

## Book Recommendations

December 2012

Mr. Scott Taylor

These are not necessarily my all-time top favorite books, but they are ones I highly recommend. Although some of these are intense reads, none are difficult reads –most are very suitable to someone who isn't a regular reader but is looking for a place to start. Some of these are character-rich, contemplative, and meditative reads, and several are action-packed page turners. Enjoy!

1. *The City of Tranquil Light*, Bo Caldwell (2010): A deeply spiritual story of missionary labors in early 20th century China. It is also a love story of two Christian workers who serve side by side, suffering together, sacrificing together, and reaping blessed fruitfulness together. It is most of all a moving meditation on suffering --suffering in the midst of following hard after God's will --going on day after day when the pain is almost unbearable. This was one the most satisfying books I've read in a long time. One reviewer on the cover said it perfectly, "A beautiful, searing book that leaves an indelible presence in the mind."
2. *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson (2005): This book takes the form of a letter written by an aging and ill pastor, John Ames, to his young son, whom he fears he will not live to see grow up. *Gilead* speaks to the frailty of our human condition, our need of redemption in this life and the next, and the incredible beauty of everyday life. This book won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2005. Robinson's companion novel *Home* is equally enjoyable.
3. *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850): You probably read this in a high school or college Lit class and heard the instructor rip apart those cruel Puritans, but I encourage you to take up the book again and read it as an adult --read it as a fellow sinner who knows their need of Christ --as one who has born the burden of guilt of shame that only Christ can take away. If you do this, I believe you'll come away with a better understanding of what Hawthorne was saying.
4. *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe (1719): Again, a book you may have read while in school or perhaps your children have read a children's version of it. It is another rewarding read for the adult --for anyone who has found themselves in dire straits with nowhere to look but to God --a powerful book about contentment and faith.
5. *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, Eric Metaxas (2010): A well-written biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the fearless pastor and theologian who was imprisoned and executed by Hitler's Nazis. Metaxas put together a thoroughly researched and thoughtful examination of Bonhoeffer's life. This book will challenge your soft, casual, and comfortable approach to daily living. It will make you feel silly for fretting over which movie you want to watch on Saturday night! While some are critical of Bonhoeffer for not being an "evangelical," the dry, dead, purely cerebral, liberal context out of which he came makes his passionate life all the more amazing and inspiring.
6. *Darkness at Noon*, Arthur Koestler (1941): I cannot talk about this book without having the hair stand-up on my forearms. It is modern masterpiece --occurring on every list of "best books of 20<sup>th</sup> century." Some argue it is the most insightful book on communism ever written. The story is a fictional

account of an actual general in Stalin's inner circle. During Stalin's purges, Nicholas Rubashov, an aging general, is imprisoned and psychologically tortured by the communist party to which he has devoted his life. Under mounting pressure to confess to crimes he did not commit, Rubashov relives a career that embodies the ironies and betrayals of a system of living and thinking that left God out of the "equation."

7. Anything by P. G. Wodehouse, especially *Jeeves in the Morning*, *The Inimitable Jeeves*, *The Code of the Woosters*, *Laughing Gas*, and *The Mating Season*: If you like British humor, zany tails, twisting plots, and hilarious characters, great writing, and unbelievable endings then you'll love Wodehouse. These books are fun and lite, but Wodehouse's mastery of the English language is legendary. No one can paint a picture of a character better than Wodehouse. He is known as the funniest comedic writer ever.
8. *Every Man Dies Alone*, Hans Fallada (1947): This disturbing novel, written in 24 days by a German writer who died in 1947, is inspired by the true story of Otto and Elise Hampel, who scattered postcards advocating civil disobedience throughout war-time Nazi-controlled Berlin. Fallada aptly depicts the paralyzing fear that dominated Hitler's Germany, when decisions that previously would have seemed insignificant--whether to utter a complaint or mourn one's deceased child publicly--can lead to torture and death at the hands of the Gestapo. This is a novel about quiet and personal courage that refuses to be corrupted. It is also a book about the profound impact of small, seemingly insignificant acts of protests against injustice and brutality.
9. *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry (2001): Berry is a profound thinker and great writer of poetry, essays, and novels. On one level *Jayber Crow* is a warm tale of the life of Jonah Crow, from his youth as an orphan, to his life as a small-town barber, and into his time of looking back upon the span of his long life. On another level, *Jayber Crow* is a philosophical reflection on the nature of love, community, family, belonging, loneliness, God, time, and eternity. This is one of my top three all-time best books.

## Book Recommendations

December 2013

Mr. Scott Taylor

Here is another list of recommended books. Like last year's list, these are not necessarily anyone's all-time favorites, but they are all excellent reads. These are what one might call serious books for the non-serious reader. All are well-written and very readable. All deal thoughtfully with life issues. All of these books followed me around for days –stayed on my mind long after the last page. Some are from living authors, others are from writers of the past. Any would make a fine gift. Enjoy!

1. *Fidelity*, Wendell Berry (1993). This collection of five short stories is from noted agrarian poet, essayist, novelist, and Kentuckian, Wendell Berry. You might find superior stories from various authors, but in my mind, this is best ever small collection from a single author. Berry's writing is a genuine work of art. No one can elicit the agrarian moods and rhythms of birth, life, love, and death like Berry. After you read *Fidelity*, try *A Place in Time* (2013) by Berry.
2. *Eyes to See*, Volumes I and II, Bret Lott (2008). These are collections of classic short stories written from the perspective of a Christian worldview. Lott is a Christian writer from Charleston, SC. He has compiled an excellent collection of stories from Flannery O'Connor, G. K. Chesterton, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and others. For someone who wants to read some classic literature but can't seem to get going with *The Brothers Karamazov* or *The Aeneid*, this is a great place to get your literary feet wet.
3. *The Man Who was Thursday*, G. K. Chesterton (1907). Chesterton's most famous and best novel. It is a zany, plot-twisting, bewildering, story about a policeman who infiltrates a secret organization of anarchists. This book has been described as a cross between a political nightmare and a metaphysical thriller. I think it is one of the most misinterpreted stories ever written. You will understand it only if you have "eyes to see" (i.e. Bret Lott books above) that look for God and accept the mysteries of His providence.
4. *Peace Like a River*, Leif Enger (2002). I have friends who say this is one of the most deeply satisfying Christian novels they have ever read. I would agree with them. The story takes place in 1960's Minnesota and explores themes of tragedy, suffering, healing, miracles, faith and family. Depending on one's perspective, one might differ with some points of theology that are implied, but this is a well-written, embracing, and haunting story.
5. *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro (1990). This book was made into a movie starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson –one of the very few occasions in which a great movie was made of a great book. Rarely do movies do justice to great books! This is a character rich fictional biography of a perfect English butler --a thought provoking exploration of how one man assumed he lived his life well only to see in hindsight that he was self-deceived. How can a man grow old without regrets?
6. *Memento Mori*, Muriel Sparks (1959). An entertaining and funny, yet terrifying story about a group of elderly citizens who answer the phone to hear a mysterious voice say "remember you must die," and then hang up. The Scottish novelist weaves her Christian faith into this tale of how past secrets and the guilt of past sins are exposed as death draws

