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Oregon Trails-Favorite Books of 2017

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Oregon Trails — Favorite Books of 2017

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With no apologies to contemporary lists of best books, I offer my “Top 17 in ’17” among the many books that I read last year. They are listed in the order in which I read them.

***Hitler’s Ascent: 1889-1939* by Volker Ulrich**

Ulrich humanizes **Hitler** but not to the point where I sympathize with or admire him but to where I get a better understanding of him. For example, I learned that **Hitler** was a voracious reader, at least during one stage of his life. He even developed an art of reading that seemed to be based on noting and retaining only that which confirmed his beliefs. Imagine the course of history if **Adolf** had read broadly and with an open mind.

***Narziss und Goldmund* by Hermann Hesse**

When I took **Joseph Mileck’s** seminar in 1972, he assigned **Hesse’s** stories and novels (all of them except *Das Glasperlenspiel*) in chronological order following **Hesse’s** own personal development that is mirrored in his fiction and poetry. I have been gradually re-reading those novels first encountered so long ago. For those wanting an understanding of **Hesse** but not wanting to read his entire work, I recommend just two of his novels, *Siddhartha* and *Narziss und Goldmund*.

***Casuals of the Sea* by William McFee**

Bennett Cerf considered three works by **McFee** to hold up against the best of **Joseph Conrad**, another writer of the sea: *Casuals of the Sea*; *Captain Macedoine’s Daughter*; and *Command*. I put *Casuals of the Sea* among my favorite books of all time since I first read it in 1962, the year I bought my first copy of it. I now own ten variant copies of the book and at least one copy of every other book that **McFee** wrote. Below is the quotation of a second-hand bookseller in *Casuals of the Sea* that launched my journey into **McFee** territory.

“Be master of yourself. The world is not an oyster to be opened, but a quicksand to be passed. If you have wings you can fly over it, if not you may quite possibly sucked in.”

***Good-bye Columbus* by Philip Roth**

In 1963 I was a private in the Army at Ft. Dix, New Jersey and lucky enough to be among soldiers with college degrees who fed my hunger for literature by recommending title after title including *Good-bye Columbus*. I never read anything else by **Roth** but after re-reading his National Book Award winner, I now want to try his other works.

***A Single Pebble* by John Hersey**

How did I miss this book as I went from *Hiroshima* to *A Bell for Adano* to *The War Lover*? *A Single Pebble* is a simple story full of complex observations about how people’s lives are intertwined with their environment, especially the mighty Yangtze River as observed and reported by a young American engineer who travels a thousand miles aboard a Chinese junk. He is as captivated by the crew, on board and on shore, as he is by the Yangtze itself. Halfway through the book, I had become a passenger, too.

***Ulysses* by James Joyce**

How many references to this book have I seen that suggest it is a book talked about but never read in its entirety? I no longer belong to that category. After many starts and stops, I finally read the entire 783 pages of the Modern Library (1961 corrected and reset) edition that I bought in Fresno, California in 1966. It was worth the wait and having to re-read more than half the novel.

My enjoyment of *Ulysses*, for I did enjoy it, was enhanced by having read *A Portrait of the Artist* at least six times, beginning in 1960 while still in high school, and *Dubliners* three times. I didn’t read **Homer’s** *The Odyssey* until after reading *Ulysses*. I didn’t need

either one in order to enjoy and understand the other. And using , as I read *Ulysses*, several guides, I found them more a distraction than a help with a few exceptions.

***For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway**

This self-parody was not apparent to me when I first read it in 1961, the very year when **Hemingway** tipped off how **Robert Jordan** ended his stand against the Nationalist, not with a shootout but with a bang. A second reading confirmed some of what I remembered but it also gave me a chance to appreciate how **Hemingway** describes the brutality of war and especially a civil war. In 1961, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was full of romance, adventure, and heroism. From my perspective as an old man, I am skeptical of what **Roberto** thought of as love but I also appreciate the personal dynamics in the novel, much as I did before but with a deeper understanding.

