

“The Thousand Good Books” by John Senior

The “Great Books” movement of the last generation has not failed so much as fizzled, not because of any defect in the books—“the best that has been thought and said,” in Matthew Arnold’s phrase—but like good champagne in plastic bottles they went flat. To change the figure, the seeds are good but the cultural soil has been depleted; the seminal ideas of Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas, only properly grow in an imaginative ground saturated with fables, fairy tales, stories, rhymes, adventures, which have developed into the thousand books of Grimm, Andersen, Stevenson, Dickens, Scott, Dumas and the rest. Western tradition, taking all that was best of the Greco-Roman world into herself has given us the thousand good books as a preparation for the great ones and for all the studies in the arts and sciences, without which such studies are inhumane. The brutal athlete and the foppish aesthete suffer vices opposed to the virtue of what Newman called “the gentleman.”

Anyone working in any art or science at college, whether in the so-called “pure” or the practical arts and sciences will discover he has made a quantum leap when he gets even a small amount of cultural ground under him—he will grow up like an undernourished plant suddenly fertilized and watered.

Of course the distinction between “great” and “good” is not absolute. “Great” implies a certain magnitude; one might say *War and Peace* or *Les Miserables* are great because of their length, or *The Critique of Pure Reason* its difficulty. Great books call for philosophical reflection; 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 Shakespeare and Cervantes, for example.

It is commonly agreed also 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 what follows from it (as a point to a line), so a cultural standard must be established from some time at least as distant as our grandparents’. For us today the cut-off point is World War I before which cars and the 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. There is a serious question—with arguments on both sides surely—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.

What follows is not a complete list: almost all the authors have written many books, some as good as the ones given; and there are

undoubtedly authors of some importance inadvertently left out—but this is a sufficient worksheet. Everyone will find more than enough that he hasn’t read; and everything on this list is by common consent part of the ordinary cultural matter essential for an English-speaking person to grow in.

Remember that the point of view throughout a course of studies such as this is that of the amateur—the ordinary person who loves and enjoys what he loves—not of the expert in critical, historical or textual technology.

The books have been divided (sometimes dubiously because some stand midway between the categories) into the stages of life corresponding to the classical “ages” of man and in general agreement with the divisions of modern child psychology as explained by Freud or 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 straitjacket but rather as a teacher and model for achievement. Book illustration reached its perfection in the nineteenth century in the work of

Randolph Caldecott, Kate Greenaway, Walter Crane, Gustave Dore, George Cruikshank, “Phiz”, Gordon Browne, Beatrix Potter, Sir John Tenniel, Arthur 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. What follows is an incomplete work-sheet of unedited notes which may serve as a rough guide.



SENIOR'S INCOMPLETE LIFE-LONG READING LIST

THE NURSERY (Ages 2 – 7)

Literary experience begins for very young children with someone reading aloud while they look at the pictures. But they can begin to read the simplest stories which they already love at an early age.

Aesop. *Aesop's Fables* (The translation by Robert L'Estrange is the classic).

Andersen, Hans Christian. *Fairy Tales*.

Arabian Nights. There are two classic translations, one expurgated for children by Andrew Lang, the other complete by Richard Burton.

Belloc, Hilaire. *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts; Cautionary Tales*.

Caldecott, Randolph. *Picture Books*, 16 little volumes (published by Frederick Warne).

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice in Wonderland; Through the Looking Glass*. Illustrated by Tenniel.

Collodi, Carlo. *Pinocchio*.

de la Mare, Walter. *Come Hither; Songs of Childhood*.

Edgeworth, Maria. *The Parent's Assistant; Moral Tales*.

Ewing, Juliana. *Jackanapes*.

Gesta Romanorum. Translated by Swann (scholarly facsimiles).

Grahame, Kenneth. *Wind in the Willows* (illustrated by Ernest Shepherd).

Greenaway, Kate. *Apple Pie; Birthday Book; Marigold Garden; Mother Goose; Under the Window; The Language of Flowers* (Frederick Warne).

Grimm. *Household Stories*. Illustrated by Walter Crane (Dover facsimiles).

Harris, Joel Chandler. *Uncle Remus*.

Kingsley, Charles. *Water Babies*.

Kipling, Rudyard. *Just So Stories; Jungle Book*.

Lamb, Charles. *Beauty and the Beast; Tales from Shakespeare*.

Lang, Andrew. *Blue Book of Fairies* and other colors; five volumes; best illustrated by H.J. Ford (Dover facsimile).

Lear, Edward. *Nonsense Omnibus; The Owl and the Pussycat*. Illustrated by Lear (Warne).

