

## DESERT ISLAND READING

If I could read only twenty books in a lifetime, I would choose these--providing I had a Bible besides.

### **Don Quixote**

by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra

To quote my own character Marcus Aurelius Wherefore, **Don Quixote** is “a unique journey through the country of illusion commonly known as human society,” offering “a host of marvels: the slapstick high comedy with the irony that makes it superb; the mad knight anointed by the grace of the narrator to show up the world as madder than he is; the knowing yet deluded squire who perfects the balance of great art just short of nonsense.” One of the few books I feel I could never have done without.

### **Paradise Lost**

by John Milton

Epic splendor never surpassed, not even by Homer. At one time I found the language too archaic and the work too remote from modern life to command my attention. Still, fascination kept leading me back to the text, until my ignorance finally resolved itself into admiration. From the smallest of domestic troubles and joys in Eden to a cosmic vision sweeping from Heaven to Hell, this magnificent poem dramatizes the human condition and our place in the universe as brilliantly today as it did when composed over three centuries ago..

### **In Search of Lost Time**

by Marcel Proust

One of the greatest reading experiences of my life, and a continuing inspiration in my endeavors at fiction. This novel is the supreme portrait of the artist in all literature, yet it never loses its way in the narrowness and preciousness prone to haunt such an enterprise. Rather it shapes by the amazing insight and the recreative power of the artist the essence of life as time lost and time recaptured. At the same time it lays out a vast portrayal of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in France.

### **Wuthering Heights**

by Emily Bronte

Heathcliff--what is he? and how is the daimonic union between him and Catherine Earnshaw to be interpreted? Is this the wildly romantic notion of a lonely spinster doomed to live on a dark and stormy moor--a "woman wailing for her demon lover"? The story is too balanced in its searing effects for that. Maybe the daimon of the moors has chosen incarnation in the couple, that devouring yet sustaining spirit of place which Catherine prefers over heaven itself. Who knows? Some obscure corners of fiction will not yield to any ray, and the novel is all the better for it..

### **Light in August**

by William Faulkner

A confirmed reader of fiction all my life, I came late to a decision to try my hand at writing it. About this time I happened upon **Light in August**. It was a revelation, not so much in the tortuous and jarring presentation of a brutally racist South as in the style that embodies it. I saw here how language can lift the common world of agony and triumph to a visionary plane. I was so enthralled that for a while I wrote like Faulkner. It was a fine apprenticeship but left behind in time as all apprenticeships must be.

### **Gulliver's Travels**

by Jonathan Swift

This tale is one I've truly known as man and boy. Stripped of its guts as a story for children, it still carried the grotesque fun that for me made it high adventure. When I grew old enough to grasp it whole, my admiration for Swift's genius grew immensely: my admiration of how he turns the common theme of learning charity through bitter experience on its head. Gulliver goes through it all only to lose his humanity. And yet we love him--or anyhow I do.

### **King Lear**

by William Shakespeare

I share Keats's veneration of this "fierce dispute betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay." Foolishly delivering himself

into the ravening hands of his daughters Regan and Goneril, who shut him out at night to perish on a storm-lashed heath, the old king yet fights back with all the passion of his nature. The awesome course of his torment, ending in redemption through reconciliation with his daughter Cordelia and death as victory, is for me the essence of tragedy's purgation of pity and terror.

### **Othello**

by William Shakespeare

That a man's character is his fate is superbly enacted in **Othello**. Evil seeks out an imperfection in a noble nature whereby to invade and destroy it. "If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy," Othello exults in newfound marital bliss. But Iago is already laying snares, knowing that the naive and hypersensitive Othello cannot but fall into the trap. In the rush of doom, Iago soon has him murdering his bride. Anytime I return to **Othello**, I find it deeply painful to read, but then pain inflicted by great art is to be treasured.

### **Collected Poems**

by William Butler Yeats

Yesterday or today or tomorrow, "many ingenious lovely things are gone" can solace us against the ravages of the years: one of many Yeats lines with that timeless quality in the tradition of Shakespeare and Alexander Pope. If I were called on to define great poetry, I could do it with a few Yeats poems as evidence. Further, he is a writer's poet. Along with the Emily Dickinson phrase, I have this one on my study wall: "A line will take us hours maybe;/ Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought/ Our stitching and unstitching has been naught."

### **Collected Poems**

by Emily Dickinson

Unique in uniting simple form with a knotty diction of high shock value, close kin to a style descending from Shakespeare through the Metaphysicals into the great Modernists, and the only example in between. Many of her lines can startle and yield a new depth of meaning even after a dozen readings. One of her lyrics on the nature of poetry hangs on the wall of my study, the one beginning "Many a phrase has the English language--/ I have heard but one--

/ Low as the laughter of the cricket--/ Loud, as the Thunder's  
Tongue--.

### **The Divine Comedy**

by Dante Alighieri

Dante comes across to a fair extent in English translation, but the enchantment of great poetry can never be fully transplanted--I learned this trying to teach Emily Dickinson to French undergraduates. Dante's achievement remains astounding to this day: to ascend from the nether depths to the empyrean in magnificent narrative, wrapping philosophy and theology about him in an intricate verse form and a concise language from a dialect which had never been raided for poetry before but which he turned into standard Italian.

