

Reading Slant During COVID-19: A Contrarian List

Subhasis Chattopadhyay

WE LIVE IN TIMES of which we have only read of in Hindu, Buddhist, and Hebrew apocalypses. In these contrarian times, I have made a reading list for whoever is interested in reading. Happy reading. The books are arranged in no particular order, and no book is more or less important than the other.

If one reads Cormac McCarthy's (b. 1933) *Blood Meridian: or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985), then one would have tasted William Faulkner's (1897–1962) gothic fiction. Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Light in August* (1932) both echo in McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and in his *Border Trilogy* (1992–8). Each book of the *Trilogy* is worth reading for its sheer poetry: *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), *The Crossing* (1994), and *Cities of the Plain* (1998). McCarthy's novels derive from Herman Melville's (1819–91) *Moby Dick* (1851) whose beginning has ricocheted through the centuries: 'Call me Ishmael'. Where would Melville be without his mentor, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–64) whose tale of hypocrisy, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) is only matched by Arthur Miller's (1915–2005) *The Crucible* (1953)?

Wallace Stegner (1909–93) presents a very different look at America's West in his 1971 novel, *Angle of Repose*. And nobody ain't read about how the West was won unless they have read James A Michener's (1907–97) *Texas* (1985) and Larry McMurtry's (b. 1936) *Lonesome Dove* (1985). Those who want to study how

the American West was actually won can read Richard Slotkin's (b. 1942) *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America* (1992). A novel from the American Deep South that one can never forget is Carson McCullers's (1917–67) *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). Faulkner, McCullers, and McCarthy are equalled by Flannery O'Connor's (1925–64) *Wise Blood* (1952). The mellower great American novel is John Updike's (1932–2009) *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (1996). To truly understand American literature, two literary-critics suffice: Mark Van Doren (1894–1972) and Leslie Fiedler (1917–2003). The rest build their careers on Van Doren and Fiedler. Criticism is literature too, you ken.

Haruki Murakami's (b. 1949) *Norwegian Wood* (1987) is all about emotions and music. His more recent *1Q84* (2011) is a fantasy-fiction which details cultic brainwashing and yes, speaks volumes about music again. In fact, Murakami has published an interview on music; *Absolutely on Music* (2016). Music soothes the soul. Read Murakami for understanding how Japanese society has become already lonely and gasps for human connections. Every book by Murakami is a gem. A supplement to Murakami's musical impulse is Sir Roger Scruton's (1944–2020) *Understanding Music: Philosophy and Interpretation* (2009).

Remains of the Day (1989) by Kazuo Ishiguro (b. 1954) cannot be surpassed in its quiet splendour. The way the inner life of a butler is probed

is only worthy of that much-maligned writer, Jane Austen (1775–1817). While reading *Remains of the Day* do read *Emma* (1815) by Austen. Ishiguro's *When we were Orphans* (2000) is equally, if not more powerful than *Remains of the Day*.

It is not for nothing that Graham Greene's (1904–91) works were banned as corrupting by the Roman Catholic Church. Greene, who converted to Roman Catholicism, knew only too well that all human feet are clay: *A Burnt-Out Case* (1960) and *The Power and the Glory* (1940) are must-reads to understand that all of us are only human. It is this chink in our armours that later Umberto Eco (1932–2016) will portray in his *The Name of the Rose* (1980). While on the topic of human frailty, lest we judge ourselves too strictly, we should read *Black Narcissus* (1939) by Rumer Godden (1907–98) and of course, her *In this House of Brede* (1969). A J Cronin's (1896–1981) *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1941) combined with Willa Cather's (1873–1947) *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) should lead us to Brian Moore's (1921–99) *Catholics* (1972). The blurring of good and evil is also found in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* (1963) and *The Constant Gardener* (2001) by John le Carré (b. 1931). *The Bell* (1951) written by the philosopher, Iris Murdoch (1919–99) sets a new tone in English letters. If one has the time, then one should read all of Murdoch's novels. Murdoch is unique in the last century. *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1945) by Carlo Levi (1902–75) will then take you to a territory not far from Greene and Murdoch.

