

Western Culture's Top 50 Books, 2006

Give yourself an education by checking out these books

By Gene Edward Veith

One WORLD subscriber who teaches accounting recently wrote, "I have a 'professional' school background. My liberal arts education is very limited. However, I make up for both with a 'feel good' sandbox education from the California public-school system in the '60s (can you see my tongue poking through my cheek?). I would truly love to expand my background. Any chance of helping with reading suggestions?"

Of course-and that subscriber should know that he is not alone. Most of us have come away from a "progressive" education system that gives us a little knowledge and makes us even more dangerous than those who are unschooled and aware of deficiencies. Nevertheless, opportunity waits: Those willing to read long and deep can go far on their own, and education by reading doesn't even cost anything. Library cards are free.

What to read? Many recent books are terrific. On the key question of evolution vs. intelligent design, Phillip Johnson's Darwin on Trial, Michael Behe's Darwin's Black Box, and William Dembski's Intelligent Design are among the books worth surveying. On American culture, Gertrude Himmelfarb's One Nation, Two Cultures, Tom Wolfe's Hooking Up, and Thomas Sowell's The Vision of the Anointed are all good reads from the past few years.

Regarding the role of today's church in our culture, Hugh Hewitt's The Embarrassed Believer, David Wells's No Place for Truth, and Leon Podles's The Church Impotent are among those that get the story right. Alvin Schmidt's Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization tells how potent Christianity has been in changing cultures, and Herbert Schlossberg's Idols for Destruction shows what happens when a society heads away from Christ.

But for those willing to spend time not only with contemporary analysis but the wisdom of former years, the advice of C.S. Lewis ("On the Reading of Old Books") is excellent: Read at least one classic for every three new books. Doing that enables readers to avoid the narrowness of thinking that today's ideas are the only possible truths: We need "to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books."

So WORLD offers a Western Culture reading list, one that will stretch your mind, equip you for intellectual combat in the world, and even strengthen your faith. While our list overlaps in part the typical "Great Books" canon, many such lists are drawn up as a secular humanist scripture. This list is different in that these books are not only great but good.

Though not all of the books are explicitly religious or even by Christian writers, they show the direct or indirect influence of the Bible or at least a worldview that sees the world as a product of design rather than anarchic material forces. Only one book per author (or in one case, a collection of authors) is listed, though it would be beneficial also to read other books by many of these authors. First comes the top five must-read classics of all time. Then, 45 more, sorted by their time period.

The Bible

Multiple Inspired Authors

The book that needs no introduction has survived two centuries of deconstruction and new movements of ideological mistranslation. Unlike the scriptures of other religions, it portrays founders and heroes as real people and (with one exception) sinners all, and combines theological exposition with realistic history and poetry that shows both ups and downs.

Paradise Lost

john milton

The greatest poem in the English language shows the creation of the universe, the rebellion of Satan, the fall of the human race, and the plan of salvation. To do such awe-inspiring subjects justice calls for imaginative genius of the highest order and language that dazzles the heart; here too is the unforgettable pride and malice of Satan ("better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven"), the love story of Adam and Eve, and the silence in heaven before the Son of God steps forward to undo the Fall. Though the book-long work is not as difficult as one might think, a useful guide through the epic is C.S. Lewis's commentary, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*.

King Lear

william shakespeare

"The Complete Works" would be educational in the highest degree, but this play is probably the bard's most moving and most profound. What is left when your country comes apart, when your family comes apart through your own fault, when you lose your very mind? Only self-sacrificial love.

The Pilgrim's Progress

john bunyan

This is an allegory by a simple, uneducated repairer of pots and pans who happened to be a literary genius. Imprisoned for preaching without a license at a time when his Puritan faith was persecuted, Bunyan made good use of his time in jail, writing an unforgettable symbolic account of the Christian life. He gave us the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair, and other expressions that still resonate today.

The Temple

george herbert

One of the most neglected books by Christians, here is a series of poems about a personal relationship with Christ, saturated with Scripture, zeroed in on the gospel, with God's grace breaking in-time after time-into the sinful heart. All this from someone increasingly recognized as one of the greatest masters of poetic form.

