

On What to Read

I was asked about a list of good books to read, and I'll give one from John Senior, which I think is pretty good, though we could have a splendid argument about it, near a fireplace with some good port. But first an introduction is in order, because this will be a list of good books, and not great books.

The "Great Books" movement of two generations ago, hasn't really failed, but it does seem to have fizzled, not because of any defect in the books—"the best that has been thought and said," in Matthew Arnolds phrase—but like good champagne in plastic bottles, they went flat. In other words, the seeds are as great as they ever were, but the cultural soil has been depleted. Normally speaking, the seminal ideas of Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, and St. Thomas only properly grow in an imaginative ground saturated with fables, fairy tales, stories, rhymes and adventures, which have developed into the thousand good books of Grimm, Andersen, Stevenson, Dickens, Scott, Dumas and the rest.

These good books are then a preparation for the great ones and for all studies in the arts and sciences, without which such studies risk being inhumane. The brutal athlete and the foppish aesthete suffer vices opposed to the virtue of what Cardinal Newman called the "gentleman." The computer whiz kid has a different danger.

I've seen many a time the student in college (whether in the arts or the sciences) receive even a little cultural ground under him—and watched him grow up like an undernourished plant suddenly fertilized and watered.

We could argue about "great" and "good" as well. The distinction between them cannot be absolute. "Great" implies a certain magnitude; so one might say Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is great because of its length, and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* because of its difficulty. Great books call for philosophical reflection and argument; whereas good books are popular, appealing especially to the imagination. But obviously some writers are both, and their works may be read more than once from the different points of view. This is true of Cervantes say, or Shakespeare.

It is commonly agreed that both "great" and "good" can only be judged from a certain distance. Contemporary works can be appreciated and enjoyed but not very properly judged, and just as a principle must stand outside of what follows from it (as a point to the line), so a cultural standard must be established from some time at least as distant as our grandparents'.

I don't know where the cut-off line is or should be. Probably for us today it would be about World War I, before cars and electric light had not yet come to dominate our lives and the experience of nature had not been distorted by speed and the destruction of shadows (even in churches). There is a serious question—with arguments on both sides—as to whether there can be any culture at all in a mechanized society. Whichever side one takes in that dispute, it is certainly true that we cannot understand the point at issue without an imaginative grasp of the world we have lost.

In the next bulletin insert will be a list of books that is not complete, but they are a start: a good work sheet.

This list is for the amateur (a French word meaning "one who does something out of love")—the ordinary person who loves and enjoys what he loves – not of the expert in critical, historical or textual technology.

The list is divided up into stages of life corresponding to the classical ages of man (which are in agreement with modern child psychology, such as the theories of Piaget). And because sight is the first of the senses and especially powerful in early years, it is very important to secure books illustrated by artists working in the cultural tradition we are studying both as an introduction to art and as part of the imaginative experience of the book. This is not to disparage contemporary artists any more than the tradition itself disparages contemporary experiment. Quite the contrary, one of the fruits of such a course should be the encouragement of good writing and drawing. A standard must never be taken as a restrictive straight-jacket but rather as a teacher and a model for achievement. Book illustration reached its perfection in the Nineteenth Century in the work of Randolph Caldecott, Kete Greenaway, Walter Crane, Gustave Dore, George Cruikshank, Gordon Browne, Beatrix Potter, Sir John Tenniel, Arthru Rackham, Howard Pyle, N.C. Wyeth, and many others. The rule of thumb is to find a nineteenth-century edition or one of the facsimiles which (though not as sharp in the printing) are currently available at moderate prices.