nigh. Her prose is sparse and economical. She says more in 200 pages than most writers say in a lifetime of novels.

7. *True Grit*, Charles Portis (1968). This is simply a great little story. It is also an example of how you can't judge a book by its movie (or movies). The main character, Mattie, is a young Presbyterian lady, who embarks on a wild-west journey to find justice for her murdered father. This is western tale, but it is more so a tale of a young woman's coming of age in the midst of tragedy and suffering. She hired Rooster Cogburn because she thought he possessed true grit, but in the end, she was the one who embodied the truest grit. Mattie is quite apt to quote Scripture at opportune times and even offers a nice little discourse on the doctrine of election!

## Book Recommendations

December 2014

Mr. Scott Taylor

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 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For the Sisters of the Crucifixion, each day is a ceaseless routine of work, study, devotion, and prayer—one 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 Kretchetovka 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 20<sup>th</sup> century's great warriors for faith and freedom.

## Book Recommendations

December 2015

Mr. Scott Taylor

Here, once again, is my annual list of book recommendations. As always, these are not necessarily all-time favorites or the year's best books. Of the books that I enjoyed this past year, these are simply ones that I could recommend, particularly to folks who might not be avid readers and are looking for a place to start. If one of your resolutions for the New Year is to read more, these may be worthy of consideration. Among these you will find a biography, a play, two classics, 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.*) Enjoy!

1. ***Exiles: A Novel*, Ron Hansen (2008).** This is a fictionalized story of an actual person and an actual historic event. Ron Hansen beautifully weaves together the stories of Gerard Manley Hopkins (a famous poet) with the true story of five nuns who died tragically at sea in December 1875. Hopkins' struggle with his calling as a Jesuit is paralleled with the struggles of the perishing nuns as they faced death. The shipwreck at sea is reflective of the shipwreck of Hopkin's life as he wrestles with his inner weakness and faithlessness. Hopkins, who had abandoned a promising literary career at Oxford in order to pursue religious training, was so moved by the tragedy of the nuns that he wrote a profound poem about it. This is a moving account of faith, submission to God's purposes, and hope in the midst of suffering. I loved this book!
  2. ***The Sunset Limited*, Cormac McCarthy (2010).** This play was authored by Cormac McCarthy, one of the greatest writers alive today (*The Road, No Country for Old Men*, etc.). Based on a startling encounter on a New York subway platform where an uneducated, African American, ex-con prevents the suicide of a white university professor. The black ex-con takes the suicidal professor to his tiny run-down apartment where a conversation begins about the purpose and meaning of life. The two engage in a riveting clash of worldviews – faith and hope in God born of suffering (black ex-con) verses nihilism and despair born of ease and narcissism (white professor). The writing is deft and spare, yet deeply intimate as these two opposites bear their souls across a kitchen table. This was one of those books that hung around in my mind for days afterwards.
  3. ***Children of Monsters: An Inquiry into the Sons and Daughters of Dictators*, Jay Nordlinger (2015).** This is a study of the children of twenty of the world's most brutal and evil dictators from the 20<sup>th</sup> century. How would you expect the children of oppressive, tyrannical, murderers to turn out? Would they grow up to carry on the family tradition or would they rebel and become decent people? Nordlinger looks at the children of Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein, and others to reveal that some grew up evil and outdid their fathers in malevolence, while a few, but only a few, became well-adjusted thoughtful adults who rejected their father's brutality. This is a fascinating and well-written examination of the family dynamics of the last century's worst tyrants.
  4. ***Trieste*, Dasa Drndic (2014).** This book is difficult to describe – shattering, depressing, hopeless, yet powerful, enlightening, and brilliant. Using well-crafted literary devices and excellent writing the Croatian author tells the haunting story of an old Jewish woman who waits to be reunited after sixty-two years with her son who was fathered by an SS officer and stolen from her by Himmler and the German authorities. Her obsessive search for her son leads her to face the massacre of Italian Jews in concentration camps. Drndic weaves the fictional stories of the narrators into the actual historic events of Nazi terror and the Jewish Holocaust. Themes of identity, love, family, individual guilt/shame, national guilt/shame, and institutional guilt/shame are ruthlessly explored. I have read dozens of books related to the Holocaust. This one of the best. This book helped me grasp how secular Europe (secular man) deals with inexplicable
- tragedy –his nihilism and materialism tell him that suffering cannot be explained, understood, or given any purpose.
5. ***The Book of Strange New Things*, Michael Faber (2014).** This was *World Magazine's* 2015 Fiction Book of the Year. Imagine being a Christian missionary on a planet in another galaxy. This is the story of Peter who accepts the calling of a lifetime. The population of natives to whom he ministers loves the Bible and call it "The Book of Strange New Things." As he becomes immersed in his ministry to the other-worldly inhabitants, his separation from his wife, natural disasters back on Earth, and conflicts with his employer all collide to provide a profound meditation on faith, endurance, and responsibility to those we love.
  6. ***Of Human Bondage*, W. Somerset Maugham (1915).** Set at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this is the story of a man, born with a club foot, orphaned as a child, who maneuvers life as an apprentice, first in art, then in medicine. He becomes entangled in a love affair that nearly brings him to ruin. This tale explores how our bondage to futile aspirations, futile loves, and futile excuses can destroy us. In some ways this is a story of how sin blinds us to our own motives and desires. This is a classic that appears on most lists of great English language novels. Highly recommended!
  7. ***Rebel Yell: The Violence, Passion, and Redemption of Stonewall Jackson*, S. C. Gwynne (2014).** This was one of most enjoyable biographies I've read in years. This is a work of history, but it is written like a fast-paced novel. General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was, without argument, one of our nation's bravest and most brilliant military leaders. His life is an inspiring story of how an awkward and oddball college professor came to display such prowess and skill on the battlefield that he tied the northern generals and Lincoln in knots. This is a story of unshakable faith in a Sovereign God. This is also a tragic story of a life lost for a lost cause.
  8. ***Jude the Obscure*, Thomas D. Hardy (1895).** Carl Trueman, a Reformed Presbyterian theologian/professor (Westminster, Philadelphia) (who, by the way, will be speaking at IPC in the spring of 2017) said of this book, "The author's use of language, and sense of the tragic is powerful. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* is an almost unbearable book to read for its bleakness; yet utterly beautiful and brilliant." I agree! This book was very controversial when first published. This is a story of Jude Fawley, a poor stone carver with hopes for an academic and ministry career. His goals are thwarted at every turn and he is finally forced to give up his dreams of a university religious education. His life plays out through two difficult and tragic relationships. The story asks an important question. Are the characters victims of the overly stern moral codes of a judgmental society or have they brought the difficulties on themselves through their own selfishness, vacillations, and submissions to impulse. Looking with eyes critical of Victorian England one is tempted to answer the former. Looking through the lens of Scripture, one likely answers the latter.