Lofting, Hugh. *Dr Doolittle's Circus* and others in the series.

Milne, A.A.. *Winnie the Pooh* and others in the series.

Mother Goose (Dover facsimiles – illustrated by Rackham; Viking Press).

Perrault, Charles. *Fairy Tales*. Illustrated by Dore (Dover).

Potter, Beatrix: *Peter Rabbit* and 23 little volumes; some available in French, Spanish and Latin. All illustrated by Potter (an important feature of these books is their small size, designed for a young child. Buy the individual books, not all of them collected in one big volume).

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *A Child's Garden of Verses* (Scribners).

SCHOOL DAYS (Ages 7 – 12)

Adams, Andy. *Log of a Cowboy*. Illustrated by N.C. Wyeth.

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women; Little Men*; others.

Aldrich, Thomas Bailey. *Story of a Bad Boy*.

Burroughs, Edgar Rice. *Tarzan* series.

Browning, Robert. *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. Illustrated by Kate Greenaway (Warne).

Burnett, Francis Hodgson. *The Secret Garden; Little Lord Fauntleroy*.

Collins, William. *John Gilpin's Ride*. Illustrated by Caldecott (Warne).

Cooper, James Fenimore. *Deerslayer* and many others.

Dana, Richard Henry. *Two Years Before the Mast*.

Dickens, Charles. *Christmas Carol; Cricket on the Hearth; David Copperfield; Oliver Twist* (These last may be reserved for adolescents or re-read.)

Dodge, Mary Mapes. *Hans Brinker*.

Defoe, Daniel. *Robinson Crusoe*.

Garland, Hamlin. *Son of the Middle Border* and others.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Tanglewood Tales*.

Henty, George William. A hundred "Boys Books".

Irving, Washington. *Sketch Book*.

James, Will. *Smoky; Lone Cowboy; Book of Cowboys* Illustrated by James.

Kingsley, Charles. *Westward Ho*, others

Kipling, Rudyard. *Captains Courageous; Stalky and Co.* Illustrated by Millar.

Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. *Hiawatha; Evangeline*.

Marryat, Frederick, *Midshipman Easy; Masterman Ready*, and others.

Masefield, John. *Jim Davis*.

Porter, Gene Stratton. *Freckles* and others.

Pyle, Howard. *Robin Hood* and others. Illustrated by Pyle.

Sewell, Anna. *Black Beauty*.

Shakespeare. *Comedy of Errors*.

Spyri, Johanna. *Heidi*.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *Treasure Island; Kidnapped*, and others. Illustrated by N.C. Wyeth

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Tarkington, Booth. *Penrod* and others in the series

Til Eulenspiegel translated by Mackenzie.

Twain, Mark. *Tom Sawyer; Huckleberry Finn; The Prince and the Pauper* – but not *Connecticut Yankee* and later novels.

Verne, Jules. *Around the World in Eighty Days*; and many others.

Wilder, Laura Ingalls. *Little House on the Prairie*; and others.

Wyss, Johann. *Swiss Family Robinson*.

ADOLESCENCE (Ages 12 – 16)

Bronte, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*.

Collins, Wilkie. *Moonstone* and others.

Dampier, William. *A Voyage Round the World*.

Daudet, Alphonse. *Tartarin, Fromont Jeune*.

Dickens, Charles. *Barnaby Rudge; Nicholas Nickleby; Old Curiosity Shop*.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. Sherlock Holmes series; *White Company*.

Du Maurier, George. *Trilby*.

Dumas, Alexander. *Three Musketeers*; others.

Eggleston, Edward. *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*.

Eliot, George. *Romola*; *Adam Bede*; *Mill on the Floss*.

Fabre, Henri. Selections from *Souvenirs entymologique*.

Hughes, Thomas. *Tom Brown's School Days*; *Tom Brown at Oxford*.

Hugo, Victor. *Quatre-vingt-treize*; *Les Miserables*; *Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.

Ibanez, Blasco. *Blood and Sand*; *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.

Le Sage, Alain. *Gil Blas*.

Park, Mungo. *Travels in Africa*.

Parkman, Francis. *Oregon Trail*.

Poe, Edgar Allen. *Tales*; and poems.

Polo, Marco. *Travels*.

Reade, Charles. *The Cloister and the Hearth*.

Rhodes, Eugene. *Best Novels and Stories* (edited by Dobie).

Scott, Walter. *Ivanhoe*; *Rob Roy*; many others.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*.

Shakespeare. *Midsummer Night's Dream*; *Romeo and Juliet*; *Merchant of Venice*.

Sienkiewicz, Henryk. *Quo Vadis*; *With Fire and Sword*.