***Go She Must* by David Garnett**

David “Bunny” Garnett was a popular member of the **Bloomsbury** group and the son of writers and editors, his mother being **Constance Garnett** whose translations of **Dostoevsky**, **Tolstoy**, **Chekov**, and others enabled English speakers to enjoy that rich Russian literature. **David Garnett** writes with sensitivity and style and tells a good story. See also his *The Sailor’s Return* and *Beany-Eye*, that is, if you can find copies.

***The Forties* by Edmund Wilson**

Even after reading *Memoirs of Hecate County*, I was taken aback at **Wilson’s** frankness as he describes his intimacies with the woman who became his wife. It is one thing to be so open in a journal that is for one’s own eyes only but to prepare it for publication so candidly is beyond me. Yes, I enjoyed the observations of this exceedingly literate (and opinionated) and erudite man and have most of his books sitting on my shelves waiting to be read.

***A Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man* by Joseph Heller**

This is a funny book, funny as odd and funny as humorous. Don’t quit reading halfway through, even if tempted, because you need to get to the punch line. What a funny, odd book. It is not for the novice reader.

***The Moving Toy Shop* by Edmund Crispin**

Edmund Crispin was a writer but also a composer, a pianist, an organist, and a conductor. His sleuth, the Oxford don, **Gervase Fen**, is perhaps my favorite crime solver of all time. The eponymous toy shop is not moving but it moves and therein lies the mystery. I think I have about four more **Professor Fen** books to go. Then what shall I read?

***A Surfeit of Lampreys* by Ngaio Marsh**

Should you run out of **Gervase Fen** novels, I suggest that you move on to **Ngaio Marsh’s** *Roderick Alleyn*, a gentleman’s detective. There are 32 novels featuring him so there is no danger of running out of reading any too soon. Both **Alleyn** and **Fen** can quote poetry and **Shakespeare** with the best of them while also solving mysteries.

***The Private Papers of a Bankrupt Bookseller* by Anonymous (William Young Darling)**

The title alone is almost enough to make you cry but then come the bookseller’s musings about books, the businesses next door to him, poetry, and, indirectly, on life itself. So poignant are some of the essays, many no more than a page in length, that my eyes became teary as I read them. I identified with the bookseller the minute I saw the book in **Richard Booth’s Bookshop, Café, and Cinema** (Hay-on-Wye, Wales), just after one of the tastiest breakfasts ever anywhere. I have even bought a book of **John Masefield** poetry on the recommendation of a bookseller who never existed except on paper. This is my book of the year.

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The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Getting Attention

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The idea that the contents and conclusions in scholarly journal articles make their way into newspapers and other popular media isn't new. Nor is the notion that such transmissions are important not just to the general public, but to the scientific community, as well. An October 1991 *New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM)* article, "Importance of the Lay Press in the Transmission of Medical Knowledge to the Scientific Community," by **David P. Phillips, Elliot J. Kanter, Bridget Bednarczyk, and Patricia L. Tastad**, posited that "efficient, undistorted communication of the results of medical research is important to physicians, the scientific community, and the public." Because "information that first appears in the scientific literature is frequently retransmitted in the popular press," the article's authors asked the question, "does popular coverage of medical research in turn amplify the effects of that research on the scientific community?" The hypothesis they tested was, "researchers are more likely to cite papers that have been publicized in the popular press." The article's authors compared the number of *Science Citation Index* references to *NEJM* articles that were covered by *The New York Times* with the number of references to similar articles that were not covered by the *Times*. The authors concluded that *NEJM* articles covered by the *Times* received a disproportionate number of scientific citations in each of the ten years after the articles appeared. (The *Times* is an appropriate yardstick because of its power; what it chooses to publish makes its way to many other media outlets.) The effect was strongest in the first year after publication, when *NEJM* articles publicized by the *Times* received 72.8 percent more scientific citations than control articles. This effect was not present for articles published during the newspaper strike in the 1960s, when the *Times* prepared an "edition of record" that was not distributed; articles covered by the

Times during this period were no more likely to be cited than those not covered.

