

## Recommended Good Reads July 2009

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The following titles are recommended by Jeff, Idea Store Whitechapel

### Non-Fiction

#### **'Everything Bad is Good for You' by Stephen Johnson**

This book does exactly what it says on the tin. It critiques the assumption that everything was better in the good old days and now the world has gone to hell in a hand basket because kids play computer games and books are now online. Johnson displays much humour but also erudite insight concerning technological evolution and the subsequent change in cognitive skills required to perform in today's workplace and how much of this is provided by the cultural changes in leisure activities.

#### **'The Meaning of Things' by A. C. Grayling**

More a collection of extended philosophical aphorisms, these essays are brief and to the point and can be dipped into anywhere. An excellent introduction to many philosophical concepts and how they present themselves in our everyday existences. Grayling has become our modern Socratic conscience, writing in the modern humanist tradition.

#### **'Essential Writings' by Gandhi**

Since none of us has actually seen Jesus, Buddha or Mohammed, Gandhi is probably the closest any of us will come to having a realistic perception of a saviour. A true political visionary, these writings encompass the personal and the perennial of Gandhi's fight against oppression, violence and the British.

#### **'The Selfish Gene' by Richard Dawkins**

A seminal publication which brought the world of evolutionary biology to the eager masses. Dawkins, champion of Darwinism, manages the formidable task of explaining the mechanics of evolution as scientific fact. Written for the general public without ever being condescending, Dawkins is able to put forward a major contribution to science writing without having to modify his text for public consumption. Incredible!

#### **'The Letters of Noel Coward' Barry Day**

Arguably the second wittiest man of all time after Oscar Wilde. Coward was not only a master of wit but a master of form. His farces had audiences rolling in the aisles and his comic songs are as British as fish and chips. He was a

man of great compassion and sensuality who also had to battle for his sexuality. His letters show his unyielding wit in the face of all of life's adversities, not least, World War Two.

### **'Existentialism is a Humanism' by Jean-Paul Sartre**

Probably the most accessible of all of Sartre's works, this is a wonderful introduction to Existentialism for the uninitiated and essential reading for those already familiar with Sartre's work. The work is a public lecture that Sartre delivered in Paris in 1945 when all of Europe needed a new philosophy to make sense of the horrors of World War Two. However Sartre's views on the nature of existence and how we should choose to live as free agents is still vital reading today.

### **'Tao te Ching' by Lao Tzu**

This ancient Taoist text, allegedly written around the 6th century BC, never fails to deliver wisdom to every facet of life. There are many legends surrounding the writing of this book, although modern historians widely agree that it is probably a collection of wise sayings than the work of one man. There is no god-head in Taoism and no enlightenment. The text is more a manual on the art of living and governing. There has been significant, modern interest in Taoism, in conjunction with the rise of Capitalism, posing the question, opiate for precarious times or opposition to material dissatisfaction?

### **'Stumbling on Happiness' by Daniel Gilbert**

This is not a self help book. In fact it may only make you happy for the duration of the read, but it will explain why. Daniel Gilbert gives an excellently well researched as well as stylishly amusing exploration into how we remember happiness and well being and the whole cognitive process that adjusts sensation memories to make us feel better about what we think we remembered. I think!

## **Drama**

### **'Plays, Volume 1' by Patrick Marber**

Marber shows in his drama the ability to dissect his own male psyche. He doesn't shy away from the dark recesses of his mind but rather shines a fearless, penetrating light on them and invites us all to do the same whatever our gender. Definitely one of the most daring and controversial dramatists of his generation, Marber took the gloss off Eighties Britain like Miller exposed the flip side of the American Dream in fifties USA.

### **'Ghosts and Other Plays' by Henrik Ibsen**

It's hard to believe that one of the first reviews for Henrik Ibsen's 'Ghosts' described the play as "an open sewer". Of course nothing is more changeable than morality and now he is as revered as Shakespeare, with regular revivals at the National Theatre. What are the strange books that Mrs. Alving reads? Do the sins of the father really become visited on the sons? What lies bubbling beneath the surface of bourgeois appearances? Ibsen takes the well made play form and shapes it into a weapon of revolt.

