



The Patrons' Post

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Quest for the Best

by Albert R. Vogeler

Good. Better. Best. Universal categories of human judgment, or petty private preferences? Both, of course. Our need to classify and evaluate, to establish and assert our values, makes ranking a natural activity, and when we do it collectively through institutions, ranking becomes a social fact and a means of influence. Hence “we” decide what is best and in some way reward it. Whether it is beauty, athleticism, or courage, whether it is art, science, or saintliness, the impulse to identify and acknowledge exceptional qualities or attainments is a notable feature of our culture.

Granted, evaluating implies listing and ranking, but these activities need to be clarified. Lists can be infinitely diverse in subject matter, yet there are only two kinds: *random* lists and *sorted* lists. The first are planless enumerations; the second are organized for a purpose. But these sorted lists are also infinite—an infinity within an infinity. They comprise dictionaries, reigns of monarchs, cities by population, universities by endowments, nations by exports, stars by brightness, books by sales, ships by tonnage, populations by age, buildings by height, libraries by holdings, maps by region,

stock quotes for investors, checklists for pilots, manifests for cargoes, commonly misspelled words, rarely seen birds, major earthquakes—that is, all the subject matters that can possibly be imagined.

Many, but not all *sorted* lists are *graded* lists running from the larger to the smaller, the most frequent to the less frequent, the fastest to the slowest, and so forth. Yet the sorted lists I have just mentioned are of one kind only: they are statistical, factual, and impersonal. The other kind of sorted list is based on judgment, taste, and emotion. This is a *valuative* list, the kind involved in the “Quest for the Best” in literature and the arts.

Though the “Quest for the Best” seems self-evidently to honor excellence, it may also reward the *worst*, namely, the best in the category of the bad--which is Bad, Worse, Worst. This little logical inversion has an inevitable appeal that has made negative lists endlessly popular. Who does not relish a list of the worst opening sentences of any novel (“It was a dark and stormy night...”), a list of the worst puns, of the most over praised books, the least justified prizes, the most embarrassing moments, the nastiest rejoinders, the worst-dressed celebrities, the most mistaken predictions? It’s the extremes that fascinate, whether good or bad—especially, we must confess, the bad.

Lists of the best *anything* are never permanent. They may be controverted from their inception, fade from attention, crumble into obsolescence, and change as tastes and values change. The history of the Great Books is a case in point. Some books have always been centerpieces of their cultures: the Tao-te-Ching, the Ramayana, the Iliad and Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Old and New Testaments, the Koran, the Divine Comedy. But when lists are extended beyond a few seminal works--when ten or twenty or a hundred titles are claimed to be the greatest—the lists are bound to come under attack by critics --and by time. When in late Victorian England Lord Avebury drew up his list of the Hundred Best Books based on the pleasure they gave readers, in no time at all Frederic Harrison, the Positivist, countered with *The Choice of Books*, a parallel list that made education and idealism the hallmarks of greatness. Other lists proliferated and the cultural elite took sides in print for years.

In America, the Quest for the Best in literature started in 1909 at Harvard when its President, Charles W. Eliot, published his “Five Foot Shelf of Books,” the Harvard Classics, a fifty-volume set of the most important non-fiction books of western civilization. It sold 350,000 copies in its first twenty years and was followed by his Harvard Classics Shelf of Fiction in twenty volumes. The ultimate objective was acquisition of a liberal education through systematic reading of seminal works, the Best in the West. (It would be a long time before such lists included classics of the East).

The movement Eliot started bore more fruit at Columbia and Chicago than it did at Harvard. John Erskine began teaching and advocating a much shorter selection of Great Books at Columbia in the 1920s. In the next decade the Great Books core curriculum was established, and has ever since been a demanding class for all freshmen (of which I was one). The list of some twenty books (ten per semester) changed over time, with one revision after another exercising students and faculty.