The flavour of a bygone India can be found in John Masters's (1914–83) *Bhowani Junction* (1954). This India, which is no more, is revived by I Allan Sealy (b. 1951) in his *The Everest Hotel: A Calendar* (1998). Sealy's book is set in the Himalayas. After reading Sealy, one should then read Salman Rushdie's (b. 1947) *The Enchantress*

of Florence (2008). This is not the same Rushdie of *Midnight's Children* (1981) but a more mature writer who has studied the past as much as he could. *A Suitable Boy* (1993) by Vikram Seth (b. 1952) will seem now, in late April 2020, while Indians are within the COVID-19 lockdown, unrecognisable for most Indians who will read this list of books decades hence. There was once a time when Indians were not socially distant. A brilliant remake of Shakespeare's (1564–1616) *King Lear* (1608) is *We That Are Young* (2017) by Preti Taneja. Seth and Taneja's mammoth books are worth every second of our attention. Between them, they preserve for us an India that will never be found again. Two other Indian authors should be read; though both are to be found in translations. Jainendra Kumar's (1905–88) *The Resignation: Tyagpatra* (in English in 2012) and O V Vijayan's (1930–2005) revolutionary *The Legends of Khasak* (in English in 1994). While we are speaking of revolutions, we might as well read Fyodor Dostoyevsky's (1821–81) *Demons* (1871–2). This panoramic novel is as much neglected as Thomas Mann's (1875–1955) *Buddenbrooks* (1901) and Boris Pasternak's (1890–1960) *Doctor Zhivago* (1957). All these books are available in excellent English translations. While we are talking of essential contrarian readings, I must urge you to read Herman Hesse's (1877–1962) *Narcissus and Goldmund* (1930). Hesse's book will prepare you to read the earlier *The Sin of Abbé Mouret* (1875) by Émile Zola (1840–1902). Before leaving French literature, do read *Cousin Bette* (1846) by Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850). Balzac's study of rage and jealousy remains unsurpassed to date.

Two Latin American books which tend to be overlooked, but once they are read, they change us forever, are *The War of the End of the World* (1981) by Mario Vargas Llosa (b. 1936) and *Inez*

(2001) by Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012). When you are through with Vargas Llosa and Fuentes, do read *Alone in Berlin* (1947) by Hans Fallada (1893–1947). Fallada's book bristles with the demonic laughter of the Nazis. An excellent book on the Nazis remains *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (1996) by Daniel Goldhagen (b. 1959).

Charles Dickens (1812–70) is immensely popular, but reading his *Bleak House* (1852–3), one wonders why it feels so eerie to read it. Such long novels have their own inner beauty and logic. In these times of COVID-19, we must read Stephen King's (b. 1947) *The Stand* (1978) to see for ourselves, how prescient horror novels are; and while reading King, also check out his *Sallem's Lot* (1975) and *The Shining* (1977).

While these books are well known, King's multi-volume *Gunslinger* series of multiverse-Westerns too shows the powers of horror and science-fiction. A book that should not be missed is *The Crow Girl* (2016) by Erik Axl Sund (pseudonym of Jerker Eriksson and Håkan Axlander Sundquist); this gave me the shivers when I read it in 2018. Jack Ketchum's (1946–2018) reworking of a true story, *The Girl Next Door* (1989) is surreally visceral. And then there is Bret Easton Ellis's (b. 1964) *American Psycho* (1991). *The Terror* (2007) by Dan Simmons (b. 1948) should be read alongside these treats. John Ajvide Lindqvist's (b. 1968) novel about kid-vampires, *Let the Right One in* (2004) and the supernatural, *Harbour* (2008) are often neglected. Natsuhiko Kyogoku's (b. 1963) *The Summer of the Ubuime* (1994) is not so well known but is equally, if not more, worth reading than Ryū Murakami's (b. 1952) *Audition* (1997).

The horror of going insane are captured in *Girl, Interrupted* (1993) by Susanna Kaysen (b. 1948) and in Dennis Lehane's (b. 1965) *Shutter Island* (2003). *The Alienist* (1994) by Caleb Carr

(b. 1955) can be read after reading John Kerr's (1950–2016) *A Most Dangerous Method: The Story of Jung, Freud, and Sabina Spielrein* (1993).

Patricia Highsmith's (1921–95) Ripley series of novels too create a moral haze, of which, *The Talented Mr Ripley* (1955) is one of my favourite books about murderous conmen. While you finish Highsmith, get on to reading Donna Tartt's (b. 1963) dreamy murder mystery, *The Secret History* (1992). To round all of this, go back in time and savour *The Laughing Policeman* (1968) by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö. Much nearer to our own times is Peter Høeg's (b. 1957) sci-fi, *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (1992). Høeg's is also a scathing commentary on the racism found in contemporary Denmark. Turn to Phil Rickman (b. 1950) for a whole new experience of the supernatural in the British Isles.

