracious readers for lunch. I lost count some years ago but have read somewhere in the vicinity of two thousand five hundred books. Some were easy reads, such as Jonathon Livingston Seagull, all the way up to the holy grail of books the 1483 pages of tiny print that is War and Peace. I have also written three previous books. What I want to accomplish in this book is to set out for you the 25 best and most worthwhile books to read so that even a person with limited time and energy can become “well

read” in one year setting aside one to two hours a day. This pace allows you two weeks per book. Some books will require a few days, others a month.

Now I already hear you whining from clear across the country in Oregon. I don't have an hour or two a day. Yes you do and I'm going to show you where it's hiding. But first let me set out my criteria for the books I have chosen. First, does the book lend insight into a particular culture, era, or people? Second, does the book offer unique insights or is it just a rehash of information available in many other places? Third, does the book examine the human condition in a way that is useful to most people? And fourth and last, is the book a vigorous and engaging read or is it dull as nails. I hope to save you hours and hours of boredom slogging through boring and redundant manuscripts that I myself have had to endure. Consider it the price I had to pay for the money you spent on this book. I truly believe that I can turn you from a “cultural illiterate” into a shining “literary star” in one year. And I offer this money back guarantee. If you read this book and follow its program and do not feel that you have become among the literary elite then I guarantee that when you write a better book on the same subject I will buy it. How's that?

The next issue to address is why read 25 books in one year. The most obvious reason is that people who have read great books are looked up to in this society and are considered “learned.” I can't tell you how amazed people have been to find out I have actually read War and Peace. They look at me as if I am some sort of minor god for although they have intended many times to read such works of art they have only seen the movie versions. So, besides status and admiration, the second thing you will acquire is a sense of history.

Why go around in life repeating all the dumb mistakes of your forbearers when a simple reading of their times can show you the folly of your current path.

But the biggest and best reason for following this program is the immense pleasure of touching some of the finest art and most profound thinking that man has created. These books will enrich your life in ways unimaginable and make of you a person of substance. I hope you will truly read these great works and conclude with me at the end that you have been made wiser, more able, more compassionate and in turn more employable than you thought possible. Here's to the incredible journey you are about to make and to greeting you on the other side of these books in the holy land of knowledge.

READING TIME AND TIPS

We are all busy creatures. The bane of our modern existence is that all of our labor saving devices have done little except trap us into ungodly modes of living, perhaps out of a suitcase or worse, a mini-van. Yet despite all the distractions there is time to complete the reading of these twenty-five books in one year. However, take as long a period of time as you need. I do believe that completing these books in one year will produce the greatest personal transformation, but I would much rather you read them period than that you gave up due to time constraints. And as a note of caution, I'm not a moralist in the anal retentive mode. Some of these books do contain sexual images, scenes and descriptions, but I will not save you from what these words have to teach. So be forewarned.

Reading is considered by some as a luxury of time. To me this is ludicrous; reading is as essential as water and oxygen. Without the ability to read and to touch other lives and thoughts we are little more than victims of our own prejudices. To become a citizen of the world requires applied thought and concern. Reading gives the heart and mind the impetus to effect these changes. Do not get discour-

aged or dismayed at the daunting task of opening an eight hundred-page book and thinking there is no way you can ever wade through it. I have a very short attention span and made my way to the other side of many excellent, but long, books. I offer you some tips to get you started.

First and foremost the best time to read is right as you get into bed for the night. You may fall asleep in fifteen minutes or half an hour, but that is perfectly fine. You can probably read five to ten of the smaller books on this list in just these few minutes before sleep. As an added bonus you will fall asleep more quickly. Secondly, we all have business to attend in the bathroom daily or almost daily. Keep at least one of the books on the list by the toilet for perusing when nature calls. I suggest you pick one that is broken up into small chapters so that thoughts can be more easily recaptured.

But without a doubt the secret to keeping going is to be reading at least three books at a time. I can't tell you how many books I have read one or two pages at a time. What this does is prevent a slow section of a book from bogging down the whole plan. If you have three books going and one is interesting to you then read that book last and start with a book that is going through a "slow" period and read only one to three pages, whatever you can stand. You will amaze yourself at your ability to read even a book that you consider boring or slow. Hopefully, few of these books will be difficult to finish. That indeed is the very purpose of this book, to weed out the unnecessary, the dull, the profane, the non-amusing, the ill informing, the oft repeating and the plain old banal.

