

Mr. Scott Taylor

Here is my annual list of book recommendations. As before, these are not my all-time favorites or the year's best books. Of the books that I've enjoyed recently these are simply ones that I recommend, particularly to those who are not active/regular readers and are looking for a place to start. If reading good books is something you want to do more of in 2017, then these are worth your consideration. Among these you will find memoir, history, 19th century classics, a collection of poetry, and several modern novels. (*I intentionally do not include "Christian books" in this particular list. I assume that you see plenty of recommendations for such from your church, blogs, and friends.*) I should mention the usual disclaimer and caveat—while I suggest reading all these books, I do not necessarily endorse all ideas expressed or language employed. Please read with discernment. Enjoy!

1. ***All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr (2014).** It is easy to see why this book won Anthony Doerr the 2015 Pulitzer Prize. Set in WWII France, this is the story of the converging lives of a young French girl who is blind, and a kind-hearted German boy who is forced to fight for the Nazis. Sometimes the blind and those trapped in darkness can see more than others. A tender, deeply moving, engaging, and magnificently written story.
2. ***The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Master and Man*, Leo Tolstoy (1886).** These two stories can be found in many collections of Tolstoy, but their combination in this volume (Modern Library, 2003) vividly contrasts two tales of death. One of a bureaucrat who pursued success and social propriety all his days, but now faces death with fear and regrets over a wasted life. The other of a peasant and his master who are trapped in a snow storm and confront death with an understanding of the value of living for others. Not ready for *War and Peace*? - Then read this—two classic Tolstoy stories of redemption, mortality, and the meaning of a life.
3. ***The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Thomas Hardy (1886).** Hardy tells a story of about a common field laborer who shamefully sells his wife and baby daughter for five guineas at a county fair. Over the years, he establishes himself as a respected member of the community and becomes mayor of the town, Casterbridge. His disgraceful past and self-destructive pride eventually come back to haunt him in this well-written story of the effect of past sins on our own futures and on the lives of those we love.
4. ***Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy (1892).** [One great Hardy novel led to another.] Was Tess a victim of her own doing or was she betrayed by unjust moral double standards? Hardy has a reputation for being critical of the religious society of late Victorian England and when he exposes actual hypocrisy, one is forced to acknowledge his point. This is the sympathetic of Hardy's novels. It is easy to see why this amazing tale has been adapted into at least eight movies.
5. ***The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alexandre Dumas, (1844).** This is perhaps perfect story telling. Dumas gives us hope, justice, vengeance, mercy, forgiveness, romance, loyalty, betrayal, and selfishness in this classic story about a man who is thrown in prison for a crime he has not committed. While in prison he learns of a great treasure hidden on the Isle of Monte Cristo and becomes determined not only to escape, but also to unearth the treasure and use it to plot the destruction of the three men responsible for his incarceration. This an epic tale of suffering and retribution. If you've never read a big, thick classic, start here. You will not be disappointed!
6. ***Laurus*, Eugene Vodolazkin (2016).** A brilliant and beautiful book that is hard for me to describe. Written by a Russian Medieval Scholar, this is a story of a 15th century holy fool. You will learn much about the medieval mind, about the Orthodox mind, and about the Russian mind. But more importantly you will learn of "the mystery of life, and how, out of the ruins of our humanity, can emerge a goodness so pure we call it holy." While the context is Russian Orthodoxy, there are lessons here for all followers of Christ. Violent and humorous, earthy and other worldly, brutal and tender. The is one of those rare books that haunts you and sticks with you for weeks after the last page is read.
7. ***Hillbilly Elegy*, J. D. Vance (2016).** This is a passionate, personal, and raw examination of the current cultural crisis among white, poor, working class Americans. Part beautiful memoir and part cultural critique, I was stunned at the parallels between Vance's life and my own upbringing. One well-known reviewer said, "An American classic, an extraordinary testimony to the brokenness of the white working class, but also its strengths. . . The most important book of 2016. You cannot understand what's happening now without first reading J.D. Vance." Some suggest Vance's analysis explains the election of Donald Trump—and I would agree. (*Caution—the language used by Vance's family is very raw.*)
8. ***Nazi Hunters*, Andrew Nagorski (2016).** A deep and moving account of the relentless pursuit of justice that began in 1945 after the end of WWII. "This is a fascinating and emotionally galvanizing narrative of the hunt for notorious Nazi fugitives ranging from Adolf Eichmann and Josef Mengele to the SS officers and concentration camp commandants who fled from the ashes of Germany's defeat in World War II. . . An epic and global quest for justice rather than revenge." This is fascinating history that reads like an adventure story.
9. ***The Well-Educated Mind (Revised and expanded)*, Susan Wise Bauer (2015).** Do you often feel like a dummy when your kids come home discussing Homer, Plato, Shakespeare, or Hawthorne? If so, this book is for you. The subtitle, "A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had," says it all. This book provides an excellent list of the best works from all periods and from various genre. And provides a guide on how to read and understand the works. This is an excellent resource that would benefit every parent at Veritas.
10. ***Sojourner Songs*, Ben Palpant (2016).** Yes, there is still a place in our frenzied digital world for contemplative poetry. Palpant began writing poetry after a very serious health crisis and subsequent encounter with God. His poetry explores the rich tapestry of God-filled everyday life and considers the role of affliction and suffering in knowing the presence and gifts of God. Palpant has been compared to T. S. Eliot and Seamus Heaney.