Best Books: A Millennial Bibliography?

By David Isaacson

The request seemed to be reasonable when the editor of Gatherings commented that my recommendations would make a nice contribution to the first issue of 2000. As a librarian, I am invariably listophilic as well as bibliophilic. Even when some colleagues are more concerned with the Y2K problem than whether they have read the best that has been thought, said, and imagined, it warms the cockles of my book lover’s heart to know that the Library of Congress Subject Headings has, for many a year, recognized a special intellectual category called “Best Books—Bibliography.”

But, on further thought, I cannot honestly say that I have the temerity, let alone the knowledge, to come up with a book list of millennial import. Indeed, an educated person is better defined by how she thinks and acts than by whether he has read a particular list of best books. I didn’t always think this way. As a high school student I very solemnly believed that if I read all or most of the books Clifton Fadiman recommended in his The Lifetime Reading Plan, (i.e., the first edition, 1960, not the revised edition, 1978), I would be a successful college student and an “educated” person. Conversely, the fewer “good” books that I absorbed, the more ignorant I would be. A few years later, in 1973, I took one of the last courses offered by the “prince of booklist makers,” Robert B. Downs, at the University of Illinois graduate library school. Downs had served in almost every library leadership role except Librarian of Congress, and was recently retired as Dean of the University of Illinois Libraries—one of the ten top library collections in the world. His Books that Changed the World (1956) along with Molders of the Modern Mind (1961), and over twenty other bibliographies of “great books” are tremendous resources for the seeker of “educating” lists.

Still later, under the tutelage of the late Leo Natanson, my mentor at WMU during the 1970s when I first came to the Reference Department here, I developed a further appreciation for the Great Books of the Western World (1959). I used to think recently retired as Dean of the The Stewart Clock Tower University of Illinois Libraries—one the learned editor of that set, Mortimer Adler, was one of the wisest people in the world, and that title remains an ever useful guide to “best books.” E.D. Hirsch, in Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1986), may be on the right track when he lists facts—the ignorance of which indicates one is culturally illiterate. But I disagree with Hirsch’s presumption that just because one is acquainted with these facts, or, in some cases, certain books, one is, therefore, culturally literate.

Intellect is a quality of mind that is nurtured by book learning, but acquaintance with a certain canon does not guarantee that a person is anything more than glib. Yes, I do think it would be a good idea if more people not only read, but understood what great thinkers have said in great books. The year 2000 would seem to be a good time for many of us to do more of this reading whether or not we are uplifted, rapturously, into the Empyrean when this year has passed. But bookish people are not, therefore, either smart or good people.

In 1977, a groundskeeper at Trinity College, Dublin, with whom I shared a few pints at a pub only a few hundred yards away from the Book of Kells, told me something I hope never to forget. After I told him I was a librarian, he looked at me somewhat askance—we had been getting on quite well before this—and then he proceeded to tell me about the many esteemed professors he knew around the College who could talk “very fancy,” but who were unable to deal with the world right in front of their eyes. His advice to me: “It’s the practical knowledge that counts, lad, the practical knowledge.”

Lest this sound anti-intellectual, I am not recommending that we don’t need more culturally literate people,

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Cool or REALLY Cool?

By Margaret Watson

So, you receive a couple of dozen e-mails every day, and you have surfed the Net, the World Wide Web, for hours at a time ... cool. You have your own personal computer at home, and it is connected to a small color printer ... cool. You have taken a couple of computer workshops, and have learned programs like Microsoft Word® or PowerPoint® ... cool. The Labyrinth tutorial on the Libraries' home page has taught you how to find books and journal articles on the Web-based WestCat and online databases and indexes ... cool. And, a multitude of other Web access points from the University Libraries' site lead you to seemingly infinite resources ... still cool. But what is REALLY cool?

The answer lies in the Instructional Technology Laboratory located at 3302 Sangren Hall. The IT Lab is an open computer and graphics laboratory that helps students apply all of the technical skills that they already know—and then make the final product "really cool." When students ask a question or indicate a need, the Lab staff will supply answers, special training, and assistance.

To begin with, the Lab's graphics area provides basic, fundamentally useful, and traditional services. Miles (at least a few hundred feet) of laminating and dozens of dry mounting sheets are produced on demand. Document binding is a must and popular since it improves the appearance (and maybe even the content) of the assigned paper. The Copy Stand offers standard slide production from printed images, photographs, and books. Use of the video and/or audio editing facilities helps to produce a polished final video product or audio tape recording.

