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Librarian's Guide to a Good Book

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Librarian's Guide to a Good Book

Abstract

"Life is far too short to ever know enough. The only way to gain knowledge is to have a steady diet of good (not escapist) literature.' Here is Dordt College's Director of Library Services' list of books to read."

Posting about good books to read from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/a-librarians-guide-to-a-good-book/>

Keywords

In All Things, books, reading

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

A Librarian's Guide to a Good Book

 [all in allthings.org/a-librarians-guide-to-a-good-book/](http://allthings.org/a-librarians-guide-to-a-good-book/)

Sheryl Taylor

A friend once shared this quote with me and its wisdom still guides me: “Life is far too short to ever know enough. The only way to gain knowledge is to have a steady diet of good (not escapist) literature.”¹

As I seek to consume a steady diet of good literature (and to avoid hunger, I try to read at least a book a week), I follow a few tried and true practices when making my reading selections. You'll find them below along with the best books I discovered this year using them.

1. **Intersperse fiction with non-fiction**. While I prefer fiction, I find that the best way to recover from a “book hangover” (the inability to start a new book because you are still living in the last book's world) is to read a non-fiction work.

The best novel I read all year was **Ordinary Grace** by William Kent Krueger, a coming of age story set in the summer of 1961 in New Bremem, Minnesota. It's a mystery but also a meditative story that shows how grace can work through suffering. After finishing it, I tried to start several other novels but just couldn't get away from New Bremem, Frank, and his brother Jake. Siddhartha Mukherjee's **The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer**, a disturbing and yet fascinating account of the history of cancer treatment and research, quickly sobered me up. And, after finishing it, I was ready to go back to the world of fiction.

Better yet, pair a fiction story with a non-fiction account for an overall richer reading experience. Shortly after reading **The Empire of the Summer Moon: Quanah Parker and the Rise and Fall of the Comanches, the Most Powerful Indian Tribe in American History** by S.C. Gwynne, I read Philipp Meyer's **The Son**, a multi-generational saga of the American West that starts with a Texas family and the Comanche raids of the 1880s.

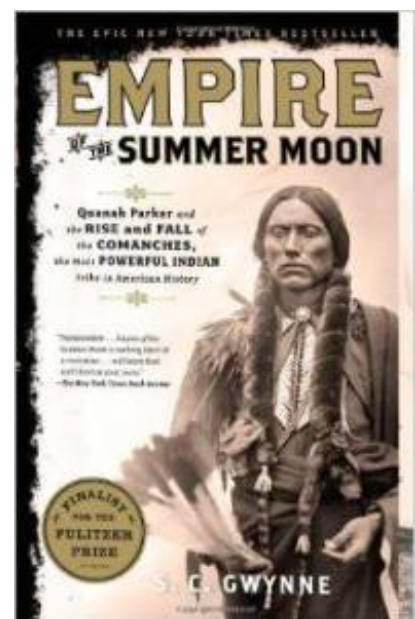
I read Stephen King's novel **11/22/63** about a man who travels back in time to prevent the JFK assassination followed by Bill O'Reilly's fact-filled non-fiction **Killing Kennedy: The End of Camelot**.

The seemingly unbelievable tale about North Korean citizen Jun Do in Adam Johnson's 2013 Pulitzer Prize winning **The Orphan Master's Son** (fiction) suddenly becomes more believable after reading the true-life account of Blaine Harden's **Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West**.

2. **Read award winners** (or books long-listed or short-listed for awards). If panels of critics and authors and publishers collectively think a book is good, who am I to argue? (This also helps with #4 below).

Wolf Hall by Hilary Mantel, winner of the Man Booker Prize (Great Britain) 2009 – the story of Thomas Cromwell and his role in the religious and political changes in Henry VIII's England.

The Sisters Brothers by Patrick deWitt, Governor Generals' Literary



Award (Canada) 2012 – the darkly comic adventures of two gun slinging brothers during the Gold Rush.

The Good Lord Bird by James McBride, National Book Award Winner 2013 – a retelling of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry by a 12-year old slave boy who passes himself off as a young woman.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers by Katherine Boo, National Book Award for Non-Fiction 2012 – describes a present-day slum of Mumbai, India by following the interconnected lives of several residents.

3. Read books from other cultures or set in other world locations. If you can't actually travel to another country, you can at least read books about them. I find stories, whether true or fictional, give me valuable insight into how other people live and love. And there's nothing better than "reading" an audiobook set in India than when the narrator uses a lovely lilting Indian accent.