NEJM remains fully aware of the importance of article transmissions to the popular press. With the print edition published weekly on Thursdays, and with each week's content available online at *NEJM.org* at 5 PM EST each Wednesday, *NEJM* offers advance-access subscriptions to "qualified journalists" with daily or weekly deadlines. When advance-access subscribers agree to abide by *NEJM*'s embargo policy, i.e., not to publish stories before online publication on Wednesday at 5 PM EST, they have complimentary access to embargoed content via the *NEJM* Media Center on the Friday prior to publication. At this time, advance-access subscribers also receive author contact information, which facilitates author interviews in advance of publication.

Of course, because *NEJM* publishes articles about medical issues of wide interest, its parent, **The Massachusetts Medical Society**, would place great emphasis on feeding clinical and medical research information to journalists. Other scholarly publishers in not just medical but in other disciplines, as well, maintain similar press operations, with their own sets of rules, not only, I think, to disseminate results in journal papers and information in books for public benefit, but also to attract papers from prominent and up-and-coming authors, as well as to sell more subscriptions and more copies — to do well by doing good.

In addition to medicine, many scientific disciplines receive considerable press coverage. Biology, physics, and astronomy are disciplines that come readily to mind. During the recent **PROSE Awards** judging, two science journals

really stood out for me. The reason was their purposeful linking of scholarly articles with public issues and the attempt to secure press coverage.

The first one I want to discuss is a subscription-based chemical sciences journal, *Chem*, published by **Cell Press**. The journal's primary aims, according to the publisher, are to showcase "chemistry as a force for good" by demonstrating "how fundamental studies in chemistry and its sub-disciplines may help in finding potential solutions to the global challenges of tomorrow." (I'm reminded of the phrase, "Better Living Through Chemistry," the more common variant of a **DuPont** advertising slogan, "Better Things for Better Living...Through Chemistry," used from 1935 until 1982. To circumvent trademark infringement, "Better Living Through Chemistry" was used on non-**DuPont** products. You've probably heard the phrase used to promote prescription or recreational drugs, to praise chemicals and plastics, or for sarcasm. [Hat tip to Wikipedia])

On submission, *Chem* authors are asked to categorize their contributions, including research articles, reviews, commentaries, discussions, and opinions into at least one of the following ten Sustainable Development Goals identified and developed by the United Nations, which *Chem* selected for their relevance to chemistry: good health and well-being; affordable and clean energy; clean water and sanitation; climate action; zero hunger; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; industry, innovation, and infrastructure; life on land; life below water. **Cell Press** says that *Chem* is the first journal to establish these wide-ranging links.

According to the supporting materials that **Cell Press** submitted to **PROSE**, they're taking on a "greater challenge." They assert that chemistry is never seen in "the same positive light" as other sci-

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Black Betty by **Walter Mosley**

If you don't know who **Easy Rawlins** is, I invite you to find out by reading about him in **Walter Mosley's** novels. He is like no private eye or anyone at all you have ever encountered. As he solves mysteries, **Rawlins** also provides a running social commentary that gives us all something to think about.

Death at the President's Lodgings by **Michael Innes**

Here is another professor of English literature using his professional background as a backdrop for murder and mayhem. The president in this novel oversees an imaginary English university situated midway

between Oxford and Cambridge. Oh to have such lodgings, sans the murders.

Earthly Delights, Unearthly Adornments: American Writers as Image Makers and *About Fiction* by **Wright Morris**

Most of **Wright Morris's** books are novels and short stories but he was also a gifted photographer and a literary critic with an insider's feeling for American literature. But **Morris** also read across borders as will be seen in his twenty recommended readings appended to *About Fiction*.

In 1989, I was privileged to meet, converse, and dine with **Mr. Morris**. I regret that I had not read these two books before meeting him because then I might have been able to hold up my end of our conversation and correspondence. The winner of two National Book Awards and two **Guggenheim** fellowships for photography, this native Nebraskan is probably the best unknown American writer ever. 🐾