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My 6,128 Favorite Books

Joe Queenan *on how a harmless juvenile pastime turned into a lifelong personality disorder.*

By JOE QUEENAN

I started borrowing books from a roving Quaker City bookmobile when I was 7 years old. Things quickly got out of hand. Before I knew it I was borrowing every book about the Romans, every book about the Apaches, every book about the spindly third-string quarterback who comes off the bench in the fourth quarter to bail out his team. I had no way of knowing it at the time, but what started out as a harmless juvenile pastime soon turned into a lifelong personality disorder.

Thomas Allen

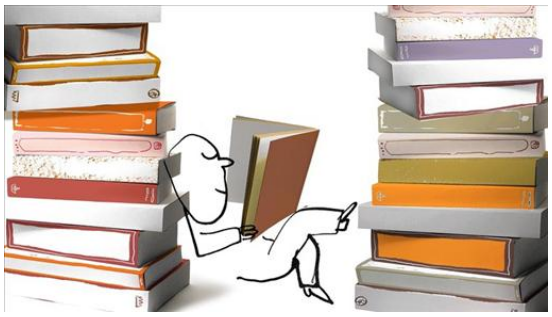
If you have read 6,000 books in your lifetime, or even 600, it's probably because at some level you find "reality" a bit of a disappointment.

Fifty-five years later, with at least 6,128 books under my belt, I still organize my daily life—such as it is—around reading. As a result, decades go by without my windows getting washed.

My reading habits sometimes get a bit loopy. I often read dozens of books simultaneously. I start a book in 1978 and finish it 34 years later, without enjoying a single minute of the enterprise. I absolutely refuse to read books that critics describe as "luminous" or "incandescent." I never read books in which the hero went to private school or roots for the New York Yankees. I once spent a year reading nothing but short books. I spent another year vowing to read nothing but books I picked off the library shelves with my eyes closed. The results were not pretty.

I even tried to spend an entire year reading books I had always suspected I would hate: "Middlemarch," "Look Homeward, Angel," "Babbitt." Luckily, that project ran out of gas quickly, if only

because I already had a 14-year-old daughter when I took a crack at "Lolita."



Joe Queenan, author of the new book "One for the Books," discusses reading books, loving books, saving books and hating e-books with WSJ's Gary Rosen.

Six thousand books is a lot of reading, true, but the trash like "Hell's Belles" and "Kid Colt and the Legend of the Lost Arroyo" and even "Part-Time Harlot, Full-Time Tramp" that I devoured during my misspent teens really puff up the numbers. And in any case, it is nowhere near a record. Winston Churchill supposedly read a book every day of his life, even while he was saving Western Civilization from the Nazis. This is quite an accomplishment, because by some accounts Winston Churchill spent all of World War II completely hammered.

A case can be made that people who read a preposterous number of books are not playing with a full deck. I prefer to think of us as dissatisfied customers. If you have read 6,000 books in your lifetime, or even 600, it's probably because at some level you find "reality" a bit of a disappointment. People in the 19th century fell in love with "Ivanhoe" and "The Count of Monte Cristo" because they loathed the age they were living through. Women in our own era read "Pride and Prejudice" and "Jane Eyre" and even "The Bridges of Madison County"—a dimwit, hayseed reworking of "Madame Bovary"—because they imagine how much happier they would be if their husbands did not spend quite so much time with their drunken, illiterate golf buddies down at Myrtle Beach. A blind bigamist nobleman with a ruined castle and an insane, incinerated first wife beats those losers any day of the week. Blind, two-timing noblemen never wear belted shorts.

Similarly, finding oneself at the epicenter of a vast, global conspiracy involving both the Knights Templar and the Vatican would be a huge improvement over slaving away at the Bureau of Labor Statistics for the rest of your life or being married to someone who is drowning in dunning notices from Williams-Sonoma . No matter what they may tell themselves, book lovers do not read primarily to obtain information or to while away the time. They read to escape to a more exciting, more rewarding world. A world where they do not hate their jobs, their spouses, their governments, their lives. A world where women do not constantly say things like "Have a good one!" and "Sounds like a plan!" A world where men do not wear belted shorts. Certainly not the Knights Templar.