## Book Recommendations

December 2016

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, 19<sup>th</sup> 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 snowstorm 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
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 15<sup>th</sup> 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.

## Book Recommendations

December 2017

Mr. Scott Taylor

Here are my book recommendations from 2017. These are not my all-time favorites or necessarily the year's best books. Of the books that I've enjoyed in 2017 these are ones that I recommend, particularly to those who are not active/regular readers and are looking for a place to start. While some of these are weightier or longer than others, all are very accessible and readable. *In this annual list I typically do not focus on Christian titles. I assume that you see plenty of recommendations for such from your church, blogs, and friends.* However, I do believe these books address issues that are important to believers. I should also mention the usual disclaimer and caveat –while I enjoyed reading all of these books, I do not necessarily endorse all ideas expressed or language employed. Please read with discernment. Enjoy!

1. ***David Copperfield, Charles Dickens (1850)***. This book is about as good as it gets. A delightful story of a young orphan's journey through life, filled with rich characters, heart breaking tragedy, hilarious scenes, hard lessons, and eventual true happiness. This work is the most poetic of Dicken's works, Dicken's personal favorite among his works, and the most autobiographical of his works. A thousand pager that will not let you go until you've savored the last sentence.
2. ***A Tree Grows in Brooklyn, Betty Smith (1943)***. This is a coming-of-age story about a girl from an impoverished immigrant family in Brooklyn, NY during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The complications and challenges of poverty, family, parenting, courtship, and growing up are all seamlessly woven together in this beautifully written story. Young Francie may end up your favorite literary character of all time. Hailed by many as one of the best books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Highly recommended to me by Mrs. Johnson, our 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher.
3. ***A Torch Kept Lit: Great Lives of the Twentieth Century, William F. Buckley (2016)***. The late Bill Buckley was the founder of *National Review* and the host of *Firing Line*, the longest running public affairs show in TV history (1966-1999). Buckley is one of the most erudite and eloquent writers – EVER. This is a collection, published ten years after Buckley's death, of 50 eulogies written by Buckley on figures like Winston Churchill, Ronald Reagan, Elvis Presley, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others. You get great commentary on the lives of many historically important people and a taste of Buckley's prose, intellect, and wit.
4. ***The Accusation: Forbidden Stories from Inside North Korea, Bandi (2017)***. Bandi is the pen name of an anonymous dissident writer living inside North Korea, the world's most brutal and oppressive regime. This is a remarkable collection of short stories about life under the horrifying, bizarre, and cruel dictatorship of the Kims. These stories are searing, tragic, and dark, but they shed needed light on the suffering and desperation of every day North Koreans. The manuscript was smuggled out of the country and published in 2017. Described as the "most dangerous book on the planet now." Read this, pray for North Korea, and thank God for your freedom!
5. ***Among the Living, Jonathan Rabb (2016)***. Four reasons to read this book. (1) It is very well written. (2) It is a great story about a young Holocaust camp survivor's assimilation back into some sort of normal life among his only remaining relatives. Much to say about love, suffering, identity, faith, race, and culture. (3) The author is a professor at SCAD. (4) The book takes place in 1947 Savannah. The characters visit Leopold's Ice Cream and have businesses on Broughton Street. It is a vivid portrait of the Jewish community in post-war Savannah.
6. ***How to Think, Alan Jacobs (2017)***. This short book will teach you that you are not as good at thinking as you think you are. This is a wise analysis of where our thinking --individually and collectively-- has gone wrong and a helpful guide to improving the way we process ideas. Jacobs provides a well-written and much needed antidote to the intellectual dishonesty, sophomoric name calling, and lack of generosity that pervades modern day culture and politics.
7. ***Flags Out Front, Douglas Wilson (2017)***. This short novel is the fun-est and funniest book I read this year. A lighthearted, satirical look at how to be a faithful Christian at a college where political correctness has caused nearly everyone to lose their minds. One night a prankster switches the flags in front of the Christian college campus so that the Christian flag is higher than the American flag. The right-wingers have a fit because it's un-American and the leftists have their hair on fire because of the elevated Christian flag. A frolicking adventure sprinkled with wisdom for navigating our insane political climate.
8. ***Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom, Carl R. Trueman (2015)***. A concise and enlightening look at the life and theology of Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation. Trueman gives us an honest portrayal of Luther's brilliance, boldness and historic significance, but does not gloss over his significant weakness and mistakes. This very readable work gave me a greater understanding of the historic context of the Reformation and a deeper appreciation for Luther's "theology of the cross."
9. ***The Works of Anne Bradstreet, Anne Bradstreet (author), Jeannine Hensley (editor) (2010)***. Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) is considered the first poet of the American colonies and one of America's first female writers. She wrote for her husband and children and never intended her poetry for publication. These are the gentle, feminine, and God-fearing musings of a Puritan woman in a wilderness frontier. Beautiful reflections on love, family, faith, marriage, suffering, sickness, and death. Her writing refutes the false stereotype of somber and sour Puritans.
10. ***The Heart of Christ, Thomas Goodwin (1651)***. Rich theology from the heart of a gentle pastor. Some Puritan writings can be dense, but I found this work to be very readable –almost conversational. You will be comforted, encouraged, and invigorated as Goodwin describes the heart of Christ toward His people. Christ has the strongest affections and tenderest love for us –especially for us in our afflictions and in our sins.