When Mortimer Adler, one of the founders at Columbia, moved to the University of Chicago, he carried his own version of Great Books education with him. There, with the chancellor, Robert Hutchens, the idea moved from teaching to publishing, the enormous project of the “Great Books of the Western World” was born. (For more about the career of Adler’s Great Books, see “Wisdom, Inc.” in the *Patrons Post*, Spring 2007.) In Chicago, the Quest for the Best was, for a time, an engine of profit as well as a source of enlightenment.

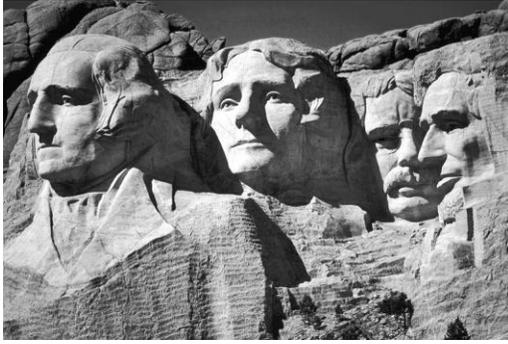
By the early 1970s those who followed current British literature were puzzled by the sudden publicity given a new literary award—the Booker Prize. Awarded for the best original novel by a citizen of Great Britain, Ireland, the Commonwealth, or—of all places—Zimbabwe—it was worth £21,000 (now £50,000). Many of the forty winners so far are apparently quite distinguished, but the fanfare accompanying the awarding of the prize every May has become a cultural phenomenon. To make the Booker shortlist of five books is itself a mark of distinction, and both the shortlist and the longlist finalists are the talk of literary circles during the spring. Booker (now Man Booker) has eclipsed all forty other British literary prizes and spawned imitations, including a Russian Booker.

America is probably more prize-happy than any other nation, with nearly a hundred different nation-wide awards for literature alone (not to mention the Academy Awards, Grammys, Golden Globes, top tunes, all kinds of top tens, World Series, halls of fame, American Idols, Men of the Year, Fortune Five Hundreds, outstanding professors, Miss Americas, and the like). In literature the most familiar status achievement is *The New York Times* bestseller list, a recognition of popularity but not necessarily excellence. The high-prestige awards are the four given annually by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Bollingen and the Poetry Society's awards for poetry, the national Medal of Arts, the National Book Award, the Bancroft Prize for history, the Modern Language Association awards, and the Pulitzers for twenty categories of journalism, plus music.

Every genre of literature has its award. The O. Henry Prize goes to short stories, the Hugo and Nebula awards to science fiction, the Edgar Allan Poe to mysteries. Virtually every other genre, like drama, children's writing, sports writing, science writing, women's writing, and religious writing has its annual reward for excellence. And then there are the incalculable number of prizes offered by college literary societies, local literary and poetry circles, and publishers' awards for writing.

The ultimate literary award, the Nobel Prize, has been awarded during 110 years to many authors of undoubted genius, but also to a distressing number of relative mediocrities, and its decisions are commonly anticipated with a certain skepticism. Unlike the Olympic Games, whose Quest for the Best is as public as can be imagined, the Nobel Committee meets in secret, and rumor is all we can expect in understanding its decisions. (See "Prize and Prejudice" in the Fall 2008 *Patrons Post*.)

The Quest for the Best in literature, as we have seen, takes many forms and yields many results. But of two things we can be certain: the torrent of the Best in *everything* is getting bigger every year and already exceeds our comprehension. But we are not limited to the Best; and most of us will be quite satisfied to make our own choices.



President's Corner

Patrons are looking forward to the completion of the Boswell Map Project this spring when the digitization process is finished. The final portion of the project will focus on alerting the general public that the maps are available online. We thank Al Vogeler and Farron Brougher for shepherding this project through a lengthy process lasting over five years.