Then, special things can begin to happen in the IT Lab. There are top-of-the-line computers loaded with software and equipped with all of the fancy gadgets that everyone talks about—and few know how to make work. With staff assistance, and using one of the available scanners, the Lab clientele are able to scan a variety of images onto the Web page, overhead transparency, or even a word-processed document. If the producer needs to do is have the film processed, and, voila, he or she has slides from PowerPoint®, Photoshop®, or scanned images. And, you have heard of those new digital cameras? IT Lab has one available, a high quality piece of equipment. Anyone can learn how to take and save images on a computer. The "digital photo" can be used in a word-processed paper, brochure, Web page, or printed on the photo printer.

IT Lab's technology can also insure that video can be captured to a computer, edited, and saved onto a CD-ROM disk. Any video recording brought to the lab can be digitized via a special video card installed in a powerful computer. Then the video can be trimmed, clipped, and edited using Premier® software. The final step involves recording the edited product using the new CD-ROM recorder. Now, that's the ultimate cool or is it?

After one or more of the aforementioned methods of producing super-professional products is completed, there may still be a need for a place to display the designer's project. The Instructional Technology Laboratory has a classroom for students and staff to use. There, the end result can be displayed on screen by use of a Pentium-based computer with a high level, "bright" projector. IT Lab staff members will set up the room and test the program for bugs. In addition, anything that has been produced and prepared for demonstration can also be complemented by adding direct views from the World Wide Web appropriately interspersed to demonstrate whatever is needed.

The REALLY cool part of all this "stuff" is that the Instructional Technology Laboratory is staffed by several talented staff members who will take any client from the basics through the advanced development of materials of all types—and intended for diverse purposes. Our phone number ought to be 387-COOL, but we suggest that you call 387-5054 for more information.

Margaret Watson, Supervisor, IT Lab
Where Are the Periodicals?

By Marcia Kingsley
Head, Serial Resources

Some years ago, at another university, one of my colleagues was an exceptionally helpful, patient, approachable reference librarian named Tom. Tom's career path was marked for success and he was tapped for promotion to the position of Assistant Library Director. When I congratulated him on this achievement, he said, with a tip of a hat to me: "The best part is that I won't have to keep explaining to patrons where the periodicals are."

Librarians have never had an easy time, regardless of the size and type of library, giving a concise or simple answer to the question: "Where can I find the periodicals (or magazines or journals)?" With unbound issues in one shelving area; microfilm and microfiche in another; bound volumes on shelves, in sorting locations, and on book trucks throughout Waldo and the branches; volumes and issues left here and there after photocopying or reading; and some issues out of the library for commercial binding, journals and other "serials" are not easy to find in the University Libraries. Despite signage, detailed location guides in WestCat, and assistance from many staff members, library users are still confused. Now that our libraries have contracted with numerous vendors for access to thousands of electronic journals that include full-text, the librarian's answer to the "where" question has gotten longer and longer—or, at least, more time-consuming.

Where are the periodicals now? A particular article in a journal or the magazine can be in any and all of the traditional places that are noted above. And, at WMU, it can also be in an online collection of electronic journals or "full-text" periodicals such as JSTOR, Project Muse, Science Direct, Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe, and Catchword. To add to the excitement of the search, a magazine may be available as an individual electronic title offered through the Internet by the publisher, or contained within a database on the FirstSearch system, e.g., ABI INFORM or WilsonSelect.

Most sources called "electronic" or "e-journals" contain all the information included in a corresponding print journal. For example, Theatre Journal is provided online by Project Muse. This electronic version, which is accessible and readable from any University computer, has all the same content as the print version on our shelves, including articles, book reviews, and letters to the editor. Many other periodicals, however, appear online only in part. For example, the ABI INFORM database on FirstSearch provides Bank Marketing articles, but not editorials or the table of contents. Yet, this type of listing usual goes under the misnomer of "full-text" journal.

The many variations found in so-called full-text electronic periodicals present a unique challenge to the librarians and staff faced by patrons who want to know "Where are the periodicals?" No catalog answers all the questions, no listing of databases and indexes provides immediate answers, and no Web site on Electronic Journals is a one-stop searching approach. But, the vast amount of information that is found appears because of the work that has been done behind the scenes. The role of the Serial Resources Department of the University Libraries is to assure that serial publications, i.e., all types of subscriptions, are available to the WMU community. The division used to be called the "Serials Control" unit, but anyone who claims to control or impose order on serial publications is engaging in wishful thinking. At the same time, however, this unit must closely control over $2,900,000 in expenditures and subscriptions.

