BOOKS THAT INSPIRE

SOONER MAGAZINE

Highlighting the University of Oklahoma’s First Exhibition of Books That Inspire
Half-a-hundred faculty members determine what single book has made a difference in their lives, then make a case for their choices and offer them up for public consumption.

Few inventions have had a greater impact on human society than the book. The development of the printing press made books one of mankind’s first mass-produced products and contributed significantly to the diffusion of knowledge. While they have undergone changes in production methods, the concept of the book is much the same as it was 500 years ago. Books have remained a preferred vehicle for transferring information and ideas from one person to another.

One reason that books have continued to be so useful is their ability to connect us with the thoughts of others. By so doing, they tend to influence our own thoughts either positively or negatively. We all have read books by authors with whose ideas we disagree. We tend to place those books back on the shelves not to be read again. Conversely, we encounter books in which the author’s message has a profound influence upon our thinking or the way we view other events or other people. We treasure these books and enthusiastically recommend them to others. Books that fall into this latter category formed the selections in this exhibit. Those viewing it found books that have enlightened, inspired, or influenced the lives and careers of the readers.

There were 51 participants in this exhibit composing a representative cross section of academic disciplines from the arts, sciences and humanities. Interestingly, only one book was mentioned more than once. The participants’ statements about their books indicate that some were influenced quite early in life, while others were influenced as adults. Common to all was the realization that the contributor, as a reader, was impressed by the book’s author to the point that the reader’s life was altered to some degree. Changes such as those described by contributors to this exhibit were compelling tributes to the power of books and reading. Calling attention to this power to change and influence lives was one of the underlying motives for staging this exhibit. Another was to observe National Library Week and to note that libraries hold these and many other books that contain equally forceful messages for those who read them. Thirdly, we hoped that this exhibit would inspire those who viewed it to make reading a frequent activity. Books make a difference in our lives, and it is part of the library’s teaching mission to help people realize their importance.

Sul H. Lee
Dean, University Libraries
The University of Oklahoma

continued
I have a penchant for reading the biographies of ordinary people. Red in Tooth and Claw, the biography of Han Wei-tien, written by Pu Ning (whose nom de plum translates as M r Anonymous), is a remarkably moving account of inner strength and dignity. Pu Ning, like the Nobel Laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn, has devoted his literary life to exposing the underbelly of communist rule. Wei-tien tells us “You must believe my eyes” as he recalls the twenty-six years he spent as a political prisoner. What Wei-tien saw was horrific, and his memories left an indelible impression on me.

... as a little girl looking out my window I wondered whose reality I beheld . . . no sidewalks, cold unpaved roads. Was I looking in or out? Which one is my real home, the shack or the home with the nice window?

In high school and college, we had the opportunity to read and discuss Calderón de la Barca’s La Vida es Sueño that spoke of the images from the window of my childhood. As I read it, I realized I had been Segismundo. His monologues spoke of social cruelties and power. His modest solitary life challenged the propensity to regard bounty as inadequate. His reflections proposed that life, even if an illusion or dream, was our unique experience and responsibility.
This was one of the first books to inspire me. I grew up in northern Canada and only knew about the African-American experience by watching Roots on television. I was moved by the miniseries, but this book allowed me to experience the "hate stare" and to feel unwanted. *Black Like Me* showed me that reading is an active form of learning. It has become my favorite hobby (and the best part of my job). An aside: my adopted sister is Indian and *Black Like Me* also helped me to understand why her life experiences would always be different from mine.

My mom gave me this book when I was five, and I'm sure I've read it 50 times since. Laura was my hero. She slept in a dugout, survived a grasshopper plague, and braved hailstorms and blizzards. The Little House books taught me that girls could be adventurous and courageous—and that they could be writers when they grew up.

H erodotus suited my temperament when I first read him at age twelve and still does. His story of how the Greeks against all odds preserved themselves against two despots cannot fail to inspire. But there is more. *H erodotus* was interested in "stuff" for its own sake: how mummies were preserved, how some nations (curiously, he thought) relieve themselves in private and how Gyges was blackmailed into murdering his king. *H erodotus* opens your eyes to the wonder and complexity of the human comedy, then and now.

Frantz Fanon's book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, gave me my first significant cross-cultural understanding of racism as an international phenomenon. By carefully juxtaposing the writings of Alfred Adler, Aimé Césaire, George Hegel, Jean-Paul Sartre and Richard Wright—to mention a few authors discussed in the book—Fanon laid the foundation for my positive self-concept as a human being, not merely as an African American. In doing so, I found my voice as a community activist and scholar. And it has yet to be silenced!
One of the first “grown-up” books that I remember reading was Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, written in 1962. I had always been interested in human impacts on the environment, and I loved how Carson wrote passionately, yet with clear and simple language, about the many ways pesticides disrupt the natural world. *Silent Spring* paints a convincing picture of the disasters that can slowly, unintentionally unfold when humans try to tinker with individual strands of the web of life. Her imagery continues to shape my personal philosophy and academic life.

It was the first class of the semester of my first year of college—Freshman Honors English with Professor Roger Brooks. As the clock struck the hour, Dr. Brooks strode to the front of the classroom and without any introduction began reading from a book:

“Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road...”