## Book Recommendations

December 2018

Mr. Scott Taylor

Here is my 2018 list of recommended books. These titles are books I have enjoyed during the past year, along with two works I failed to include in last year's list. As with previous lists, these selections are not all-time favorites or necessarily the year's best books. The goal with each list is to help those who may not be active/regular readers with a few suggestions. I aim to pique your interest with the hope that you will pick up a book and read it. Here you have a mix of history, biography, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. *I typically do not focus on Christian titles in this list. I assume that you see plenty of recommendations for such from your church, blogs, and friends.* I also mention the standard disclaimer –I enjoyed reading all these books, but I do not necessarily endorse every idea expressed or language employed. Please read with discernment. Tolle lege!

1. ***Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Katherine Anne Porter (1939)**. This story takes place during WWI and the influenza epidemic of 1918. This is a beautifully written, rich, and haunting tale of a young couple who fall in love and are visited by the rider on a pale horse (re. Revelation 6:8).
2. ***Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte (1847)**. Among the greatest works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this masterpiece is about a young woman who rises above a cruel upbringing as an orphan and much suffering as a young lady to become a strong and persevering woman of integrity. There is an intensity, passion, and intimacy to this woman's heart that grips the reader.
3. ***The Seventh Cross*, Anna Seghers (1942)**. The Germans, as a people, were certainly not all guilty of Nazi crimes, but nor were they all guiltless. This thriller, one of the first works to portray Nazi atrocities, is the story of seven political prisoners who escape from a Nazi prison camp and the camp commandant who has seven trees in the camp pruned to resemble seven ugly crosses –on which he plans to torture each recaptured prisoner. This is a story of how ordinary people can be either courageous in their stand against evil, complicit in the perpetration of evil, or just complacent in the presence of evil.
4. ***Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury (1953)**. If you read this in high school, I encourage you to read it again as an adult. Imagine a dystopian future in which everyone's thinking is shaped by the mindless chatter of television rather than by books and the free exchange of ideas –Future??? Sounds like the present! This book is often portrayed as an anti-censorship story, but it's really about what happens when a society stops reading and thinking for themselves.
5. ***The Thirty-Nine Steps*, John Buchan (1915)**. A Scotsman, a Presbyterian, AND a novelist –that's enough to pique my interest. This espionage thriller appears on many lists of top 100 best British novels. A classic fast paced man-on-the-run spy story full of adventure and mystery. *Greenmantle* and *Castle Gay* by Buchan are also highly recommended.
6. ***The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, Victor Serge (1947)**. This is a fictional take on actual events inside 1930s Soviet Union. An unsettling and unnerving account of how the "Great Terror" spread though all of Russia. Imagine a nation that was willing to imprison, torture and execute hundreds of thousands of innocents just to make sure they got the one guy who was guilty. This really happened! This is a 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian classic –for the quality of writing, for the incredible story, and for the terrifying warning it offers to freedom loving people.
7. ***Beowulf*, unknown author (c. 900-1000 A.D.)**. This is the oldest surviving long-story in Old English. We do not know the author or the precise date of the work, but it is a classic among the classics. The story is set in Scandinavia. The hero, Beowulf, fights to save the Danes from the monster Grendel and Grendel's mother. Later he slays a dragon but is mortally wounded in the battle. This is a very accessible old classic. A great story of courage with Christian themes. Beowulf has been called "The Original Superhero!"
8. ***Kindest Regards; New and Selected*, Ted Koozer (2018)**. Koozer is called "the most enjoyable and accessible major poet in America." These poems are sheer delight. They are clear and simple, yet profound and intimate. I can read them over and over again. With a quiet intensity Koozer offers beautiful snapshots of people, daily life, and relationships.
9. ***The Spy and the Traitor: The Greatest Espionage Story of the Cold War*, Ben Macintyre (2018)**. The true story of Russian KGB agent, Oleg Gordievsky, who turned the table on the KGB and exposed Soviet secrets to the British MI6 and American CIA. He was the son of two KGB agents who grew to despise his nation's communism as criminal and backward. His work is credited with severely damaging the Soviet state and hastening the end of the cold war. This true story reads like a spy novel. Gordievsky's courage is inspiring.
10. ***Ty Cobb: A Terrible Beauty*, Charles Leerhsen (2016)**. I was fascinated by this biography of the "Georgia Peach." Ty Cobb was perhaps the greatest baseball player ever and certainly one of the most controversial. Did you know that Cobb stole home fifty times in his career? If you know baseball, you know this is incredible. This well-researched biography is a great example of how rumors, biased media coverage, and myth can paint a very distorted picture of a man. Most of the horrible stories told about Cobb do not stand up to the facts.
11. ***The Coddling of the American Mind*, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018)**. This is an analysis of how social media usage, our hyperpolarized political climate, and helicopter parenting have converged to create a generation of less mature, less resilient, and less responsible young people. While the authors do not write from a consciously biblical perspective, they do offer wisdom and insight into current unhealthy trends in our culture. This is a must read for all parents. The immediate concerns of the book are the problems of student fragility on college campuses (i.e., safe spaces and trigger warnings), but the book applies to everyone who is striving to raise children to be independent, resilient, sound-thinking adults.
12. ***Them: Why We Hate Each Other—and How to Heal*, Ben Sasse (2018)**. Are you weary of the constant tribalism and rancor in American politics? Tired of the anger and vitriol aimed at anyone with a different opinion? Sasse, a Christian, husband, father, and U.S. senator from Nebraska, argues that most of the problem is not really about politics. Our core problem stems from the loss of community and the dissolution of institutions that have bound us together for centuries (family, church, neighborhoods, civic groups. etc.). This a warm, wise, and poignant diagnosis of where we are and a thoughtful prescription for healing and moving forward. After completing this book, I thought, "if only millions of Americans would read this and take it to heart."