For thinking deeply from a Christian viewpoint about the travails of the human soul, I would recommend *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) and the *Journals* of Thomas Merton (1915–68). *An Infinity of Little Hours* (2005) by Nancy Klein Maguire is one of the best books written on the Carthusians by anyone ever. *The Long Loneliness* (1952), the autobiography of Dorothy Day (1897–1980) has remained etched in my mind as also Paul Glynn's (b. 1928) *A Song for Nagasaki* (1988). Day's and Glynn's prose lift our souls. Seamus Heaney's (1965–2013) *Beowulf* is the most beautiful translation into English to date, of the only extant Anglo-Saxon epic. In Heaney's hands, it becomes an epic replete with Christian metaphors. Of poets, begin with the neglected Banjo Patterson (1864–1941).

While on the subject of spirituality, study Sri Utpaladeva's (circa 900–50) philosophy of recognition. The most accessible translation is by the late Swami Lakshmanjoo (1907–91). Boris Marjanovic's translation of Sri Abhinavagupta's (circa 950–1016) commentary on the Kashmiri

recension of the Bhagavadgita is a brilliant contrarian approach. To understand the depth of Sanatana Dharma, study the works of Mark S G Dyczkowski (b. 1951). Swami Hariharananda Aranya's (1869–1947) corpus is essential reading within both yoga and Sankhya. Georg Feuerstein (1947–2012) remains the best Western commentator on contrarian or antinomian Hinduism to date. Begin with his *The Psychology of Yoga: Integrating Eastern and Western Approaches for Understanding the Mind*, and then proceed to his other books. Feuerstein remains Sir Arthur Avalon's (1865–1936) true heir. Read Sir Avalon's books after having finished Feuerstein's vast corpus that includes encyclopaedias. Take off from here to read the two books by Christopher D Wallis. Wallis's works will now make Sri Utpaladeva's philosophy more attractive to the reader. Now, enter the world of Buddhism through Red Pine's (b. 1943) translation and commentary of *The Lankāvatāra Sūtra. The Buddha before Buddhism: Wisdom from the Early Teachings* (2016) by Gil Fronsdal (b. 1954) is the one book you need to read to get ready to delve into the myriad branches of Buddhism. Having read these authors, be still and savour the works of the medieval Hindu philosopher Vijñānabhikṣu. Without knowing Vijñānabhikṣu's works, how can one even begin to understand the need for the contemplative life, or, the *vita contemplativa*? Of Upanishads, read the sannyasa Upanishads translated variously by Patrick Olivelle and by Swami Atmapriyananda. Among the major Upanishads, a contrarian beginning would be the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*. And when you have read so much then start with Kisari Mohan Ganguli's English translation of the Mahabharata. If you have not read Ganguli's *Mahabharata*, you have not read the best book in the world!

If you want canonical lists of books, then

look first at Professor John Senior's (1923–99) list mentioned in Father Francis Bethel's book, *John Senior and the Restoration of Realism*. More importantly, Father Bethel's book itself is the most neglected book on books published in this century. It is another matter that the late Harold Bloom (1930–2019) stole Professor John Senior's ideas on reading and published his own list in his *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994). Yet Bloom's *The Visionary Company* (1961) read with Peter Gay's (1923–2015) *Why the Romantics Matter* (2015), between them, will challenge your conceptions of literature. Is not all modernist and postmodernist literature, an unending howl in the wilderness echoing that Romantic agony mapped by Mario Praz (1896–1982) in *The Romantic Agony* (1933)? Decide for yourselves. Romanticism in literature has repercussions in these times of COVID-19. Only the Romantics can help us stave off the inhuman, which threatens to obliterate Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1889–1951) insights to be found in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). The taciturn Wittgenstein was a mystic and we need to discover this mysticism today during lockdown silence all over the world. We don't need the Nazi, Martin Heidegger's (1917–76) philosophical chicanery. Instead, read Edith Stein's (1891–1942) *On the Problem of Empathy* (trans. 1989).

In the greatest, most hilarious and yet the most moving novel of the last century, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) by John Fowles (1926–2005); Fowles observes that the sorrowful 'read far more fiction, and far more poetry, those two sanctuaries of the lonely, than most'. While on the subject of sorrow, read Shakespeare's comedies and behold the sorrows and the existential loneliness of the Fools in his plays. To be lonely, is to be wise and human. Read on.