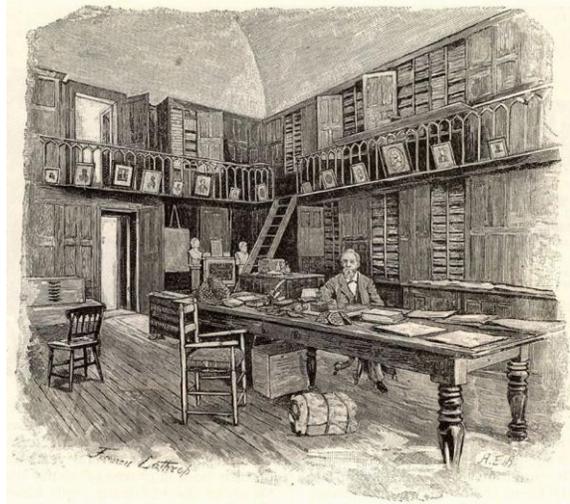
Prior to retiring and closing her wonderful bookstore in Fullerton, Joan Lorson donated 14 boxes of books to the Pollak Library. The retail value of these books exceeds \$8000. Once again, board member Farron Brougher and his wife Tracey Tomashpol have made a generous financial donation to Patrons. We are extremely grateful for these gifts. We continue to seek your contributions of used books. We will accommodate your delivery of these gifts so that it does not create an inconvenience for you. Please see the detailed instructions contained within this newsletter.

University Librarian Richard Pollard has announced some unexpected good news amidst the doom and gloom of the current financial crisis. The library will receive \$70,000 of new money for the purchase of books. This amount reflects \$50,000 from Vice President for Academic Affairs Ephraim Smith and \$20,000 from a CalPers refund that will be used for equipment and operational needs.

Howard Seller and Lis Leyson will report about our field trip in November and our three excellent speakers at the lectures this year. For the first time we joined with another University support group to enhance field trip participation. Art Alliance was our partner for the special bus trip to the lovely Chen Gallery in Torrance. I am in hopes that we may have a more collegial relationship with all of the campus support groups so that everyone may benefit from this body of diverse and varying interests.

In closing, I wish to thank the entire team of Board members who have worked so diligently and made my two-year tenure so fulfilling. I hope to see all of you at the Annual Meeting on June 5 when we have the pleasure of hearing the new president of the Zamarano Club, Gordon Van De Water, who discusses his most recent book *A Stroll by My Western Bookshelves*.

Suzanne Serbin



Harvard's "Reading" website

A Note by Gordon J. Van De Water

I recently discovered a website that may be of interest to many of our readers. It is Harvard's new interactive "Reading" website, and it certainly caused me to say "Wow!" Here's the web address so you can get right to it – <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/reading/>. As the introductory material puts it, "*Reading: Harvard Views of Readers, Readership, and Reading History* is an online exploration of the intellectual, cultural, and political history of reading as reflected in the historical holdings of the Harvard Libraries. For Internet users worldwide, *Reading* provides unparalleled digital access to a significant selection of unique source materials."

Some of the items highlighted here are annotated copies of books owned by John Keats, Herman Melville, and Hester Lynch Piozzi. There are also records showing the reading activities of Emerson, Longfellow, and Thoreau, as well as textbooks in reading instruction dating from the 18th to early 20th centuries. All told, more than 250,000 pages from 1200 individual books and manuscripts are set forth for your viewing experience.

It is remarkably easy to use this website. For instance, I inspected Dibdin's *Library Companion*, a first edition copy of 1824. The front cover of the volume came up on my screen, and then by clicking on a button, I could turn the pages from beginning to end. A very nice feature allows one to modify the size of a page to whatever is the most comfortable size font. I own a second edition (1825) of this work and have read large sections of it with interest. But I have to smile at the opening words of the preface: "It will be obvious, from the slightest glance at the ensuing pages, that it has been the object of their author to present a great quantity of useful information within a reasonable compass." "Useful"? Yes, to those who have an interest in divinity, history, voyages and travels, biography and memoirs, all primarily from the 18th century and before. But "a reasonable

compass"? It is all relative, I suppose, but Dibdin's book stretches for 912 pages of fairly close print.