## Book Recommendations

December 2019

Scott B. Taylor

Here is my 2019 book list. As always, these books are not all-time favorites or even the year's best books. This is a simply a list of books that I enjoyed this past year and could recommend, especially to those who might not be avid readers and are looking for a place to start. All of these are good reads. All are accessible. All will speak some aspect of God's truth to your heart and mind. If one of your resolutions for the New Year is to read more, these may be worthy of your consideration. Among these you will find three classics, a poetry collection, two modern novels, two biographies, and three recent non-fiction works. *(Please note that I intentionally do not include "Christian books" in this annual list. I assume that you see plenty of recommendations for such from your church, blogs, and friends.)* Enjoy!

1. *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens (1861). Many believe this is Dicken's best. This is a rich and engaging story of how the orphan Pip grows to maturity and manhood. From his early years he aspires to be a "gentleman" and as a young man he mysteriously comes into wealth and "great expectations." As the story unfolds Pip learns that his expectations are not what he expected. Through the convolutions of Providence, he develops into a man more concerned with character and wisdom and less with position and prosperity. No one weaves intricate details and a host of fascinating characters into an amazing tapestry of life's defeats and victories like Dickens.

2. *Kristin Lavransdatter*, Sigrid Undset (1922). This is the epic story of Kristen, the daughter of Lavrans. She is beautiful, passionate, and headstrong and makes decisions in her youth that follow her all the days of her life. This sweeping 1300-page saga of life in 14th century Norway is potent, enthralling, and rewarding. Do not let the 1300 pages discourage you. This is such a good book. Undset takes readers deep into the daily life, social conventions, political intrigues, and religious devotion of the 1300's. The working of God's providence to sanctify Kristen has innumerable lessons for all of us. Be sure to get the Nunnally translation (Penguin Classics). Undset won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1928.

3. *The Revenant: A Novel of Revenge*, Michael Punke (2015). If you've seen the movie with DiCaprio you know the story. The movie is good. The book is great. With any excellent book, never console yourself with just having seen the movie! This is a page-turner tale of betrayal and revenge set in the 1820's western frontier. The book is based on actual events in the life of Hugh Glass, a trapper for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. Glass is brutally mauled by a grizzly bear and then abandoned to die by his companions. With astonishing grit and determination Glass survives, regains his strength, and traverses hundreds of miles of wilderness seeking retribution against the men who betrayed him. Revenge is never as satisfying as we hope!

4. *The Execution of Mayor Yin, and Other Stories from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*, Chen Jo-hsi (1978). These eight short stories display the sorrow, confusion, anger, and futility of life in communist China during and after the Cultural Revolution. How do ordinary people live meaningful lives when the state consistently lies to them, when the innocent are pronounced guilty, and when their daily lives are terrorized by suspicions, house searches, and forced migrations? These snapshots are moving, well-written, and poignant.

5. *Cry, The Beloved Country*, Alan Patton (1948). Of all the books I read this past year this is the one that most haunted me afterward. The story sticks in my mind. I can never forget the tragic injustice of apartheid juxtaposed against the humble, tender, and faithful life of the village pastor Stephen Kumalo. May I grow to be like the "umfundisi." This is simply a wonderful novel. This book is an aching blend of racial injustice, shame, and fear and the compassionate, wise, and loving heart of a godly father -actually, two fathers -one black and one white. Redemption is painful but always beautiful.

6. *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems*, Leland Ryken (2018). Christian poetry can be a beautiful means of

worshipping and communing with God. This collection of ninety classic Christian poems, each with a 1-2 page exposition, will give you fresh perspective on your walk with God. Ryken is a godly and wise guide to literature and poetry. Here you have selections from Herbert, Eliot, Dickinson, Shakespeare, and many others. Pray, read, enjoy the poetry, enjoy God, and worship.

7. *Discrimination and Disparities*, Thomas Sowell (2018). This is a very readable examination of how economic and other disparities arise. Why do some countries or groups of people prosper, and others do not? Why do firstborns typically outperform younger siblings? Why do some races, sexes, classes, and individuals succeed at some endeavors and fail at others? Why is there inequality? Sowell is an intellectual giant with humility and lots of common sense. With graceful arguments, vast supporting data, and keen insight he dismantles the popular mantra that those who achieve less do so because they are victims of discrimination, exploitation, oppression, or genetics. Wherever you stand along the political spectrum there is much in the book that will surprise you and enlighten you. A must read for everyone.

8. *Sacred Duty: A Soldier's Tour at Arlington National Cemetery*, Tom Cotton (2019). This is a behind the scenes portrait of Arlington National Cemetery and the service of the revered military unit "The Old Guard." The book is part memoir, part intimate profile of the today's soldiers, and part inspiring reflection on the work of the Old Guard. These are the guys who carry the flagged draped coffins of our fallen soldiers and stand in timeless vigil at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Be it the funeral of a young private killed in Afghanistan or of President George H. W. Bush, these soldiers honor the fallen with the highest measures of sacrifice, dedication, and perfection. I was awe struck by the uncompromising commitment to perfection and discipline shown by these soldiers -simply because the fallen were worthy of the honor. Lots of application here to our daily lives, how we worship, and how we serve others. This book made me stand tall as an American but took me to my knees as a Christian.