A major task of the Serial Resources employees is to manage and pay for about 7,000 ongoing subscriptions to print and electronic titles. In addition, a certain number of new titles, subscriptions, are added each year. A simple count shows that in a given year, the unit receives 39,000 journal or magazine issues, another 10,000 directories, almanacs, and other serial updates, and some 25,000 invoices and pieces of correspondence. This means that 49,000 items are "inventoried" in WestCat so that library users can see exactly which issues of journals or editions of a yearbook have been received—and if not, the SR employees must send a claim as soon as possible.

Many other steps occur in the attempt to maintain control. The physical issues of the journals and other serials must be distributed to the correct location in Waldo Library or one of the branches. At a later point, when it is time to bind, nearly all 39,000 journal issues are returned to us, prepared for binding, and shipped out. Again, every effort is made to record this information in WestCat. The Libraries' catalog of books, periodicals, media, Web sites, and other resources, is key to retrieval of the actual item—either physically or online. Any new subscriptions to a serial approved for purchase involves notifying the Cataloging Department so that they can add the descriptive record to WestCat. The library Web site also has links to all of the electronic journals and databases. Additional information on "holdings," the year and volume with which the subscription starts, is added by Serial Resources. Moreover, as each existing periodical arrives physically in the Libraries, it is Serial Resources that notes the latest volume of a directory or the latest issue of a journal found in the Current Periodicals area of Waldo Library.

Maintaining accurate information about the ever-evolving subscriptions is very labor-intensive. Publishers change the titles of scholarly journals frequently. They may split one journal into two—or merge two into one. The Libraries' catalog, WestCat, must reflect the new information and the serial entries must be adapted—by human intervention. To add to the complexity, libraries, in their dealings with electronic journals, also must update electronic addresses or Uniform Resource Locators (URL's). If the publisher forgets to inform us of even a minor change—a
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dot or hyphen or letter—the link in our catalog will not function, and users cannot access.

The need for many small details to fall together correctly both at our end and the vendors’ end requires the Serial Resources Department to maintain an enormous amount of information. The types of problems that once occurred in delivery, lost mailings, or traditional accounting errors have now been exacerbated by computer applications—services, including access, are shut down electronically with no notice, electronic billings are lost, URL’s are changed, and entire systems, at both the staff and public level, can and do stop functioning.

Finally, invoice management/payment consumes an inordinate number of person-hours in any serials department—even when backed up as well as we are by an Operational Services Department. Many bills for both printed and electronic resources arrive with too little data about what is being billed. Given the breadth and depth of the University Libraries’ serials collection, we deal with hundreds of invoices in foreign languages and currencies. We must master the abbreviated language and use of acronyms that might, for example, bill us multiple times for LNM1705. We even once received a $19,000 invoice with no information on what was being billed—it turned out to be an engineering database, INSPEC, but this took considerable time to uncover.

This tale, as do serials, could go on, but the bottom line is that an academic research institution must have a strong and comprehensive “serial” collection of journals, yearbooks, and other ongoing research that reflects the latest published data on hundreds of subjects—in print and now, on the WWW. Those essential resources are there and accessible to you because of a team in Serial Resources working closely with a Cataloging Department, a Web Office, and others behind the scenes. This effort makes it possible for the reference librarians, as well as other public services staff, to have all the information necessary to explain “where the periodicals are.”

“The fact of knowing how to read is nothing, the whole point is knowing what to read.”
—Jacques Ellul

Where Are the Periodicals:  
A Brief Guide to Locating

By Laurel Grotzinger

To complement Marcie Kingsley’s analysis of how to manage serial resources in the University Libraries, an introductory user guide to finding serials at WMU follows:

FINDING JOURNAL/MAGAZINE ARTICLES: To locate an article on a particular topic, click on Research Resources on the Libraries’ Home Page (http://www.wmich.edu/library/). Then select Databases and Indexes. If you know your database title, go directly to the alphabetical listing and click on it. If not, use the dropdown menu to select a subject area and identify an appropriate database or index. When you reach the search screen, enter your keywords and identify articles that you wish to locate. Electronic or e-journals are also found on the Research Resources page, and can also be searched alphabetically or by keywords.