### **Tess of the d'Urbervilles**

by Thomas Hardy

Hardy's best. The striking and tragic story of a young woman with the nobility of ancient blood in her veins doomed to exile in the modern world and destroyed by it. A supreme study of how sexual cynicism on the one hand and an equally cruel conventionality on the other twist love out of existence.

### **Ulysses**

by James Joyce

Cultivating a fondness for this vast and complex novel requires a special commitment, but the reward far outweighs the effort. Stephen Dedalus, Leopold Bloom and Molly Bloom rank among the greatest characters in literature. Joyce's incomparable skill in the full creation of these three as ordinary modern people in a fully wrought city, and at the same time as figures moving against a backdrop of all history and literature never falters. **Ulysses** has no literary descendants because it cannot be imitated--or emulated. It is unique.

### **The Plumed Serpent**

by D. H. Lawrence

An experiment in reviving the primitive spirit of America, with invented myth and religion, including deification of the principal characters. The fantastic masquerades filling the pages lead many readers away from the true nature of the story: which lies in Kate Leslie's struggle between European culture and the "noble savagery" of Ramon Carrasco and Cipriano Viedma. She embodies the old frustrated longing of rational Europe to unite with the primeval spirit of America in order to recapture the lost instinctive depths of its own soul. That Kate never solves this dilemma is less important than that she remains committed to the search

### **Lord Jim**

by Joseph Conrad

A major novel about a failure--a figure who would seem no fit protagonist anyhow. Worse, Jim's noble dream is only the boyish fantasy of heroism won by saving a host of people from calamity. When such an opportunity comes, he fails the test. The book is about his flight from guilt, his reckless attempts to prove that he is worthy after all. He fails--in his own eyes--but to Marlow, chief narrator of his plight, he remains an enigma, and it is Marlow's fascination that holds us in thrall. This exceptional storyteller is one of Conrad's greatest creations.

### **Emma**

by Jane Austen

Her genius was lost on me for years: her English appeared stilted, the narrative substance too cloistered in mannerisms to reach universality. When my mistake dawned on me, it was like opening a full treasure chest. I could now savor in Austen's work superb examples of the novelist's art: such as Chapter 15 in **Emma**, where a short carriage drive stirs in this narrow society the excitement and danger of a polar expedition, in the midst of which a terrible misunderstanding erupts into a catastrophe of hurt feelings and insulted vanity.

### **Barabbas**

By Par Lagerkvist

A stark, spellbinding novel about the murderer pardoned by Passover custom instead of Jesus. Thereafter, by bitter and

unrelenting irony, Barabbas lives in Jesus's shadow as a darker twin might, and is constantly linked with the Christians against his will. He joins them only when the opportunity comes to participate in the burning of Rome, and is then executed among the Christians accused of setting the fire, perhaps the only one guilty. They are horrified to have him share the honor of martyrdom. In building fictional effects, the story never falters from the first word to the last.

### **David Copperfield**

by Charles Dickens

A hard choice. **Great Expectations** and **Bleak House** are as good, often better by some criteria. All three are among the choice novels in the world. But when I feel like looking into one of them again, **David Copperfield** usually wins out. It has a more dazzling array of characters--though David himself pales next to a few of them--a broader reach of interwoven situations, and the early chapters rise to comedy seldom equaled and never surpassed in any other novel in any language.

### **Death in Venice**

by Thomas Mann

While **The Magic Mountain** is a visionary triumph, for me Mann's finest is **Death in Venice**. A man feels compelled to go in quest of ultimate beauty, but it threatens as he advances to lead him to a surrender to depravity. In a Venice sunk in the surreal terrors of the plague, he glimpses an impossibly blissful merging of beauty and depravity that the plague would condone. He dies on a beach with the lovely boy he has been pursuing from afar beckoning him out to sea. A remarkable coalescence of self and city as mutually responsive symbols.

### **Earthly Powers**

by Anthony Burgess

A novel never written, so to speak, by an elderly retired novelist, told instead under the guise of an autobiographical reminiscence. The freedom of the form permits the narrator to range over his successful career as a popular novelist from the beginnings of Modernism into the 1960s. Through this blend of participant and observer, we touch on the outstanding events and meet the chief

figures of the period, in literature, politics and all the rest. Apparently based on the life of Somerset Maugham--though Maugham himself appears briefly--this brilliant account of twentieth-century life and culture is an unforgettable read.

### **The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman**

by Laurence Sterne

The "hero" of this marvelous work is unique among the protagonists of the great comic novels in that he sees himself as ridiculous and dogged by failure yet takes his every experience and passing thought to be significant and fascinating to relate. He would thus be an insufferable bore were it not for his superlative sense of humor, which encompasses an clear-sighted self-awareness as well as a universal observation of human foibles--and is brought to life through an inimitable style. I not only admire the book and the author but have profited greatly from emulating him.