9. *A Woman of No Importance: The Untold Story of the American Spy Who Helped Win World War II*, Sonia Purnell (2019). In this biography that reads like a thriller we hear the never before told story of an unsuspecting woman with a prosthetic leg who became the mastermind behind the French Resistance in WWII. In 1942 the Gestapo said of this brave woman, "She is the most dangerous of all Allied spies. We must find and destroy her." Stories of unnoticed, unappreciated, and humble heroes like Virginia Hall are always inspiring. The is an enjoyable read --well-written narrative and a captivating plot.

10. *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*, Douglas Murray (2018). What happens when an entire continent abandons faith in God, loses confidence in its heritage, and cowers in shame for its past? Murray parses the story of how Europe is slowing committing suicide. And it seems that the United States is on the same path. After you read this you will desperately hope that our leaders read it and have the courage to embrace reality. A must read.

11. *Luckiest Man: The Life and Death of Lou Gehrig*, Jonathan Eig (2005). This is a biography of one of the strongest, most determined, and most skilled baseball sluggers of all time. This is the story of a man who was struck down in his prime by the disease that now bears his name. Lou Gehrig is regarded as the greatest first baseman in baseball history. He was shy and awkward, but had a heart of gold and the grit of an "Iron Man." Baseball fan or not, sports fan or not, you will enjoy this classic biography about a man who faced the abrupt and tragic end of an incredible career with humility and gratitude.



## Book Recommendations

December 2020

Mr. Scott Taylor

Once again, I have compiled an annual book list. As in previous years these are titles that I have enjoyed during the past year, but they are not all-time favorites or necessarily the year's best books. The goal here is to offer suggestions to those who may not be active/regular readers. This list features several classics, some novels, an autobiography, and four contemporary non-fictions. As usual, this list does not focus primarily on Christian titles. I assume that you see plenty of recommendations for such from your church, blogs, and friends. I also include the standard disclaimer—I enjoyed reading these books, but I do not necessarily endorse every idea expressed or language employed. Please read with discernment. Glorify God. Enjoy Him forever. And read a good book!

1. *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662). Pascal was a 17<sup>th</sup> century mathematical and scientific genius who worked on ideas centuries ahead of their time. *Pensées* means pieces or fragments. This classic work of apologetics is the collection of the fragments of written thoughts and ideas found in Pascal's living quarters and on his person at his death. His untimely death left the organization of the fragments to modern compilers. This very readable work is a rare combination of theology, philosophy, and warm devotion to Christ.
2. *The Woodlanders*, Thomas Hardy (1887). Hardy has appeared in previous editions of this list. I am always intrigued by his stories and vivid characters. I think of his writing as Dickens with a tragic view of life. This powerful novel explores the entanglement of romance, destiny, individual choices, and tragedy. This is considered by some to be Hardy's finest work, but do not expect a happily ever-after ending!
3. *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*, Ole Rolvaag (1927). Hailed as the most powerful novel ever about pioneer life in America, this work follows a group of Norwegian immigrants who settled in the Dakota territory in the 1870s. As they struggle to build new lives in America, the families face snowstorms, poverty, locusts, loneliness, and homesickness. Beautifully written and with strong elements of faith in God's providence, I found this book to be both emotionally gripping and historically informative.
4. *Animal Farm*, George Orwell (1946). Orwell's classic fable of the insidious nature of communism is a short engaging story that is a must read for every American. The story is about a group of farm animals who rebel against their human farmer with dreams of a utopian society where all animals are free and equal. As the story unfolds the animals learn that their dreams of absolute equality have landed them in a new society of oppression and totalitarian rule in which "Some Animals Are More Equal Than Others." YOU GOTTA' READ THIS!
5. *The Chrysalids*, John Wyndham (1955). A dystopian futuristic science fiction story that takes place following a global nuclear war. The Chrysalids is set in a community of genetic fundamentalists who view all physical differences and abnormalities as "offenses" and "blasphemies" against God and reject all deviations among, plants, animals, and humans. This sounds bizarre but it is actually a tender tale of love, acceptance, and overcoming unholy intolerance. The novel has many applications to contemporary trends toward tribalism, identity politics, and selective abortion. A beautifully written and constructed science fiction classic.
6. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn (1962). During the horrors of World War II, a Russian soldier is wrongfully convicted of treason and sentenced to ten years in a Siberian labor camp." This is Solzhenitsyn's fictional account of his own experience in a Soviet Gulag. This "masterpiece of modern Russian fiction" is a powerful account of the brutal dehumanizing conditions inside Soviet prisons. Ivan's dignity and strength sustained him in the face of the evils in the camp. Solzhenitsyn won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970.
7. *That Distant Land: Collected Stories*, Wendell Berry (2005). Berry makes another appearance on this list. This collection of twenty-three short stories from fictional Port William portrays the relationships, affections and struggles that bound the community together over generations of life on the land. Berry is a remarkable writer whose stories capture the virtues and commitments of a disappearing way of life.
8. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass (1845). Douglass was a slave who escaped to the north and became an abolitionist, writer, newspaper editor, and eloquent orator. His writings and speeches impassioned the abolitionist movement. In this short autobiography he provides a graphic portrayal of the physical abuse, deprivation and tragedy that plagued his early years before his escape to freedom. Douglass was a courageous and fearless man. He tells his story with great sensitivity, power, and beautiful prose. Another must read!
9. *Live Not By Lies*, Rod Dreher (2020). This book from the bestselling author of *The Benedict Option* draws on the experiences of Christian survivors of Soviet persecution. The book is written as a warning to American Christians of the approaching dangers of "soft" totalitarianism. The title is taken from a 1974 essay of the same title by Alexander Solzhenitsyn (above). Identity politics, corporate surveillance, progressive policies, big tech, consumerism, and the pandemic are making us increasingly vulnerable to psychological and spiritual manipulation. On a societal level we have begun to live by lies. Dreher is trying to "amplify the alarm sounded by the brave men and women who fought totalitarianism" in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is NOT a conspiratorial rant. Dreher is on to something! Read, pray, and act on it.
10. *Did America Have a Christian Founding?: Separating Modern Myth from Historical Truth*, Mark David Hall (2019). Hall, a distinguished professor of history, tackles the centuries old controversy about the founding of our republic. He exposes the false claim that America's Founders were mere deists who desired the strict separation of church and state. With thorough research and a balanced approach, he demonstrates that the political ideas of our forefathers were unquestionably shaped by their Christian convictions. The book's argument has profound applications to the constitutional and religious liberty questions of today. Compelling!
11. *Clarence Thomas and the Lost Constitution*, Myron Magnet (2019). This book is both an inspiring account of the life of Savannah native and Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and an informative introduction to modern challenges facing the United States Constitution. In clear, non-lawyerly language, Thomas's brilliant legal mind and his commitment to a free and self-governing nation are presented. This book helped me to connect many of the "dots" in today's judicial and cultural debates.
12. *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund (2020). I cannot think of a Christian book that has had more of an impact on me than this title. It is truly a balm of healing for the weary, burdened soul. D. A. Carson says of this book, "*Gentle and Lowly* comes from the pen of someone who has not just profited from reading the Puritans—but who, more importantly, has read the Bible under their tutelage. One short book can never be enough to convey all the glory of the character of Christ, but this book deftly unpacks something we often overlook: Christ is meek and lowly in heart and gives rest to those who labor and are burdened. Written with pastoral gentleness and quiet beauty, it teases out what twenty biblical texts contribute to this portrait of the heart of Christ, all of it brought together to bring comfort, strength, and rest to believers."