RETRIEVING JOURNAL/MAGAZINE ARTICLES: Selected databases and indexes offer full-text articles by clicking on a heading that indicates that the online full-text is available. In such cases, you will then see the text of the article on the screen. You can e-mail it to yourself or print it right from the screen.

If the citation to the article does not indicate that full-text is available, you must check WestCat, the online catalog, to learn if the University Libraries hold the volume and issue that contains the article. Be sure to note title of the periodical (not the article), volume and issue number, date, and pages for each article that you want to locate before leaving the database or index that you searched. Click on Home and open WestCat. Open the Author/Title/Subject Index and mark the box for “Journal Title.” Type in the journal title. If the Libraries has the periodical title that you have typed in, you will either get the descriptive entry, or a list of related titles. Select the one that matches your citation (the date typically ends in 9999) and open that entry. Once a title is open on the screen, scroll down to a classification number, holdings, and current issues listing. Missing issues, serials shipped out to the bindery, and other useful data are included there. Guides to location of the various Library of Congress classifications are found throughout Waldo and the branch libraries. In the event that the periodical is not found in the University Libraries, you can also place an interlibrary loan request online or fill out a card at any reference desk.

Library Friends Find Treasure

The Friends of the University Libraries held their fall meeting on Tuesday, November 16, 1999, in the Stewart Clock Tower Room. The speaker was Michael McDonnell, WMU Government Documents Librarian. His presentation of “Hidden Treasures: Government Information in University Libraries” outlined the resources found in the depository library found on the second floor of Waldo Library. He described the difficulties of locating the documents since, until 1998, bibliographic records for government publications had not, in general, been incorporated in WestCat, the online catalog. As a result, depository material had been hidden from patrons using the catalog. Even though many government publications were incorporated in the catalog in 1998, books acquired before 1976 are still missing. Today, another trend is limiting the ability of WestCat to be a primary searching tool. Many agencies, due to budgetary pressures and Vice-President Gore’s project to reinvent government, are turning to the Web as the method of publication. WestCat has again lost its comprehensive searching power and will not be as useful until we create catalog records that contain Internet links to the major Web sources. At the present time, patrons should search: http://www.yahoo.com/Government, or http://usgovsearch.northernlight.com/publaccess/

McDonnell concluded his presentation by pointing out that when a new administration is in place in 2001, there will be a crucial decision as to how much the current Web sites are maintained. Will archival material simply be deleted by individuals with differing political agendas? Will the historical record be hidden forever? Librarians are looking for means to create “snapshots” before anything happens to the sites. How that record will be accessed is unknown!

The Friends’ meeting concluded with a reception and an informal discussion.
A Path Well-Chosen
By Gordon Eriksen

Some people seem to be born knowing what their careers will be, and how to go about achieving lifelong success. Joyce Zastrow is such a one.

Joyce, who was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, knew from a very young age that she must have a career in music and teaching. Blessed with an exceptional voice, she steadily followed a path from elementary and secondary school through college that would assure a musical future. After earning a Bachelor of Arts degree at Valparaiso University in Indiana, and a Master of Music at Wisconsin, she was exposed to a breadth and depth of music beyond any previous experience. Finally, she had three years at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, where she encountered and embraced an enthusiasm for Lutheran choral singing. The second, for another three years, was at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus, where, in a major department of music in a major state university, she was exposed to a breadth and depth of music beyond any previous experience. Finally, she had three years at Oberlin Conservatory, Ohio, where she was able to focus and hone her teaching skills in an intensely dedicated environment.

With such a strong background, Ms. Zastrow was ready for a position that would offer a broad range of opportunities in which to use her talents. She chose Western Michigan University, arriving in 1962, and immediately became immersed in teaching voice classes and applied voice. She also had the responsibility of directing the Women's Glee Club, and quickly became an active member in the community of some 14,000 students and staff members located on the west side of Kalamazoo. After a number of years as a choral director, she turned completely to her main interest: teaching studio voice and other courses important to a successful singing career. Among them were vocal pedagogy, song literature, and the all-important English, French, German, and Italian diction for singers. When Dr. Joyce Zastrow retired, in 1990, literally hundreds of students would attest to the fact that because they completed her courses, they were far better “singers” and professional performers. Moreover, from her classes came numerous students who are teaching the next generation of young performers at the public school and college/university level, as well as many who sing in opera and other professional settings in the United States and Europe.