I believe wholeheartedly in the books that I recommend. I ask you to trust a reader of the first order in your quest toward literary enlightenment. There are few endeavors in life that can compare to

the feeling of being able to discourse with educated people and to be taken seriously in their company. I challenge you to give this book to others you feel will benefit from it after you are done. But please buy them their own copy as this is a reference book. I offer in parting three words of advice, read, read, read.

SIDDHARTHA

I want to point out at the start that these books are in no particular order. Feel free to jump around in any manner you wish. Reading, to me, is an exercise just like any other physical activity and I suggest a short, easy to read book to start off with. Siddhartha by German novelist Herman Hesse is a short book about the life of a young man living in the time of Buddha. It is neither dogmatic nor preachy, but indeed is a book primarily about the wanderings of a great soul and how he comes to meet the Buddha. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of books on Buddhism that you could read, but few of them give the clarity of insight to be found in Siddhartha. Hesse is a writer of the first order and his simple, direct style brings home his points with extreme clarity.

We are all familiar with the orange chiffon robes of Buddhist monks. We have seen several recent movies and documentaries that have familiarized ourselves with these austere folks who like to live high in the mountains if at all possible. What we do not understand is why they live as they do. Let me tell the tale of the early days of the Buddha. The future Buddha is a prince among the people and lives a rollicking lifestyle full of the satisfaction of any and all physical desires. He marries and looks forward to the grand future his

worldly position affords him. Sometime in early adulthood Buddha is overtaken by the need to seek enlightenment. He wanders through rivers, mountains, and lands starving toward knowledge. When the Buddha is all but dead from fasting he finds enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree.

Now a skeptic might point out that all that really happened is that Buddha has a delusional moment under the duress of hunger, but nevertheless the young prince becomes Guatama Buddha and starts not a religion, but a way of life. The eight-fold way to be exact. The foundation of Buddhism is the idea of endless reincarnation until one discovers and follows the path to enlightenment, which is the melding of your soul into the great soul, ending with nirvana. Until this happens you will be reborn endless times. What Buddha finds under the Bodhi tree is essentially the “middle way” the path between extreme indulgence and extreme deprivation. The Buddha would be punished in our society for abandoning his family, but in the east he is transformed into a great soul.

I could debate the pros and cons of east versus west, or enlightenment over salvation, but the truth is that no truth loving, soul searching individual can call his education complete who does not at least have a fundamental working knowledge of what Buddhism is all about. I contend that one can even be a Buddhist and a Christian simultaneously if one wishes. Remember the all-important truth that Buddhism is not a religion. Buddha founded it as a way to live ones life in order to achieve maximum results in this world and the next and does not preclude that a practitioner can hold other beliefs.

Hesse achieves a simplicity in his description of Buddhism and Siddhartha’s life of searching that in my reading is unparalleled, even Jack Kerouac, a writer whose books I also recommend, stum-

bles over the details of Buddhist life. This stumbling by many authors is due to the attempt at over dramatization of what is fundamentally a simple man with a simple plan and a simple path of existence. Hesse captures this simplicity in a unique way through the telling of the life story of Siddhartha. Siddhartha is clumsy at first in his attempts at understanding, but through diligence and perseverance he is led to the path of enlightenment by the forces of nature. Siddhartha meets Buddha who is quickly gaining followers and practitioners. And over the hundreds of years since Buddha's death his followers have grown into the millions upon millions.

Hesse has written several other books written in the same simple style. But I recommend Siddhartha the most. It captures the sense of struggle both internal and external that Siddhartha must have experienced on his path. It is easy for westerners to pass off the ramblings of this seeking soul as little more than heathen babble. However, I can say with full understanding that Siddhartha is a book for the ages and has much to teach the westerner concerning how to live on an overcrowded, over polluted world without going stark raving mad. Read this short, involving book early on if not first and you will have an excellent gauge by which to judge the western books that follow.

WALDEN

This is another excellent book to start out with, primarily because it gives a firm moral compass to much that is to come. Walden by Henry David Thoreau is the story of the period of time Thoreau spent living in a small cabin on the edge of a pond in Massachusetts. I have been to Walden Pond and was amused to find it so near Boston and in the thick of one of most heavily populated regions of The United States. Walden Pond is hardly still the isolated outpost of the Thoreau years. But in the mid eighteenth hundreds, the pond was still in a lazily inhabited area of New England and there were, at Thoreau's time, no other full time residents in the immediate area. However, even in Thoreau's time one could see the smoke from passing railroad engines riding the tracks to the west of the pond.

