Best Books: A Millennial Bibliography?

By David Issacson

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 Stewart Clock Tower University of Illinois Libraries—one of 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,
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.