## Book Recommendations

December 2021

Mr. Scott Taylor

Here are my Book Recommendations for 2021. As always these are titles that I have enjoyed during the past year, but they are not all-time favorites or necessarily the year's best books. The goal here is to offer suggestions to those who may not be active/regular readers. This list features several classics, some novels, two biographies, and three contemporary non-fictions. As usual, this list does not focus primarily on Christian titles. I assume that you see plenty of recommendations for such from your church, blogs, and friends. I also include the standard disclaimer –I enjoyed reading these books, but I do not necessarily endorse every idea expressed or language employed. Please read with discernment. Glorify God. Enjoy Him forever. And read a good book!

1. *Silence*, Shusaku Endo (1966). This is a story about the persecution of Portuguese Jesuit priests in 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan. This work is both theological and historical in its outlook and explores the question of why God sometimes seems to be silent in the midst of brutal persecution. It will make you think about how faithful you would be in the midst of torture and suffering. The 2016 movie is also excellent.
2. *Charis in the World of Wonders: A Novel Set in Puritan new England*, Marly Youmans (2020). Set in 1690s New England. This novel is an adventure story, a reflection on the mysteries of providence, and an exploration of everyday wonders –all in one. This was my page-turner of the year. A delightful tale of a godly young woman's journey through sorrow and hope.
3. *Klara and the Sun: A Novel*. Kazuo Ishiguro (2021). Ishiguro won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2017. He is one of my favorite contemporary authors. This story is narrated by Klara, an "Artificial Friend" (AI robot). She gently, innocently, and perceptibly watches the behavior of the lonely, status obsessed, and technologically confused humans around her. A powerful meditation on love, loneliness, and what it means to be human. A haunting mirror held up to the face of 21<sup>st</sup> century humanity.
4. *The Way West*, A. B. Guthrie (1949). Guthrie won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for this book in 1950. Set in 1846 in a wagon train carrying settlers from Missouri to Oregon. This is a "western" but it's more about pioneer families and their struggles to make new lives on the wild frontier than it is about shoot-'em-up cowboys. Such great story telling!
5. *Shane*, Jack Schaeffer (1949). Yes, another western! A captivating story set in 1889 Wyoming about a stranger who rides onto a family's ranch. The stranger has a mysterious past but ends up helping out the family and profoundly influencing the young son. The chapter about removing an old stump is one of most powerful pictures of masculinity in all of literature. "If you read only one western in your life, this is the one."
6. *The Passenger: A Novel*, Ulrich Alexander Boschwitz (1938, re-released 2021). There is something about lost and forgotten novels rediscovered by later generations. This is a Kafkaesque (look it up 😊) tale of the harrowing absurdity of the early days of Nazi persecution of the Jews. Otto Silbermann, a loyal

German who looks Aryan but is a Jew, flees his home out of fear of being exposed and captured. He boards a train, then another, and another. He embarks on a frantic odyssey of darkness and despair. This story serves as a prescient and prophetic warning to our contemporary world in its confusion about justice, identity, and humanity.

7. *Witness*, Whittaker Chambers (1952). This is the autobiographical account of Chambers' role in the 1948 espionage trial of Alger Hiss, a Soviet spy who had infiltrated the highest levels of the United States government. Hailed as "one of the dozen or so indispensable books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century," *Witness* is an amazing story of Chambers' disillusion with communism, restoration to his childhood Christian faith, and courageous testimony in the Hiss trial. The introduction alone is worth any price you'll pay for the book!
8. *Gulag Voices*, Anne Applebaum (2012). *Gulag Voices* is a rich collection of the writings of the Gulag, the Soviet concentration camps of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. These personal stories, memoirs, and testimonies of prisoners from all walks of life vividly portray the ugly inhumanity of the brutal camps and the moving humanity of many of their captives. It is estimated that 1.6 million prisoners died in the Gulag camps.
9. *Maverick: A Biography of Thomas Sowell*, Jason L. Riley (2021). Thomas Sowell is one of America's most influential conservative thinkers, perhaps the greatest social theorists of our time. This is the first ever biography of Sowell. *Maverick* highlights Sowell's most significant writings and traces the events and ideas that shaped a Black orphan from the Jim Crow South into one of today's most brilliant public intellectuals.
10. *Chance or the Dance? A Critique of Modern Secularism*, Thomas Howard (1969, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2018). Howard argues that we cannot live truly meaningful lives without a Christian understanding of how things are and why they are. This work is often compared to Lewis' *Abolition of Man* in its insightful analysis of our modern age. Howard clearly and beautifully explains why secular humanism reduces daily life to emptiness and provides a brilliant defense of how all we see and experience is covered with God's fingerprints.
11. *Return of the God Hypothesis: Three Scientific Discoveries That Reveal the Mind Behind the Universe*, Stephen C. Meyer (2021). Meyer argues convincingly and cogently with reams of evidence from physics, cosmology, and biology that the existence of a personal God is the best explanation for the universe we inhabit. This is not a theological and philosophical treatise that tries to "prove" the existence of God. It is an objective attempt to demonstrate that three irrefutable scientific facts 1) The universe has a beginning, 2) The universe has been finely tuned for the possibility of life, and 3) There have been huge bursts of information into our biosphere, point to a personal God. Those with interests in science or creation-evolution issues will love this book.