Ancient books

The Iliad

homer

The keystone epic of the ancient Greeks and the greatest war story ever written is yet, strangely, anti-war. The conflict between egotistical, angry Achilles and noble Hector, who only wants to defend his family, is heart-wrenching; so is the ending, as once-hated enemies are reconciled in mutual sorrow. The immoral, indifferent, meddling pagan gods are reminders of what "good news" it was for the Greeks centuries later to learn about the God who is real.

Gorgias

plato

Plato's dialogues are consistently worthwhile but this one is fun, as Socrates uncovers the threat and exposes the pretensions of a sophist who prizes style over substance and seems uncannily like some politicians and mediocrats of our own day.

Antigone

sophocles

See the Greeks come to the realization that there must be a higher law above that of their own culture, one that should limit the power even of kings.

The Aeneid

virgil

The true sequel to The Iliad, in which a band of Trojan refugees escape their burning city and found another that would become even greater: Rome. The book's theme is that success in any important enterprise requires faithfulness to duty and the subjugation of personal desires.

Sayings of the Fathers

translated by joseph h. hertz

The best-known treatise of the Talmud describes the seven marks of a discerning man along with the envy, cupidity, and vain ambition of the foolish. Wisdom and pride inhabit every page, but the overall emphasis is on the need to repent one day before death comes, which means-since none of us knows when he will die-every day.

Confessions

augustine of hippo

Witness the conversion to Christianity of someone who was at once a Greek-style philosopher and a sophisticated Roman man of the world. The first autobiography ever written, this book is a vivid, honest, and spiritually stimulating account of the inner life of an African bishop whose theological insights are today appreciated across the whole spectrum of Christendom.

Medieval Books

The Divine Comedy

dante alighieri

In this allegorical journey to heaven, the punishments of hell are symbols of the very sin that the lost souls embraced in life, evils chosen by their own will. Dante's purgatory is a symbol of what it means to repent from a sin, and his paradise is a symbol of the love of God. The epic is a comedy because, in Dante's terms, it has a happy ending, with images of grace and Luther-like criticisms of abuses in the church resonating far longer than its medievalism. For a Virgil to see you through these vales, see Dorothy L. Sayers's Introductory Papers on Dante or Charles Williams's The Figure of Beatrice.

The Canterbury Tales

geoffrey chaucer

Diverse representatives of medieval society, on a religious pilgrimage, amuse each other by each telling stories along the way. Reflecting the different personalities that brilliantly come to life at the hands of Chaucer, some of the tales are bawdy and others are intensely moral, romantically idealistic, or cynically satirical. Chaucer's characters include both pious Christians and hypocritical frauds (such as the Pardoner, who sells indulgences), but his last story is a sermon about everlasting life that reminds us how we are all traveling on a pilgrimage that ends in eternity.

Le Morte D'Arthur

thomas mallory

This book weaves the King Arthur legends into a unified saga of chivalry, heroism, and faith, with destruction of the civilization of Camelot coming through human sin, the adultery of Lancelot and Guenevere. This is the sourcebook for all of the later retellings, from Tennyson's Idyls of the King to T.H. White's The Once and Future King.

Summa Theologica

thomas aquinas

This "Summary of Theology" is a systematic examination of the nature of God, creation, man, thoughts, and sacraments. Aquinas's five "proofs" for the existence of God (motion, causality, contingency, degrees of perfection, and design) proved influential, and his thinking underlay Roman Catholic philosophy from the 14th century well into the 20th.

Renaissance & Reformation

Dr. Faustus

christopher marlowe

The legend of a man who sells his soul to the devil has become a literary motif in nearly every age. "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:37). Here in the educational explosion of the Renaissance, it was knowledge. In Goethe's version in the Romantic era, it was experience. Other versions trade off salvation for artistic genius, material success, or even baseball prowess. In today's horror stories, people give themselves to the devil for nothing. In Marlowe's classic exposition, Dr. Faustus cannot really sell his soul, since it does not belong to him. It was bought with a price. He can repent at any time-"Christ's blood streams in the firmament"-but he won't, even as he is being pulled into the fires of hell.