And just what did Henry do with all this free time he claimed for himself. Well, he watched a lot. He watched a battle between ants and the paths of waterfowl. He made the acquaintance of game and beasts, of fire and boat. Thoreau started by building a small cabin in the northwest corner of the lake. The cabin is no longer there, but the foundation is. The exact location of the cabin is known precisely and it sits back from the water much farther than I would have suspected from reading the book. However, I assure you this was

indeed a primitive arrangement with only the barest of essentials for human life.

Thoreau keeps a diligent record of all his expenditures and the entire year comes to a grand total of three lattes. That's living cheap my friends. Henry's point is that all of us live more indulgently than we need to and economy of living leads to an abundance of thought. Henry is without a doubt one of the first environmentalists. This is his true crown in the world. Even in the sparsely populated times of the mid 1800's Henry understood that waste leads to disaster if allowed to be indulged on a grand enough scale. His deep insight into human nature allows him to contemplate the fatal flaw of democracy, the flaw is that if everyone is involved in his or her own struggle for wealth no one is looking out for the planet as a whole. The civilized society that is unconcerned for the need for conservation is doomed to follow the logical consequences of their folly to its ultimate doom.

I will mention here that Walden is not Thoreau's only work of literature. I will save you countless hours by forbidding you to even look up the titles to any other works by this man other than his brilliant little essay about "civil disobedience." The reason for this stricture is simple, Henry wrote a masterpiece, once. Unfortunately, he was never able to repeat this accomplishment. His other works are near drivel. It is hard to decide whether Henry was a brilliant writer who frittered away his talent after Walden or a mediocre writer who had lightning strike. I subscribe to the lightning interpretation, but that in no way hinders the sheer genius of Henry's little book about a pond.

What I admire the most about Walden is its sense that an entire community of beings lives in or near the water. Thoreau sees the

ecosystem as a whole and not as a random group of individuals each struggling for their own existence. This is where the book achieves its power. This was an amazing leap of insight in its day. The symbiosis of nature was the focal point of Henry's life at the pond and the reason we love the book today. He showed that harmony of nature goes way beyond the bee's pollination of local flowers and to the fact that each cog in the mighty flow of the universe is inexorably connected to every other. Western man strives to isolate, to be a minimalist, yet nature becomes a contradiction at this level. Nature retreats under intense scrutiny into a self-defining loss of words. Henry's insight into the ecosystem around him has been a prime mover in the environmental movement of our time. This alone makes Walden worth the reading.

It must be noted that Thoreau did not live in complete isolation during his tenure at the pond. He had guests and the cabin was only an afternoon walk into the city of Concord. But the bulk of the story attends him in the private moments of reflection that are in our time a luxury of the highest order. We, the seekers after all things new and shiny, are encouraged by our society to "get busy", or as Eric Hoffer said, "We have been taught not to waste our time, but we have been taught to waste our lives." Read this glorious book and then tell me you see the world in the same old light of consumption.

THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

Okay. You have had it easy up until now. Two good books to start that have only required a modest investment of time. Now we need to sink into the real meat of literature, the Russian novel. I'm not completely sure why the Russians are the greatest novelists of all time. Perhaps it is due to the extreme conditions in which they had to live combined with long lonely winter nights in which to indulge in the beauty of thousand page books. I'm not certain of the cause, but I am grateful for the effect. Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote two of the four best novels ever written and both will be included in this book as recommended reading. This book is long, about 850 pages depending on what printing you read, so I encourage you to bite it off in small chunks. It is a savory meal I promise you.

Dostoyevsky was a very conflicted man who was prone to violent outbursts. By all accounts he treated everyone around him very badly. I say so what, what's a little spat between friends compared to millennium enduring masterpieces. Dostoyevsky wrote several other pieces more than worthy of your time "Notes From The Underground" among them, but I am focusing in this book on full-length

works that give the general drift of an artist's entire life and times. Let it be said that you could do far worse than to read everything this man ever wrote. And why is he so worthwhile? I believe it is due to a keen perception combined with the harsh realities of both his inner and outer life mixed together with a fine economy of language. You rarely see Dostoyevsky quoted, but you hear him talked about always.

The Brothers Karamazov is epic in proportion, taking the intertwining lives of four brothers through a major portion of their adult lives. Each brother more or less represents an archetype, meaning the religious, the scholarly, etcetera. I don't want to dwell too much on the actual content of the book. The book more than speaks for itself. It is the enduring landscape of eighteenth century Russia that endows the work with life and substance. You have never understood true cold until you have read Dostoyevsky. The social conditions, the terrain, the weather, the blathering of inane Czars all give the Russia of his time a depth and reality that would be impossible to duplicate elsewhere. Russia is the only land to be born into if one aspires to be a novelist. It requires long pages of description to even touch on the grandeur and harshness of so great a land.