The Saturday Essay

The Unraveling of Affirmative Action (10/13/12)

Prescription for Addiction (10/6/12)

The Perils of Texting While Parenting

I read books—mostly fiction—for at least two hours a day, but I also spend two hours a day reading newspapers and magazines, gathering material for my work, which consists of ridiculing idiots

(9/29/12)

How to Stop Hospitals From Killing Us (9/22/12)

Why Can't We Sell Charity Like We Sell Perfume? (9/15/12)

Geography Strikes Back (9/8/12)

Are Entitlements Corrupting Us? Yes | No (9/1/12)

or, when they are not available, morons. I read books in all the obvious places—in my house and office, on trains and buses and planes—but I've also read them at plays and concerts and prizefights, and not just during the intermissions. I've read books while waiting for friends to get sprung from the drunk tank, while waiting for people to emerge from comas, while waiting for the Iceman to cometh.

In my 20s, when I worked the graveyard shift loading trucks in a charm-free Philadelphia suburb, I would read during my lunch breaks, a practice that was dimly viewed by the Teamsters I worked with. Just to be on the safe side, I never read existentialists, poetry or books like "Lettres de Madame de Sévigné" in their presence, as they would have cut me to ribbons.

During antiwar protests back in the Days of Rage, I would read officially sanctioned, counterculturally appropriate materials like "Siddhartha" and "Steppenwolf" to take my mind off Pete Seeger's maddening banjo playing. I once read "Tortilla Flat" from cover to cover during a nine-hour Jerry Garcia guitar solo on "Truckin'" at Philadelphia's Spectrum; by the time he'd wrapped things up, I could have read "As I Lay Dying." I was, in fact, lying there dying.

More from Joe Queenan

Just the Facts, Ma'am—Slightly Revised

A Rogues Gallery of the Once Respectable

The Scary Secret Lives of Replacement Refs

The Perils of Taking a Summer E-Break

I've never squandered an opportunity to read. There are only 24 hours in the day, seven of which are spent sleeping, and in my view at least four of the remaining 17 must be devoted to reading. A friend once told me that the real message Bram Stoker sought to convey in "Dracula" is that a human being needs to live hundreds and hundreds of years to get all his reading done; that Count Dracula, basically nothing more than a misunderstood bookworm, was draining blood from the necks of 10,000 hapless virgins not because he was the apotheosis of pure evil but because it was the only way he could live long enough to polish off his extensive reading list. But I have no way of knowing if this is true, as I have not yet found time to read "Dracula."

I do not speed-read books; it seems to defeat the whole purpose of the exercise, much like speed-eating a Porterhouse steak or applying the two-minute drill to sex. I almost never read biographies or memoirs, except if they involve quirky loners like George Armstrong Custer or Attila the Hun, neither of them avid readers.

I avoid inspirational and self-actualization books; if I wanted to read a self-improvement manual, I would try the Bible. Unless paid, I never read books by or about businessmen or politicians; these books are interchangeably cretinous and

they all sound exactly the same: inspiring, sincere, flatulent, deadly. Reviewing them is like reviewing brake fluid: They get the job done, but who cares?

I do not accept reading tips from strangers, especially from indecisive men whose shirt collars are a dramatically different color from the main portion of the garment. I am particularly averse to being lent or given books by people I may like personally but whose taste in literature I have reason to suspect, and perhaps even fear.

Serge Bloch

People who need to possess the physical copy of a book, not merely an electronic version, believe that the objects themselves are sacred.

I dread that awkward moment when a friend hands you the book that changed his or her life, and it is a book that you have despised since you were 11 years old. Yes, "Atlas Shrugged." Or worse, "The Fountainhead." No, actually, let's stick with "Atlas Shrugged." People fixated on a particular book cannot get it through their heads that, no matter how much this book might mean to them, it is impossible to make someone else enjoy "A Fan's Notes" or "The Little Prince" or "Dune," much less "One Thousand and One Places You Must Visit Before You Meet the Six People You Would Least Expect to Run Into in Heaven." Not unless you get the Stasi involved.

Close friends rarely lend me books, because they know I will not read them anytime soon. I have my own reading schedule—I hope to get through another 2,137 books before I die—and so far it has not included time for "The Audacity of Hope" or "The Whore of Akron," much less "Father John: Navajo Healer." I hate having books rammed down my throat, which may explain why I never liked school: I still cannot understand how one human being could ask another to read "Death of a Salesman" or "Ethan Frome" and then expect to remain on speaking terms.

Saddling another person with a book he did not ask for has always seemed to me like a huge psychological imposition, like forcing someone to eat a chicken biryani without so much as inquiring whether they like cilantro.