I hope you will be able to investigate this site, designed so that even computer-illiterate people can easily access the material. Although this helpfully-designed site is important for researchers and scholars, it can take all of us into an informative and even delightful world of reading

BOOK SALE CENTER REPORT

By

June Pollak

With the start of the spring semester, the Patrons and Emeriti Book Sale Center reopened, fully restocked. We sell used books, both from donations and excess volumes from the CSUF Library. Our very low prices of \$1, \$2, or \$3 per book are set to help the CSUF students and others purchase books which are usually extremely expensive. All proceeds from sales are designated to purchase books for the Library, vitally important in this era of drastically reduced state funding.

Our hours for the spring semester are 11 to 3 on Tuesdays, 11 to 7 on Wednesdays, and 12 to 3 on Thursdays. Please visit us regularly. We are open throughout the fall and spring terms, but not during intersession or summer.

As always, we need your donations to keep the shelves stocked in L 199. Please call 657-278-2182 and ask for Joy Lambert or Lorraine Seelig in order to make arrangements. If you are interested in joining the Patrons and Emeriti volunteers working in the Book Sale Center, please call June Pollak at 949-661-0463.

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Book Sale Center Annual Sale

Save the date for the Annual Sale in early May. The Patrons website will be updated soon with details.

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Activities Report

By

Howard Seller and Lis Leyson

The Chen Art Gallery in Torrance was the site of the first special activity organized by the Patrons (in conjunction with the CSUF Art Alliance) for this academic year. On Thursday, November 12, 2009, we visited this art museum which is housed inside the Sunrider International World Headquarters in Torrance. A docent and the museum's curator accompanied us as we viewed the extraordinary personal collection of Dr. Tei Fu Chen, the founder of Sunrider. The hundreds of items on display included rare artifacts ranging from Neolithic era pottery to Ming and Qing dynasty imperial porcelains. After the morning tour of the museum we traveled to Chinatown in Los Angeles for a dim sum lunch at the Empress Pavilion Restaurant. Few people had ever heard of the Chen Art Gallery before this visit, and many of the participants indicated an interest in returning with friends and family members.

The Patrons' lectures are now open to the public and free. Professor Irena Praitis, a member of the Department of English and Comparative Literature at CSUF, delivered the first lecture, on Sunday, November 15, 2009. Dr. Praitis recently edited *Stirring Dawn*, a book of poems (mostly haiku) written by the late Joan Greenwood, who was on the faculty of the department for many years. Dr. Praitis discussed the experience of preparing the book as well as what she learned from the poetry. Her presentation also included the reading of a number of the poems. The lecture was followed by a discussion in which some of the members of the Greenwood family also participated.

David Savage, who has been the United States Supreme Court reporter for *the Los Angeles Times* since 1986, gave the second lecture in our series on Sunday, February 10, 2010. In addition to his frequent articles in the newspaper he has also authored two books: *Turning Right: The Making of the Rehnquist Supreme Court* and *Guide to the U.S. Supreme Court*. Mr. Savage discussed some of the key cases in front of the court and offered some interesting insights and observations about the justices. Many persons at this well-attended lecture had questions, and the event was enhanced by the discussion that followed the lecture.

The third lecture of the year was delivered on Saturday, March 6, 2010 at 2:00 P.M. in room 130, Pollak Library. The speaker was Professor Phil Gianos, who discussed politics and film. Dr. Gianos joined the faculty of the CSUF Department of Political Science in 1971 and recently retired after

serving as chair of the Division of Politics, Administration and Justice. He is the author of *Politics and Politicians in American Film* as well as several other books and numerous articles.

The fourth and final lecture is Saturday, March 27, 2010 at 2:00 P.M. in room 130, Pollak Library by Professor Ellen Caldwell of the CSUF Department of English and Comparative Literature. Dr. Caldwell has been on the faculty since 2001 and is particularly well regarded by students and colleagues for her course "Shakespeare on Film." Her other academic interests include medieval and Renaissance literature.