The Faerie Queene

edmund spenser

Hardly anyone anymore reads this author who is ranked with Chaucer and Milton as among the greatest authors in the English language. That's too bad, because this work, with its purposefully old-fashioned spelling and complex rhyme scheme, invents the self-contained fantasy world and blazes the trail for fantasy writers to come. In this complex, labyrinthine tale, which is both chivalrous romance and multi-leveled allegory, Book I is a symbolic exploration of holiness: the Redcross Knight is subject to deception, sin, and bondage as long as he tries to be holy on his own, and has to be rescued by symbols of the grace of God.

Don Quixote

miguel de cervantes

This parody of the medieval romances in realistic prose is arguably the world's first novel-and still one of the best. The saga of a man who insists on living in his fantasy world, despite mundane reality, is both hilarious and thought-provoking: The knight with a pot on his head is foolish for tilting at windmills, yet we are sad when he becomes sane again.

Institutes of the Christian Religion

john calvin

Love him or hate him, Calvin with his precise formulations set the stage for all the debates within Protestantism that have since arisen. His emphasis on God's holiness, man's utter sinfulness, and Christ's merciful bridging work emphasizes the centrality of God's irresistible grace and points the way to hard-working contentment among believers.

Book of Martyrs

john foxe

Foxe's vivid descriptions inspired generations of Christians to honor martyrs such as England's John Hooper, burned at the stake in 1555. "Lord Jesus, have mercy upon me," Hooper repeatedly prayed: even "when he was black in the mouth, and his tongue swollen, that he could not speak, yet his lips went till they were shrunk to the gums." Finally one of Hooper's arms fell off, and the other, with "fat, water, and blood" dripping out at the ends of his fingers, stuck to what remained of his chest.

Devotions upon Emergent Occasions

john donne

This libertine who turned to Christ was a great poet and preacher, but his written prose may even be better. In these devotions made on his sickbed, Donne coined some of his most memorable lines: "No man is an island," and "ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." Donne's rich metaphors and honest spiritual musings as he faced death remain just as powerful today as they were in the 17th century-maybe more so, since we are not used to devotions of this kind of depth anymore.

Penseés

blaise pascal

When the young prodigy in mathematics and science (and godfather of today's computers) was converted to Christianity, he decided to write an apologetic treatise on the truth of the Christian faith. The result is a collection of short, fragmentary "thoughts" (the meaning of the French title) on the contradictions of the human heart and the astonishing grace of God. Pascal's thoughts are so fresh, so original, and so provocative that one sentence can leave you pondering for hours.

The Two Treatises of Government

john locke

These treatises brought a new dimension to Anglo-American political thought by vigorously critiquing absolute monarchy and emphasizing the importance of the rule of law, separation of powers, and protection of property. Locke's view of the origin and goals of government grew out of biblical thinking even though he apparently did not accept some aspects of biblical theology and anthropology.

18th Century

Gulliver's Travels

jonathan swift

Not just a children's story (the original is probably not the cleaned-up version you may have read as a child), Swift's story of little people, big people, flying islands, and talking horses is a withering satire on Enlightenment pretensions. Swift was a conservative Christian minister with a wicked sense of humor; although some readers will be taken aback at his interest in bathroom issues (for example, how Gulliver really put out the fire in the Lilliputian castle), Swift was really inventing science fiction even as he ridiculed the pretensions of the modernity to come.

Robinson Crusoe

daniel defoe

This gripping tale of shipwreck and survival has enraptured generations of readers, but in recent years some stripped-down editions removed the theological flavor and made the story merely one of physical survival. The full-bodied, original Defoe, now available once again, makes Crusoe's island hermitage a place for spiritual renewal as well.

Tristram Shandy

laurence sterne

The strangest book ever written, and the funniest for those with the quirky sense of humor it calls for. The preface comes in the middle of the book and digressions make a walk down the stairs take hundreds of pages; characters close their eyes, whereupon Sterne shows you a black page to show you what they were experiencing. Written by another eccentric minister of the gospel, the book makes today's "experimental" novels look like dull, unimaginative exercises.