As he read, an explosion occurred in my head: This was like nothing I had ever read in high school! I wrote a senior Honors thesis on Joyce and have remained a lifelong reader.

The book that has most inspired me is *A General Theory of Crime*, by Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi. I first read the book while in my first year of graduate school at the University of Arizona, and it changed the way I thought about criminological theory. Unlike many other theories that attempt to explain crime and deviance, Gottfredson and Hirschi begin with the known facts about crime and create a simple, straightforward theory that explains these facts. Using a wonderful combination of logic and wit, the authors shook up the field of criminology in a way few modern theorists have.

I am reluctant to call this an inspirational book. It is a useful book. It helped me develop better reading and listening skills. My reason for wanting it included in this group is that it is a really good guide to understanding critical reading. I believe reading is the fundamental learning skill, and we must work hard to develop and maintain that skill. This book was (and continues as) an excellent guide for me. It is a book that I recommend to our students and graduates.
There are two poems by Marge Piercy, written 17 years apart, that recommend all her poems. The title poem of a 1973 collection, "To Be of Use," was my personal talisman during the seemingly endless labors of graduate school, and it still re-centers me even today. I recommend a daily reading. A second poem, "Excursions, Incursions" from The Moon is Always Female (1980), has a hilarious reference to a professional woman with unmanicured, gardener’s hands. In the middle of a meeting when you see me smiling down at my folded hands, it is because I just thought (again) of that poem. Both these poems are included in Circles on the Water.

Riddley Walker has haunted me ever since I read it two decades ago. Why? Because Riddley Walker asks poignant (and ultimately unanswerable) questions that make the reader reflect on the history of civilizations and why they have disappeared leaving only artifacts and myth. Hoban writes of a future, when, as the survivors begin to sift through the detritus of ruins and uncover parts of our civilization, they rediscover the process to make a substance which they worship and incorporate into rituals. Hoban’s hypothesis is that, in George Santayana’s memorable phrase, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952) is a vivid portrayal of a young black man’s travels in the American South and North, in search of his place in American society. Ellison, a native of Oklahoma City, created a significant contribution to contemporary American literature with this controversial novel and added a heretofore unheard black point of view to the dialogue on 1950s race issues in America. Ellison’s efforts garnered him the National Book Award for fiction in 1953. Although critics and scholars often focus on the overt themes of racism and anti-communism in the novel, Invisible Man represents to me the general problem of alienation from the culture in which one lives and the price one pays for creating a life outside the establishment.
Sometimes a good book goes unappreciated because the reader has not yet reached the place where the story resides. However, some books are so powerful that they pull you in and teach you things beyond your experience. Cry the Beloved Country was such a book for me. At its heart, it tells a tragic tale, not because of the politics of apartheid, not because of the downward spiral such a system exerts upon the human soul. It is the attempt to chronicle the search for dignity and meaning in a place where such things remain elusive that makes it an inspiring tale.

What is so remarkable to me about Nixon Agonistes is the way Wills moves from journalistic reporting of particular moments, to the presentation of the arc of an individual’s career, to a philosophical interpretation of a period in the nation’s history. This book demonstrates how a careful accounting of events can make philosophy meaningful—and how events are made meaningful by philosophy.

As a musician, the majority of my time is spent practicing my instrument. As a result, reading is a luxury. I must choose the books I wish to read with great care. Highbrow/Lowbrow was a gift from my sister, who is a cultural historian. I am so thankful she gave me this book because it transformed my attitude about being an artist in the United States today. It was shocking to discover that at one time in this country every citizen (no matter what social status) could quote from Shakespeare and was familiar with the Beethoven symphonies. This book will shame all artists and the institutions that support them to make their work truly accessible to everyone once again. It will also inspire the average American to seek out the rich culture that this country has to offer and demand that it be available for all rather than only those who can afford it. The good news: reading is still an affordable educational pastime. Take advantage of it!
Books that Inspire

5. David L. Boren (President)—Journey From the Big Bang to the Big Brain. William Calvin.
8. Rosa Cintrón (University College)—La Vida es Sueño. Pedro Calderón de la Barca.
9. Kelly Dampman (Sociology)—Black Like Me. John Howard Griffin.
11. David Deming (Geology & Geophysics)—The Three Musketeers. Alexandre Dumas.
12. Ralph Doty (Classics)—The Three Musketeers. Alexandre Dumas.
24. Manyul Im (Philosophy/International Programs)—The Spirit of Folk Art. Henry Glassie.
31. Kae Koger (Drama)—Six Characters in Search of an Author. Luigi Pirandello.
32. A. Robert Lauer (Modern Languages)—Don Quixote. Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra.
36. Andrew Phelan (Art)—Riddle Walkers: Russell Hoban.
38. Betty Robbins (Marketing/Women’s Studies/Film Studies)—Man’s Search for Meaning. Victor Frankl.
43. Gregory Stephens (Human Relations)—Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature. Werner Sollors.
50. Logan Whalen (Modern Languages)—Gargantua and Pantagruel. Francois Rabelais.

FALL 2001