Dostoyevsky always gives the impression of a man who is living on borrowed time and doesn't give a damn what you or anyone else thinks. Here's why. In 1849, when he was still a young man, he was rounded up for political dissidence and hoisted across the frozen tundra to Siberia, there to be summarily shot. He is led out, attached to a pole I believe, and blindfolded. The order is given and the rifles raised. Dostoyevsky is prepared to die. Then another order, don't shoot. The whole execution is called off and Dostoyevsky, after serving a long and hard decade, is released back to the civilized

world. Try that little experience and see if you don't come out of it with a chip on your shoulder.

In The Brothers Karamazov Dostoyevsky explores the purposes of society and the meaning of an individual existence in a world that is as cruel as it is absurd. He draws very few conclusions, his gift is to show the world as it is and let you decide for yourself what a stinking cesspool it is. If you are like me you will begin this book and be unable to put it down. Its insights into the human condition are unsurpassed in all of literature; by comparison Shakespeare is a mere tattler. I cannot even think of this book without the thought of bitter cold and starvation washing over me. This book is life altering, soak it in and revel in it. You will thank me.

Getting back to the book itself, I want to mention that within the book there is a chapter titled "The Grand Inquisitor" that is sometimes separated out and sold separately. If possible read this twice. Why? Because it is the greatest chapter of prose ever written. Though I rank War and Peace as the greatest novel of all time, The Brothers Karamazov a close second, I feel that this one chapter surpasses all that is in Tolstoy in sheer audacity, creativity and raw emotional power. The chapter concerns the second coming of Christ and the struggle of good and evil within each and every individual. I leave you with this challenge, jot down a few ideas in a journal about how you perceive the individual's journey through life and his struggle to ingrain sanity on the world and then write down your thoughts after reading this book. The thoughts will be miles apart, if not you need to read it again, you missed something important along the way.

THE REPUBLIC

Our reading skills should be at razor sharpness after our last outing into Russia, so this next assignment should be a breeze, but it's not. There is so much meat in The Republic that a slow burn of a read is called for. Plato is by most accounts the greatest philosopher who ever lived. Certainly he was the greatest philosopher of his age. Plato's ideas are still a part of our modern culture and he is assigned reading in every university in the west. What makes him so great? Well, for one, his introduction of the dialogue as a form of reasoning and argument. That's a nice start. Next, his overpowering dependence on ideas above that of the material world, and lastly, his use of the insufferable, yet loveable, character of Socrates from whom Plato learned a great deal of his early lessons.

It has been argued long and bitterly over where exactly Plato starts and Socrates ends. We would have no knowledge today of Socrates, save for a brief reference in the play "The Clouds" were it not for Plato. I believe it is generally agreed that most of the early works were written versions of Socrates' own teachings, but the rest of Plato is all his own. The Republic is most certainly the work of Plato alone. There is little hint of Socrates' own thoughts here. One can if one wishes obtain a book with all of Plato's works in one vol-

ume. I own one and it is 1186 pages long. However, as much as I love and admire Plato he gets a little redundant and tiresome in some of his lesser-known works. The essence of Plato is in The Republic and a man or woman can get the solid foundation of Greek philosophy from this book alone.

Just what is The Republic? Well, it is Plato's ideas on the perfect society and what constitutes justice and reality. In this book one will find two of the best-known ideas of western man. Both ideas are integral parts of our culture and thought to this day. One, of course, is the idea of a philosopher-king. Plato believed that a man of learning and wisdom should head society and down from him the rest of society should function much as an individual does with various parts and services performed by various classes of men. If this sounds like the caste system of India, that's because there are more than a few similarities. Much of the criticism of Plato's ideas focuses on just how one decides who performs what tasks and how one decides merit.

The other great idea is the concept of Plato's Cave. If you have never read Plato you have undoubtedly heard of this idea. Wouldn't it be wonderful to actually know what the hell people are talking about when they refer to it? Millions of people have used the allegory of the cave without the slightest clue as to what Plato meant by the example and how he meant for it to be understood. Basically, Plato believed that the reality that we see in our common everyday experience is an illusion. He taught that these images, which we believe are real, are actually like shadows cast upon a wall. He gives the example of people who are tied to a position inside a cave where they can only see the shadows that passing people and objects cast on a far wall. Their whole lives these people believe they are looking