## Book Recommendations

December 2022

Mr. Scott Taylor

Here is my list for 2022. As always these are titles that I have enjoyed, but they are not necessarily the year's best books. My primary aim with this list is to offer suggestions to those who are not regular readers. This list features several classics, some novels, two biographies, and some contemporary non-fictions. As usual, this list does not focus exclusively on Christian titles. I assume that you get plenty of recommendations for such from your church, blogs, and friends. I also include the standard disclaimer –I enjoyed reading these books, but I do not endorse every idea expressed or the language employed. Please read with discernment. Glorify God. Enjoy Him forever. And read a good book!

1. *Ivanhoe*, Walter Scott (1819). One of the earliest historical novels. Set in 12<sup>th</sup> century England, this story has it all - Normans, Saxons, knights, lords, monks, tournaments, romance, revenge, chivalry, Richard the Lionheart, and Robin Hood! An excellent story, well written. I thought the language from 200 years ago would be a challenge but found this work quite readable. Be careful, you'll want to joust with your neighbor after reading *Ivanhoe*!
2. *The Autobiography of Calvin Coolidge*, Calvin Coolidge (1929). Coolidge was the thirtieth president of the United States, 1923 to 1929. He "oversaw one of the greatest periods of prosperity in American history and reduced the federal budget even as the economy grew." He was a man of great modesty, humility, and wisdom –a model of fiscal responsibility and political restraint – the opposite of many contemporary politicians. Many consider this one of the best presidential autobiographies ever written.
3. *Animal Farm*, George Orwell (1945). An allegorical tale of a group of farm animals who revolt against their human farmer and make plans for a utopian society where all animals can be happy, free, and equal. In the end the animals learn that their utopian dream of equality is an illusion. They soon learn that "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* to reflect the tragedy and folly of life under Stalin in the Soviet Union. A brilliant portrayal of the madness of communism.
4. *The Searchers*, Alan Le May (1954). This is an epic story of a six-year search for a young girl captured by Comanche warriors in 1836. The long search is a tale of grit and perseverance. The tension of the story lies mostly in the conflicting motivations of finding the lost girl and getting revenge on the Indians –but as the search goes on understanding for the Comanches grows. A very thoughtful read. Excellent character development. Not your typical "good guy wins the shootout" Western.
5. *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis (1955). This work describes Lewis's life from early childhood (born 1898) until his conversion to Christianity in 1931. Lewis tells of his early life with humility, humor, and sometimes with sadness. Most interesting is his description of his "accidental discovery of and consequent search for the phenomenon he labeled "Joy."" This intense sense of transcendent longing and goodness was beyond words and was instrumental in opening his heart and mind to the reality of God and the truth of the Gospel.
6. *Spurgeon's Sorrows: Realistic Hope for those who Suffer from Depression*, Zack Eswine (2015). Pastor Eswine uses the life of C. H. Spurgeon to demonstrate how the "river of life often flows through the slough of despond." Spurgeon is widely acknowledged as one the greatest preachers ever, yet he battled serious depression throughout his life. This was one of the most encouraging books I read all year—a biblically comforting balm for the soul.
7. *In the Year of Our Lord: Reflections on Twenty Centuries of Church History*, Sinclair B. Ferguson (2018). Sinclair Ferguson gives us an inspiring tour of church history. Twenty chapters, one each for twenty centuries. This is not a dry academic summary of events. Ferguson uses God's mercies through the centuries to inspire and challenge believers in their walk with Christ. Each chapter highlights a key historical event, comments upon it in the light of Scripture, and masterfully applies it to our daily lives.
8. *A Gentleman in Moscow*, Amor Townes (2019). I loved this rich story about Count Alexander Rostov, a Russian aristocrat who is sentenced to house arrest in the Metropol, a grand hotel across the street from the Kremlin. He is sentenced simply because he is a bourgeois aristocrat. Rostov is forced to live in an attic room while some of the most tumultuous decades in Russian history are unfolding outside the hotel's doors. The story is full of fascinating characters. This novel is a subtle and nuanced portrayal of the beauty of humanity alongside the oppressiveness of totalitarianism. This was a mega-best seller when it came out –no wonder!
9. *Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution*, Carl Trueman. (2022). This is a concise, non-academic version of Trueman's 2020 book, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*. Trueman gives us an insightful guide for navigating the current crisis of human identity and sexual politics by explaining how society has shifted (via Rousseau, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, etc.) from a commonsense commitment to objective truth to a "truth" predicated upon personal feelings and individual authenticity.
10. *Rembrandt is in the Wind: Learning to Love Art through the Eyes of Faith*, Russ Ramsey (2022). Ramsey invites us to "discover some of the world's most celebrated artists and works, while presenting the gospel of Christ in a way that speaks to the struggles and longings common to the human experience." This book is "part art history, part biblical study, part philosophy, and part analysis of the human experience." We learn from the glories and failures of great artists –how redemption and beauty go hand in hand. I learned much and was inspired by this book.
11. *The Thing Is: Short Stories of Things and the People They Encounter*, Rivers Houseal (2022). Young Miss Houseal, a homeschool graduate, is quite the wordsmith. These stories are keenly observant of life's details –things and people. The writing is fresh and resonant. The perspective is Godward. The subjects are a typewriter, a medieval church bell, a grandfather clock, a fiddle, and a potato. So, so, enjoyable!
12. *Small Things Like These*, Claire Keegan (2022). I first heard about this book from a review on [The World and Everything In It](#) podcast. This is a beautifully written tale of a working-class man who chooses to do the right thing, a small thing, even if it costs him greatly. Set in 1980's Ireland during a time when unwed mothers and orphaned girls were deprived of their dignity in sequestered religious institutions. This story is a poignant picture of the precariousness of life and the importance of small things. This is one of those reads that lingers in your thoughts and haunts you for days afterward.