And the Mountains Echoed by Khaled Hosseini – a beautifully sad series of interlinking stories that begins in an Afghani village in 1952; this is Hosseini's third novel and his books have introduced me to his rich Persian culture.

The Wave: Life and Memories after the Tsunami is a memoir by Sonali Deraniyagala based on the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami.

Say You're One of Them by Uwem Akpan – a collection of short stories set in several African countries that show the resilience of children in the midst of heartbreak and tragedy.

The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry by Rachel Joyce – a quirky British novel about a retired salesman decides one morning to walk across England to visit a friend who's dying of cancer.

4. Read a variety of genres. While my first forays into "adult" fiction where Agatha Christie mysteries, and mysteries are still my favorite genre, I need the balance that other genres provide. Reading dystopia or futuristic lit is not high on my list but books like Edan Lepuck's **California** and David Egger's **The Circle** effectively opened my eyes to what the world could become.

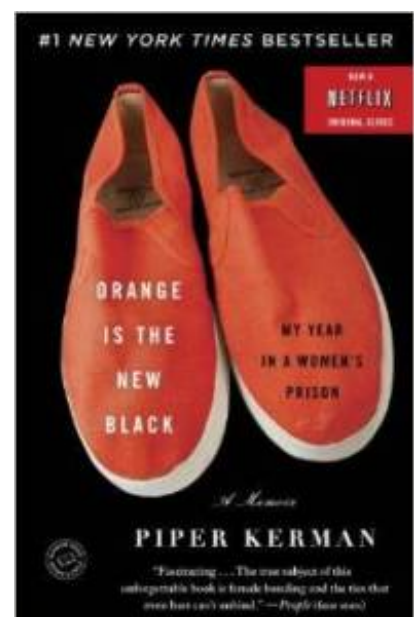
Memoir: **Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison** by Piper Kerman – a white, blue-eyed, blonde, well-educated woman serves a prison sentence in a federal prison year's after the consequences for some youthful actions catch up with her.

Graphic Novel: Gene Luen Yang's **Boxers and Saints** – brilliant telling of the Chinese Boxer Rebellion that pitted "heathen" Chinese against Christian missionaries and soldiers.

History: **One Summer: America, 1927** by Bill Bryson – Bryson chronicles the events of the summer of 1927 and Lindbergh's famous flight is just the tip of the iceberg. A fascinating social history you'll find hard to put down.

Historical Fiction: **All the Light We Cannot See** by Anthony Doerr – the story a blind girl in St. Malo, France during World War II hiding a secret and a young German radio operating soldier who wants little to do with the war.

Mystery: **Silkworm** by Robert Galbraith (and the first one if you haven't read it – **Cuckoo's Calling**) – a literary murder mystery with a loveable main character; Galbraith is a pseudonym for J.K. Rowling and this mystery series is as good as any Harry Potter book.



5. **Read what trusted book-loving friends suggest.** Find a few friends that love to read too, read books in common, and discuss them over lunch or a cup of coffee. I find the entire reading experience deeper when I talk about a book with someone else.

[The Round House](#) by Louise Erdrich – an Ojibwe lawyer remembers a summer in his youth when his mother was attacked and how it transformed his family and community.

[The Purchase](#) by Linda Spalding – a story about frontier life in Pennsylvania in the late 1700s and a widowed abolitionist who buys a slave boy.

6. **Finally let go a little.** While I follow the above maxims most of the time, there's always room in my literary "diet" to enjoy some dessert. Don't take yourself and your reading habits so seriously that you can't enjoy a beach read or chick lit every now and then.

[The Good Thief's Guide to Amsterdam](#) by Chris Ewan – set in Amsterdam, this mystery features the adventures of a crime novelist who supplements his income by stealing, and gets caught in the act.

[Sycamore Row](#) by John Grisham – a wealthy Southern business man dying of cancer hangs himself from a sycamore tree after writing a will that leaves his millions, not to his estranged children, but to his black housekeeper.

[The Handsome Man's Deluxe Cafe](#) by Alexander McCall Smith – the latest installment in the No. 1 Ladies' Detectives Agency series, featuring all of the regular loveable characters.

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Footnotes

1. from Alexandra Stoddard in her book [Grace Notes](#) ↩

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