It's also a way of foisting an unsolicited values system on another person. If you hand someone whose mother's maiden name was McNulty a book like "Angela's Ashes," what you're really saying is "You're Irish; kiss me." I reject out of hand the obligation to read a book simply because I share some vague ethnic heritage with the author. What, just because I'm Greek means that I have to like Aristotle? And Plato? Geez.

Writers speak to us because they speak to us, not because of some farcical ethnic telepathy. Joseph Goebbels and Albert Einstein were both Germans; does that mean they should equally enjoy "Mein Kampf"? Perhaps this is not the example I was

looking for. Here's a better one: One of my closest friends is a Mexican-American photographer who grew up in a small town outside Fresno, Calif., and who now lives in Los Angeles. His favorite book is "Dubliners."

A friend once told me that he read Saul Bellow because Bellow seemed like the kind of guy who had been around long enough that he might be able to teach you a thing or two about life. Also, Saul Bellow never wore belted shorts.

More from Review

The New Face of Infidelity

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This is how I feel about my favorite writers. If you are an old man thinking of taking early retirement, read "King Lear" first. Take lots of notes, especially when the gratuitous blinding of senior citizens starts in. If you're a middle-aged man thinking of marrying a younger woman, consult Molière beforehand. If you're a young man and you think that love will last forever, you might want to take a gander at "Wuthering Heights" before putting your John Hancock on that generous pre-nup.

Until recently, I wasn't aware how completely books dominate my physical existence. Only when I started cataloging my possessions did I realize that there are books in every room in my house, 1,340 in all. My obliviousness to this fact has an obvious explanation: I am of Irish descent, and to the Irish, books are as natural and inevitable a feature of the landscape as sand is to Tuaregs or sand traps are to the frat boys at Myrtle Beach. You know, the guys with the belted shorts. When the English stormed the Emerald Isle in the 17th century, they took everything that was worth taking and burned everything else. Thereafter, the Irish had no land, no money, no future. That left them with words, and words became books, and books, ingeniously coupled with music and alcohol, enabled the Irish to transcend reality.

This was my experience as a child. I grew up in a Brand X neighborhood with parents who had trouble managing money because they never had any, and lots of times my three sisters and I had no food, no heat, no television. But we always had books. And books put an end to our misfortune. Because to the poor, books are not diversions. Book are siege weapons.

I wish I still had the actual copies of the books that saved my life—"Kidnapped," "The Three Musketeers," "The Iliad for Precocious Tykes"—but they vanished over the years. Because so many of these treasures from my childhood have disappeared, I have made a point of hanging on to every book I have bought and loved since the age of 21.

Books as physical objects matter to me, because they evoke the past. A Métro ticket falls out of a book I bought 40 years ago, and I am transported back to the Rue Saint-Jacques on Sept. 12, 1972, where I am waiting for someone named Annie LeCombe. A telephone message from a friend who died too young falls out of a book, and I find myself back in the Chateau Marmont on a balmy September day in 1995.

A note I scribbled to myself in "Homage to Catalonia" in 1973 when I was in Granada reminds me to learn Spanish, which I have not yet done, and to go back to Granada.

None of this will work with a Kindle. People who need to possess the physical copy of a book, not merely an electronic version, believe that the objects themselves are sacred. Some people may find this attitude baffling, arguing that books are merely objects that take up space. This is true, but so are Prague and your kids and the Sistine Chapel. Think it through, bozos.

The world is changing, but I am not changing with it. There is no e-reader or Kindle in my future. My philosophy is simple: Certain things are perfect the way they are. The sky, the Pacific Ocean, procreation and the Goldberg Variations all fit this bill, and so do books. Books are sublimely visceral, emotionally evocative objects that constitute a perfect delivery system.

Electronic books are ideal for people who value the information contained in them, or who have vision problems, or who have clutter issues, or who don't want other people to see that they are reading books about parallel universes where nine-eyed sea serpents and blind marsupials join forces with deaf Valkyries to rescue high-strung albino virgins from the clutches of hermaphrodite centaurs, but they are useless for people engaged in an intense, lifelong love affair with books. Books that we can touch; books that we can smell; books that we can depend on. Books that make us believe, for however short a time, that we shall all live happily ever after.

—Adapted from "One for the Books" by Joe Queenan, to be published Thursday. With permission from Viking, a member of the Penguin Group (USA).