The Wealth of Nations

adam smith

Out of a Christian concern for the common man, Smith attacked special interests who said they were acting to protect the poor but were actually using government to preserve their own standing. He showed that competition and free trade reduce poverty and spur helpful activity, since "man's self-interest is God's providence": Service with a smile is most likely when we profit by serving.

The Federalist Papers

james madison, alexander hamilton, & john jay

Witness the mind of the founders of the American Constitution at work, as they try to figure out how to design a free republic that, unlike those of the past, will last.

Reflections on the Revolution in France

edmund burke

Predicting accurately that French revolutionary ideology would lead to dictatorship and terror, Burke advocated the political pursuit of limited goals grounded in historical experience. He opposed the Enlightenment approach (now called "progressivism") of attempting to rearrange social and political institutions according to abstract principles.

19th century

Sense and Sensibility

jane austen

Perhaps the best English-language novelist shows in a witty and wise way that true love, leading to marriage, needs to be a matter of the head as well as the heart.

Lyrical Ballads

william wordsworth & samuel taylor coleridge

Wordsworth, writing about ordinary people and things in such a way that they seem extraordinary, essentially invented nature poetry. Coleridge, writing about extraordinary things in such a way that they seem ordinary, pioneered the genre of fantasy with poems such as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Romantics later went off the deep end, but these two young poets had a balanced sensibility that was a refreshing reaction against the "Age of Reason." Both later became conservative Christians: Wordsworth recognized the importance of moral duty, and Coleridge, despairing of his own moral failures after vain attempts to kick his opium habit, turned to Christ for forgiveness.

Democracy in America

alexis de toqueville

This French observer's emphasis on the importance of religious and community institutions in American life during the 1830s shows the deep roots of compassionate conservatism. Even more, his analysis suggests why the United States is the biggest national success story of the past three centuries: Religious belief, civic associations, and that sense that "among Americans honest callings are considered honorable" have contributed to prosperity combined with liberty.

Economic Harmonies

frederic bastiat

Following on Adam Smith, Bastiat argued that free markets and free trade most often led not to savage dealing but to harmonious relationships among people. If the rule of law could be emphasized and government intervention minimized, a market economy would maximize both liberty and prosperity.

David Copperfield

charles dickens

You could pick just about any book by England's most enjoyable novelist and find his trademark of memorably eccentric characters, strong moral sentiment, and devastating social criticism. This coming-of-age saga, following a young man growing up, is probably his best.

Moby Dick

herman melville

Captain Ahab is a combination of Milton's Satan and Shakespeare's Lear. Rich with a symbolism that is sometimes difficult to harpoon, this sea saga for good reason (despite the intrusion of more information about whaling than you'll want to know) is considered the great American novel.

Leaves of Grass

walt whitman

Whitman was a Romantic poet who went off the deep end, but he loved America, and his innovative poetry captures the texture, the ideals, and the values of the early Republic. It also embodies some of the problems of American culture-such as a demand for freedom at all costs and a contempt for the past-that we still struggle with today. But Whitman is worth reading at least to counter those who think existence is meaningless: Whitman has a way of showing that ordinary existence-such as a leaf of grass-is not meaningless but rather amazingly wonderful.

Innocents Abroad

mark twain

Read America's most enjoyable novelist before he became bitter (though those later works are worth reading too). This, his first book, is a comical treatment of his trip, as a backwoods frontiersman, to the sophisticated scenes of Europe. The contrast between the American way of looking at things and the European remains instructive.

Crime and Punishment

fyodor dostoevsky

Plunge into the depths of the human soul with the tormented Russian novelist, who, for all of his psychological intensity and personal struggles, is one of the greatest Christian writers of all time. Here, a young man, influenced by the fashionable atheism all around him, commits a murder as a philosophical exercise: After all, if there are no absolutes, why not? He experiences a guilt he cannot explain and meets another sinner, a prostitute, who tells him about Jesus. What does he do?