The Patrons' annual meeting will be held on Saturday, June 5, 2010 at 2:00 P.M. in room 130, Pollak Library. The meeting will include a review of the year's achievements and activities and the election of officers for the coming year. The highlight of this year's event will be a talk by Gordon J. Van De Water, a member of the Patrons of the Library board of directors. Mr. Van De Water is currently the president of the board of governors of The Zamorano Club, Southern California's oldest organization of bibliophiles and manuscript collectors, and his own collection includes a significant number of books on California and Western America. Mr. Van De Water has also authored several books, most notably *A Stroll by My Western Bookshelves* and *The Zamorano 80 Revisited*. The Patrons are especially pleased and honored that Mr. Van De Water will share with us some of his experiences as a book collector.

All Patrons activities are open to members and we encourage you to attend. We look forward to seeing you.

Anyone wishing to make a donation of books to the Book Sale Center may call 657-278-2182. Joy Lambert, who is in charge of Collection Development, will arrange to have a library employee meet the donor at the loading dock or arrange to have a large donation of books picked up at the donor's home.



Patrons Book Discussion Group

By

Herb Rutemiller

Patrons members are welcome to attend the Patrons Book Discussion Group which meets the fourth Thursday of each month during September-November and January-May. The meetings are held in the second floor conference room, Pollak Library South, 3 P.M. to 5 P. M.

On March 25 we discussed *Iron River* by T. Jefferson Parker. April 22 will be our session for individual book reports. On May 27 we will be discussing *Out Stealing Horses* by Per Petterson, which won several international literary awards in 2007.

Membership Report

By

Nancy Holmes

Given these times of continued budget reductions for the University, your membership in the Patrons of the Library is highly valued. The Patrons act as a support group for the Library. Support services include book purchases and periodical subscriptions, activities and lectures, operation, in cooperation with the Cal State Fullerton Emeriti, of the Book Sale Center as well as digital cataloging of the Roy V. Boswell Collection of the History of Cartography.

In 2009, we were honored to have three new life members: Lynn Coppel, Claude Coppel and Shirley Stephenson. Also, our membership has increased about 5% in the first six months of FY 2009/2010. This is a very positive change, given last year's small decline in membership.

Please visit our website that has a calendar of our events and other pertinent information. It can be accessed from the Library web site: www.library.fullerton.edu, under Information, Patrons of the Library. Also, please feel free to contact me at 714.738.5590 or via e-mail at nancylynnholmes103@hotmail.com.

BOOK SELECTION COMMITTEE

By

Gordon J. Van De Water, Chair

It is time to provide our members with an update on purchases made throughout the year - books added to the shelves of the Pollak Library because of the generosity of our members. It is especially important in this time of economic downturn to be creative in the selection process to ascertain that the titles selected will be important to the students and to those teaching the students. The Book Selection Committee comes together once a month during the academic year to review lengthy listings of desired books and after discussion and evaluation, choices are made. I have culled a number of titles from books selected so you have the opportunity to view some of our choices.

Cambridge Companion to the Musical

James Mason Hutchings of Yosemite

On the Western Trails

Strange Maps: An Atlas of Cartographic Curiosities

Methland: The Death and Life of an American Small Town

African American Urban History since World War II

History of Modern Sudan

Idea of Justice
Why the Dreyfus Affair Matters
Louisa May Alcott: The Woman behind Little Women
Gabriel Barcaa Marques: A Life
Vanishing Orange County
Wind in the Willows: An Annotated Edition
Wolf Hall: A Novel
Erotic City: Sexual Revolutions and the Making of Modern San Francisco
Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States
L A Noir: The Struggle for the Soul of America's Most Seductive City
Radio and the Jews: The Untold Story of how Radio Influenced the Image of the Jews
Tyranny of E-Mail: The Four Thousand year Journey to Your Inbox
Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern-Day Iraq
Evolution: The First Four Billion Years
Lost Goddesses: Denial of Female Power in Cambodian Society