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*.

Wallace, Edgar. *Four Just Men*; *Sanders of the River*; others.

Wells, H.G.. *The Time Machine*; *The Invisible Man*; others.

Wister, Owen. *The Virginian*.

YOUTH (Ages 16 – 20)

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*; and others.

Balzac, Honore. *Pere Goriot*; and many others.

Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward*.

Bernanos, Georges. *Diary of a Country Priest*.

Blackmore, Richard. *Lorna Doone*; and others.

Borrow, George. *Romany Rye*; and others.

Bronte, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*.

Buchanan, John. *The Thirty Nine Steps*; and many others.

Butler, Samuel. *The Way of all Flesh*; Erewhon.

Cabell, James Branch. *Jurgen*; and others.

Cable, George Washington. *Old Creole Days*; and others.

Cather, Willa. *My Antonia*; *Death Comes for the Archbishop*; and others.

Chekhov, Anton. *Stories*; and plays.

Chesterton, G.K.. Father Brown series; *Everlasting Man*; *A Man Called Thursday*

Columbus, Christopher. *Four Voyages to the New World*.

Conrad, Joseph. *Lord Jim*; and many others

Cook, James. *Captain Cook's Explorations*.

De Maupassant, Guy. *Stories*.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*; *Our Mutual Friend*; *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Dostoyevsky, Feodor. *Crime and Punishment*; *Brothers Karamazov*.

Doughty, Charles. *Travels in Arabia Desert*.

Fielding, Henry. *Tom Jones*; *Jonathan Wilde*

Hakluyt, Richard. *Voyages to the New World*.

Hawkins, Anthony Hope. *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Scarlet Letter*; and others.

Irving, Washington. *Life of Columbus*; *Conquest of Granada*; *Life of George Washington*

Jackson, Helen Hunt. *Ramona*.

Lagerof, Selma. *Jerusalem*; *Gosta Berling*; and others.

Loti, Pierre. *Iceland Fisherman*; and others.

Manzoni., Alessandro. *The Betrothed*.

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*; *Billy Budd*; and others.

Moore, Tom. *Lalla Rookh*.

Morris, William. *News from Nowhere*.

Scott, Robert. *Scott's Last Expedition*

Shakespeare. *MacBeth; Hamlet; Taming of the Shrew; As You Like It*.

Stendahl. *The Red and the Black; The Charterhouse of Parma*.

Stanley, Henry Morton. *How I Found Livingstone*.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Vanity Fair; Henry Esmond*; and others.

Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*; and others.

Trollope, Anthony. Barchester series

Turgenev, Ivan. *Fathers and Sons; A Nest of Gentlefolk*; and others.

Undset, Sigrid. *Kristin Lavransdatter*; and others.

Verga, Giovanni. *The House by the Medlar Tree*; and others (translated by D.H. Lawrence)

Washington, Booker T.. *Up from Slavery*.

SPIRITUAL READING (All ages)

The Bible. For cultural purposes, there are only two English Bibles: for the Protestants the King James Version and for Catholics the Douay-Rheims. Both are literary masterpieces as none other even remotely is. Since spiritual mysteries can only be communicated through poetry, whatever more modern versions may gain in accuracy is nothing compared to what is lost.

Bunyan, John. *Pilgrim's Progress*—the Great Protestant Masterpiece.

de Sales, St Francis. *Introduction to the Devout Life*—the best there is.

MUSIC

Avoiding extremes of difficult and light—neither Bach nor Debussy—the distinction between “great” and good is blurred. The student should listen to one work only for at least a week, going over and over the separate movements or acts until the repeated themes are recognized as they recur. It is better to know a very few works very well than to run over vast amounts. The following is a good order for neophytes:

Beethoven. *Violin Concerto*.

Beethoven. *Pastoral Symphony*.

Verdi. *Rigoletto*.

With an opera, read the entire libretto in English, then take only a single scene and play it through several times trying to follow the words in Italian (or French or German) with an understanding of their meaning. Having gone through the whole opera scene by scene, pick out great moments – arias, duets, etc. It is good to have two recordings, one of the complete work, another of the highlights.

Puccini. *La Boheme*

Mozart. *Clarinet Concerto* or *Oboe Concerto*; *Jupiter Symphony*; Piano music (especially as played by Gieserking)

Beethoven. *Seventh Symphony*.

Brahms. *Fourth Symphony*.

Chopin. *Selections*.

(Most important: Students should attend live concerts).

ART

The Kenneth Clark series *Civilisation*. Clark published a book with illustrations and the text of the series. And most important, visits to museums and galleries.