## **Fiction**

### **'Revolutionary Road' by Richard Yates**

Richard Yates belongs in a category all of his own. Eugene O'Neil is the only other writer who comes close to his, particular brand of, darkness. The construction of the interior lives of these young hopefuls, living out the suburban nightmare of fifties America, is remarkable in its detail, realism and symbolic relation to the world of the novel. The emotional depth, ear for dialogue and dramatic construction is second to none. The philosophical insights regarding the American Dream in all it's terrible mediocrity informs the world of the book, the world at large and your own existence in devastating prose.

### **'Apathy and Other Small Victories' by Paul Neilan**

Continuing the tradition of slacker fiction, Paul Neilan's irreverent and hilarious novel is unrelentless in its scathing attack on contemporary culture's obsession with Work and Relationships. One of the funniest books I've ever read with a style that crackles like a hot stand-up comic.

### **'Ask the Dust' by John Fante**

Fante, who was the acknowledged god of Charles Bukowski, is one of the most overlooked American fiction writers of the twentieth century. The plight of his protagonist, wannabe writer Arturo Bandini, evokes an absurdity that is universally recognised. The story is at once tragic and hilarious. The style is artless and poetic. Fante's honesty and humour regarding the state of his own ego results in some of the most beautiful and courageous prose you will ever read. Spectacularly modern, even seventy years on.

### **'The F\*\*! Up' by Arthur Nersesian**

A true urban odyssey. Nersesian effectively effuses this tale of a down at heel loser with his sense of the mythic, whilst maintaining warmth and a fine comic sensibility. Nersesian's characters are never stock. They are always infused with a myriad of motivations, confused and situationist, caught in the web of the world, making things worse for themselves by kicking to get free. Ultimately a novel about the absurdities of life's pitfalls and the consequences of desire.

### **'Unlubricated' by Arthur Nersesian**

Sounds painful, and it can be when you're a young actress whose trying to set up a shot for herself off Broadway. Nersesian paints such charming and likable hustlers. They aren't exactly criminals or saints, just opportunists who are looking for that lucky break. The poignancy of Nersesian's prose throws a sympathetic glaze over his protagonists who are trying desperately to do the right thing in a world where nice guys finish last.

### **'The Fall' by Albert Camus**

Camus didn't win the Nobel Prize for nothing. His second person narrative about a man who gradually discovers the absurdity of his own life, demonstrates the prowess of a writer at the height of his powers. Camus' deft skill enables an identification, and thus appreciation of the similarities of

everyone's feelings towards their life, as well as an artful distance which then enables an intellectual recognition of the Absurd Philosophy which Camus conceived of in Paris after World War Two following a split with the Existentialists.

### **'The Reader' by Bernard Schlink**

How do we cope with the knowledge of atrocities and what are the secrets in our own lives that allow us to live in collusion with such atrocities? These are just a couple of the themes that Schlink manages to grapple with in this incredibly lucid account of a young man's sexual awakening in Germany during the aftermath of the holocaust. The writing is so simple and direct that it is able to encompass so many ideas, love, betrayal, conscience and the torture of memory.

### **'The End of the Affair' by Graham Greene**

The consuming power of jealousy and the conflicts between love of self, love of another and love of God are under the spotlight in Greene's masterful portrayal of an illicit wartime romance. Transportive prose that oozes with the malady of obsession laced with deep insight and wisdom in regard to everyone's emotional life.

### **'Perfume' by Patrick Suskind**

An incredible modernist fable set in period times. The protagonist of this novel became one of my literary heroes before I'd even finished the book. A scathing portrayal of man's search for beauty and truth amongst the vagaries and downright brutalities of life. The story of an uncompromising artist by an artist who doesn't compromise.

### **'Boredom' by Alberto Moravia**

Boredom is of the Existential kind in this novel of sexual obsession. The boredom has parallels with Sartre's Nausea, that sensation of felling one's existence acutely. The hapless protagonist of Moravia's tale, a wealthy artist, craves the feeling of boredom but is denied it due to his preoccupation with a young model. What Moravia is able to capture and transmute into fiction is the utter individuality of sensation, as though his dilemma had never, and would never be, experienced by anyone but himself, conjuring to mind Joseph Conrad's maxim: "We live as we dream...alone."