

## Against the Grain

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# Oregon Trails: Bookends

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As I am wont to say, there is no such thing as a coincidence. Sometimes there are convergences that are so striking that they are remembered, filed away in one's grey matter for another time, another convergence, another insight gained by that first revelation.

I had never read *Lolita* and came across it while browsing the stacks at a university library. I knew something about what the book was about but as I read it, I realized that the pop culture notion of *Lolita* was wrong.

At the same time, I checked out a copy of *Blue Calhoun* by **Reynolds Price**, a fellow Tarheel whose work I knew and liked. *Blue Calhoun* is not a version of *Lolita* but rather, for a relatively small but pointed part of the novel, a treatment of the effects of sexual abuse of a minor. The **Price** book may not have made such a strong impression on me had I read it before reading the **Nabokov** novel. There is, too, in the **Reynolds** work, the cloyingly close relationship between mother and son, not incestuous but still a bit disturbing to me.

Although *Blue Calhoun* and *Lolita* aren't the matching book ends that my other selections are, they are the ones that got me thinking of such combinations that a mere subject bibliography might miss.

*The Poisonwood Bible*, by **Barbara Kingsolver** and *Mosquito Coast* by **Paul Theroux** are variations on the theme of patriarchy gone wrong despite good intentions. Ultimately, because of the single-mindedness and inability to see beyond his own narrow vision, each of the fathers leads his family to disillusion and disaster and loses everything. Read them at the same time or one right after the other for full effect.

Searching for one's soul or spiritual path, the need to find oneself. Two of my favorites that can serve as bookends are **W. Somerset Maugham's** *The Razor's Edge* (the film version isn't half bad but is no substitute for the real thing) and **Hermann Hesse's** *Siddhartha*. Each protagonist finds his own way and suggests that the material things in life beyond what one needs to live comfortably are impediments on the path to spirituality.

There are two other book ends that can be paired and compared with the two above — **St. Augustine's** *Confessions* and **Thomas Merton's** *The Seven Storey Mountain*. **Merton** never became a saint, despite his aspirations, but **St. Augustine** never had a best seller nor did he achieve, during his lifetime, what **Merton** did, a fame that ultimately led to an untimely death.

Although each book is dated, there is much to recommend for *Generation of Vipers* by **Philip Wylie** and *The Air-conditioned Nightmare* by **Henry Miller**. Both are moralistic observations about American Society in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of their observations and judgments might still prevail, although I don't know if **Wylie** would accuse his fellow Americans of Momism anymore. Or would he?

Do you want to follow up the above two books with other observations about American life in particular and modern society in general?

*White Noise* by **Don DeLillo** is a relatively well-known novel that suggests that the world makes no sense (nonsense). **Philip Wylie**, a once popular novelist (some science fiction) in the United States, has his own way of pointing out some of life's absurdities and deserves a place next to **DeLillo's** book. The book is *Finnley Wren* and it must be read to be explained.

I have not read the English translation of *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless* (*The Confusions of Young Törless*) by **Robert Musil** (Austrian novelist), but I don't hesitate to pair it with **Alex Waugh's** *The Loom of Youth*.

**Musil** writes about a student at an Austrian boarding school. **Waugh** writes about one of England's public schools, also a boarding school. Before you sign your children up for boarding school, you might want to read these timeless accounts.

The first of these book ends, *Ulysses* by **James Joyce**, traces the activities and thoughts of one man in a single day. The second, *Berlin, Alexanderplatz* by **Alfred Döblin**, is the story of **Hans Biberkopf** over a prolonged period of time. Each author uses his native language in original, artistic ways and in the case of **Döblin**, it might not translate into English. Of the two books, the more interesting, intriguing, and readable is *Berlin, Alexanderplatz*. To get some sense of the original, you might want to watch, if you can stand its intensity, the mini-series adaptation by **Rainer Werner Fassbinder**.

**Thomas Bailey Aldrich** was a contemporary and acquaintance of **Mark Twain** and the author of *The Story of a Bad Boy*. I read somewhere that **Mark Twain** was scornful of **Aldrich's** autobiographical tale of a boy's adventuresome life in late 19th-century New England and is said to have written *Tom Sawyer* as a literary response. I read both books as a boy, innocent in the ways of literary criticism or author's jealousy. I suspect that **Samuel L. Clemens** thought that his boyhood was superi-

or to any in New England but failed to see that adventure can be found anywhere and not all of us can live on the banks of the Mississippi River. As I recall, the snow fort built by Tom Bailey was just as appealing as Tom Sawyer's spelunking but not any more fun than my own boyhood days in the interior of the Territory of Alaska in the early 1950s.

In *Henderson the Rain King* (**Saul Bellow**), an American travels to Africa to get away from it all. In *A Handful of Dust* (**Evelyn Waugh**), a Briton makes his escape to South America. Their adventures are quite different, but their fates are the same while also different and not necessarily what the heroes had expected.

*The Morning Watch* by **James Agee** and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by **James Joyce** also juxtapose an American and High Anglican with a European and Roman Catholic. Each of the main characters suffers a religious crisis but each in his own way.

*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is another **James Agee** book that makes me think of another, *The Grapes of Wrath*, by **John Steinbeck**. Both writers, one with non-fiction, the other with a novel, describe the plight of poor people during the Great Depression and try to evoke the humanity of the downtrodden though hardworking Americans.

And finally, a pair of books that I have as bookends must be described before they are named and, spoiler alert, I would not recommend reading them together or back to back for effect but only if you should find yourself in a position to read them in close proximity.

I was in the Portland International Airport waiting for my flight to board. Among the other passengers was a young Marine stationed in Okinawa for the past two years. He was telling another young man that he didn't like either Okinawa or Japan and that Okinawa had a lot of old cultural things (as if Japan didn't). The Marine was going to Atlanta with us and then on to South Carolina where he was from. The other young man had asked if *Semper Fi* was in the Army. "No, Marines."

"I'm sorry, I hope I didn't offend you."

"Nah, that's okay. My dad's in the Army."

Then the young Marine asked, "What's that?"

"That's a Kindle. It's an eBook reader."

Marine, looking at the Kindle: "Cool!"

Civilian: "Here, hold it. See how light it is."

Marine: "Wow! Way cool!"

Civilian: "It can hold hundreds of books."

Marine: "There's only one book for me, so I guess that would be a waste. No, make that two books. [Pause] "The Bible and The Call of the Wild."

Civilian: "I think you can get the Bible on this. It would take a lot less space. [Slight pause] But I guess it wouldn't be the same." 🐻