Professor Zastrow’s interest in seeking to be proficient in the various foreign languages required of a singer added some wonderful musical codicils to her career. Among them was a summer at the American Conservatory, in Fontainebleau, France, where she studied under the renowned Nadia Boulanger. She also spent a summer at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, working with renowned German artists including Coach Erik Werba. Still another great opportunity came in a summer at the Aspen Music Festival when she could learn from Jennie Tourel. Along the noted path that she traveled, she also took the time to work on a Doctor of Musical Arts degree at the University of Illinois, Urbana/Champaign. In order to complete the degree, she took a year’s leave of absence from WMU, and served as a teaching assistant in Illinois’ fine graduate program. (Librarians, please take note: Joyce and I, both Illinois alums, remarked about the size and quality of the music libraries at Indiana, where she earned her first graduate degree, and at Illinois, where her D.M.A. came into being. We were agreed that if one could not find what was needed in these two fine collections, the next library of choice had to be the Library of Congress.)

If anyone reading this thinks that Professor Zastrow epitomizes the concept of “all work and no play ... make for a dull life,” it simply isn’t true. She definitely pursued a career with diligence and success, but, at the same time, pursued with equal determination a wide range of interests. She loves to garden, and has a yard with an unhindered view across both her flowery handiwork and into open fields. She enjoys cross-country skiing when the snow pack and weather permits, and is an avid golfer. The latter enthusiasm has taken her, since retirement, to several Elderhostels that focus on golf. Traveling, needless to say, is still another avocation. Recent trips have included Italy, Turkey, and Israel. As she observed, “I’ll be among the hoards in Oberammergau in 2000 seeing the Passion Play.”

Joyce’s civic commitments have continued to be impressive. She is a member of the Outreach Board of Opera Grand Rapids, and still is an active part of the Thursday Morning Musicale organization of Kalamazoo. She has served on the Ethics Committee of the National Association of Teachers of Singing. Her work with the Kalamazoo Association of Retired School Personnel (KARSP) has been a challenging and time-consuming project. She was on the program committee for several years before entering the administrative cycle. She then served terms as President Elect, President, and Past President—a commitment of which she is justly proud. And, of course, she has continued to “do things” with the University to which she dedicated some twenty-eight years. One of them has been her growing interest in and service to the Friends of the University Libraries.

And such is the story of one who has chosen well her path through life. Joyce Zastrow has chosen and lives a life of music, a music and a life not unlike the music noted in Emerson’s ode to Music:

Let me go where'er I will
I hear a sky-born music still: ...
There, alway, alway something sings.
or that a deep knowledge of great books would not be beneficial to our society. But wisdom is a matter of soul and heart, not just intellect or being well-read. It probably would be better if more people really read (and had been taught to enjoy) Shakespeare, the Bible, Dickens, Confucius, the Upanishads, Homer, and so on. Certainly, it is important that we have intellectual leaders we can admire and emulate. Equally crucial, in a culture such as ours that is so ambivalent about its intellectuals, is that we have political leaders who model high intellectual as well as high moral values. Instead of mocking intellectuals, as our popular culture so often does in movies like The Nutty Professor, in witch-hunts like those that ostracized Robert Oppenheimer and Paul Robeson, and in literary caricatures like Ichabod Crane, I would rather have students hero-worship Thomas Jefferson, who was not only a shrewd political leader, but an architect, philosopher, scientist, and unabashed intellectual. Recall that John Kennedy, another President with more than a passing interest in the life of the mind, once addressed a group of Nobel Prize winners whom he had invited to the White House by quipping: "I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."

Intellectual achievement is something that itself should be subjected to careful scrutiny. Lists of great books may encourage a merely quantitative attitude toward acquiring knowledge. Librarians can help teachers and parents instill a respect of intellectual matters not only by providing and recommending lists of good or great books, but by helping to create and sustain an attitude of critical thinking. Libraries are traditional repositories for books, and other "information packages" that have a chance of converting mere information into knowledge. But if that knowledge, in turn, is to become wisdom, we need inspired teachers who are not only scholars like Mortimer Adler and Leo Natanson, but humble laymen like the Trinity College groundskeeper—whose name, alas, I no longer remember, but whose wisdom will endure well into this twenty-first century and new millennium.