

Book Recommendations Mr. Scott Taylor

December 2014

Here is my annual list of recommended books. This year's list includes books I read in 2014 and a few from years past. As with previous lists, these are not necessarily 'favorites,' but they are books I highly recommend—especially to folks who may not be regular readers and are looking for a good place to start. The goal is to encourage you to *tolle lege* (take up and read). Some of these are serious and somber, while others are simply great stories. All made a definite impression on me. Any would make an excellent gift. Happy reading!

1. *A Place in Time: Twenty Stories of the Port William Membership*, Wendell Berry (2013). This is the latest collection of short stories from a man who many believe to be one of our greatest living writers. Berry is an agrarian whose essays, poetry, and fiction portray the beauty of rural community, family bonds, and attachment to the land. He speaks insightfully and prophetically to the ills of our transient, hyper-paced, consumerist society. I cannot say enough about the beauty of Berry's writing. I highly recommend any of Berry's fiction and poetry.
2. *Silas Marner*, George Eliot (1861). Silas Marner is a weaver and a devout Christian who finds himself falsely accused of theft. Devastated, he moves away, assumes a reclusive life, and devotes himself to the accumulation of wealth from his weaving business. Tragedy strikes again when he is the victim of theft. As the story unfolds a young girl wanders up to his door. He raises this young girl to be a virtuous young lady. His life is redeemed by the love he finds in this father-daughter relationship. This is a simple, yet profound story of the healing power of love and the blessing of sacrifice for others. A fine old classic—this book is “one of the most affecting novels of the 19th Century.”
3. *Mariette in Ecstasy*, Ron Hansen (1994). This powerful story takes place in a convent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For the Sisters of the Crucifixion, each day is a ceaseless routine of work, study, devotion, and prayer—none hardly separate from the other. Hardly the makings of a page-turner, yet after the arrival of young, pretty, and extremely devout Mariette, who is prone to “trances, hallucinations . . . great extremes of temperament, and inner wrenchings,” the convent is thrown into an uproar. The ecstatic experiences of Mariette disrupt the idyllic rhythm of the nuns' lives. This is a reflective exploration of religious experience and emotions. Is Mariette a saint or just a high-strung fanatic? Where do we draw the line between faith and madness, legitimate spiritual experiences and mystical hysteria? As a Protestant I found the depiction of convent life fascinating and the questions raised by the story applicable to all Christians—even staid Presbyterians☺ A number of reviewers project this book to be an enduring classic.
4. *The Short Day Dying*, Peter Hobbs (2006). This was the first novel of Peter Hobbs. He wrote it using his great-great-grandfather's diaries and old King James Bible as primary sources. The book is in the form of journal entries written by Charles Wenworth, 27, an apprentice blacksmith and lay minister. Charles writes about the hardships and tragedies of 19th century English life. This book probes what it means to be human—to risk love, to wrestle with loneliness, to face the harshness of death, to struggle from doubt to faith—through the life of a humble and gentle man. Laced with Scripture and meditations on the beautiful world God made. I found this book deeply moving—it haunted me for days.
5. *A Noble Treason: The Story of Sophie Scholl and the White Rose Revolt Against Hitler*, Richard Hanser (1979). This is an inspiring true story of two Christian college students, Sophie Scholl and her brother Hans, who stood against Hitler and Nazism in 1942 Germany. As Hitler Youth, they had been enthusiastic supporters of the Nazi agenda for Germany, but as their realization of Nazi brutality grew, so did their moral outrage. Hans and Sophie formed a small protest group of like-minded friends and called themselves the White Rose. They secretly printed and widely distributed anti-Nazi leaflets. Eventually their efforts were discovered and they had to pay a terrible price for their defiance of the Nazi state. This is a powerful story of faith and ultimate sacrifice.
6. *41: A Portrait of My Father*, George W. Bush (2014). Politics aside, this is a warm and loving story written by a son about his father. Even if 41 (George H. W.) and 43 (George W.) were not presidents, this would be a moving biography. This is the only biography written by a president about his father who was also a president. John Quincy Adams (#6) did not write about his father, John Adams (#2). There is much here about love of family, commitment to principles, hard work, and sacrifice. Even if you're not a Bush fan, you will enjoy this book. Imagine sitting by the hearth and listening to a man in his late sixties tell stories about his ninety year old dad, whom he loves and admires deeply. The decency and graciousness of both 41 and 43 radiate from these pages.
7. *Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis*, Tim Townsend (2014). This is the true story of Henry Gerecke, a Lutheran pastor and U.S. Army chaplain from St. Louis, who was selected by the army to minister to Nazi criminals at the infamous Nuremberg trials. Gerecke's performance of pastoral duties to a group of Nazi murderers during their trial, sentencing, and execution is inspiring. While there are about twenty pages in which the author (Townsend, not Gerecke) mishandles some theological issues, this is an outstanding read. The story is gripping and provides much to ponder regarding salvation, forgiveness, and retribution. Could you share the Scriptures with, pray for, comfort, and lovingly serve brutal murderers in their final days? Could you walk a Nazi criminal to the gallows and pray with him before the noose goes taut?
8. *We Never Make Mistakes: Two Short Novels*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (2004). These two novellas portray the injustice and oppression of life under Stalin in the subtle, understated, yet brutally realistic tone typical of Solzhenitsyn. “In *An Incident at Krechetovka Station*, a Red Army lieutenant is confronted by a disturbing straggler soldier and must decide what to do with him. *Matryona's House* is the tale of an old peasant woman, whose tenacious struggle against cold, hunger, and greedy relatives is described by a young man who only realizes her saintliness after her death.” Both are excellent introductions to the writings of one of the 20th century's great warriors for faith and freedom.