Master and Man

leo tolstoy

These 19 beautifully constructed brief tales by the great Russian author leave readers without the stuffed feeling that many have after the multi-course War and Peace. "What Men Live By" has a strong claim to being the best short story ever written.

20th century

Ash Wednesday

t.s. eliot

Eliot's poetry is difficult, but it is more than mere fragmentation and it rewards the effort; besides, when one of the most important and most innovative modernist authors converts to Christianity, Christians should notice. While "The Waste Land" explores spiritual barrenness- Eliot realized that modernity had lost something sacred-"Ash Wednesday" is about his conversion, with an emphasis on repentance and on Christ as "the still point of the turning world." Later, Eliot wrote his religious magnum opus, "The Four Quartets." (Russell Kirk considered Eliot to be a major resource for conservative thinkers and offers a guide to his poetry in Eliot and His Age.)

The Bear

william faulkner

This novella is an accessible introduction to the stream-of-consciousness style of the 20th century's best American novelist and to his Southern gothic characters. Unlike James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Faulkner grounded his characters in a realistically rendered world, and The Bear basically comes down to just a really good story about hunting.

The Violent Bear It Away

flannery o'connor

In an age that is supposedly leery about expressions of explicit Christianity, O'Connor is about as explicit as they come-but this does not prevent her writing from being shocking. (Some say her strategy was to shock complacent secularists with the grace of Christ.) This short novel, a modern rendition of the story of Jonah, is about the struggle between a backwoods preacher and a modern psychologist for the soul of a young boy who is determined to resist God's call.

The Lord of the Rings

j.r.r. tolkien

A colossal work of the imagination, a throw-back from the depressing modernist realism that dominated the century to an evocation of heroism, wonder, and other ancient values.

The Power and the Glory

graham greene

This British novelist with an affinity for the tropical wreckage of the British Empire writes here about the Mexican revolution and its Marxist persecution of Christianity. This novel is about a priest-alcoholic, sinful, guilt-ridden-who persists in carrying out his ministry to others, while a fanatical socialist police officer is trying to track him down. It is a tale about vocation and God's grace, about sinners, saints, and the connection between them.

The Chronicles of Narnia

c.s. lewis

These seven books (beginning with The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe) should be read repeatedly by parents to children for the enjoyment and edification of both. They make up both a sweeping work of fantasy and a reader-friendly introduction to basic biblical doctrines. In particular, The Magician's Nephew shows creation out of nothing and the entrance of sin to the world, and The Last Battle creates a kid-comprehensible end-times scenario.

Survival in Auschwitz

primo levi

A gripping account of depravity that shows how 20th-century totalitarians, believing man is merely an animal, tried to turn all men into animals. Instead of howling, Levi restrainedly wrote of life in hell, and his just-the-facts-ma'am story of survival amplifies the horror of the Holocaust.

Witness

whittaker chambers

The powerful autobiography and reflective meditation of a communist who became a Christian and, to the scorn of the intellectual establishment, wrote that "I am an involuntary witness to God's grace and to the fortifying power of faith." Chambers also explained that he first came to believe in God by looking at his infant daughter's "intricate, perfect ears" after she had smeared porridge on her face: He realized that those ears "could have been created only by immense design," and "design presupposes God ... at that moment, the finger of God was first laid upon my forehead."

The Cypresses Believe in God

jose gironella

This moving novel tells of one family in the years preceding the Spanish civil war and shows what happens when communist and fascist ideologies take precedence over the gospel. Gironella understood the forces that push sane men toward murderous activities that prompt the other side to retaliate; those counter-activities then prompt the original perpetrators to see their action as justified.

The Civil War

shelby foote

The American Iliad unwinds in three large volumes that are factually accurate but read like fiction. That's because a master storyteller, seeing that the plot laid out by the Master was more fearfully magnificent than anything he could have created, devoted 20 years of his life to telling the tragedy right.

The Second Coming

walker Percy

Of a half-dozen Percy novels that capture the God-driven hope and God-forsaken zaniness of contemporary American life, this is the most luminous in showing how humor beats alienation, faith overwhelms spiritual fatigue, and love for a woman can point a man to God. He concludes, "Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have." c