

Angelhaunt's

Recommended Books

(In no particular order)

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Here are 46 books that I have found more than worthwhile in my quest to be a writer. I think everybody already knows about James Joyce and Plato's *Republic* and *Moby-Dick* and so on, so I've tried to restrict myself to those gems that many people may not be aware of. Some of these will of course be familiar, but not the same ones to everybody.

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Fiction is in the left column and nonfiction in the right. Have fun.

- JSR

FICTION

The Stranger - Albert Camus

This one truly shows the link between schizophrenia and Existentialism. The protagonist, Meursault, is a stranger - an alien - in his native land. If you want him to understand something, you have to explain it to him, as if he were from Mars. You know, like, you can't go around shooting people because you were arguing earlier. Of course, Meursault would understand were you to explain it to him; the funny thing about him though is that you would have to. And it would have to be *logical*. Perhaps he is a schizophrenic without a delusion, or an autistic without any an inner world to

NONFICTION

The Art of Fiction - John Gardner

In 1997 when I moved back to Colorado from Los Angeles, finally getting enough peace and leisure in my daily life to turn seriously to writing, two books I read gave me the tools to begin quality work in the written word. One was Joyce's *Ulysses*, and the other was John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. It primarily deals with breaking down the writing of a novel into a technique, which in a step-by-step way can make anyone into at least a semi-decent novelist. This book is not one that gives you that golden inspiration that will help you dazzle; rather, it is more a practical study of how to learn

engross him. But he is definitely a *stranger*.

The Naked and the Dead - Norman Mailer

A true miracle. That a 23-year-old would set out to write his first work, a massive novel that was intended to show America what World War II was like, and that the work should turn out to be a 700-page true masterpiece of gritty, realistic fiction, is amazing. Mailer's insight, wit, feeling for character, and mastery of language rank right up there with the best of the best for the realistic war novel genre.

On the Road - Jack Kerouac

I am not a big fan of Kerouac's Buddhist-phase books, but this one is when he is not trying to be some philosopher or searcher-on-the-path and just parties his way across the country. I like Jack better that way: just a good, drunk, stoned, poor-as-dirt man hungry for life.

Gravity's Rainbow - Thomas Pynchon

Rainbow was the first Pynchon book I read. I have to say I have only vague memories of what it was about; it seems like some dense, intricate cavern that I can't quite picture precisely when I try to recall it. I get images of people having pie fights while flying in biplanes and making fake Molotov cocktails while dealing drugs in postwar Germany. Maybe it's just that it's been a good seven years since I read it. Also recommended by Pynchon: *V*, *Vineland* and *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Closer - Dennis Cooper

Gay fiction with an edge. A bloody, sadistic, twisted edge. Not your minimalist conservative fare.

The Book of Disquiet - Fernando Pessoa

This was a lucky find for me. I'd never heard of Pessoa at all till someone sent me a PM at a forum and recommended him. Well, I

the skills of a novelist. If you have that golden inspiration, this one will help you eventually soar; if you don't, it will at the least give you the tools you need to write something halfway decent.

Writing Degree Zero - Roland Barthes

This one is a thin literary theory book published in the mid-20th century. Its main thesis is that the end state and final form of literature will be written works that communicate to the reader to a degree of zero. This is not devolution or something to be shunned according to Barthes; in fact as writers we should reach out to that end state of literature and finally bring it to reality. In fact I have read one (and only one) book that comes close, but not quite there, to a communication degree of zero. It was Todd Brooks's *Analekta*, in which most of the words used are not real words at all. It would in fact be hard to write with absolutely zero communication between writer and reader, but Barthes believes that this is the end point of literature we should seek. My opinion is that there will always be advances in literature, and when communication is at a degree of zero this is just one little nook that ends without anywhere to go after that. But turn a little away from this dead end to the left or right and we'll always find new avenues to advance the form of the novel that utilize communication. This is a seminal work in any case, one I found interesting.

The Eden Express - Mark Vonnegut

An excellent memoir of schizophrenia, written by the son of Kurt Vonnegut. Apparently Mark is one of those schizophrenics who have a severe episode but later recover and eventually do not need medication ever again. I've been told about a third of schizophrenics have this sort of sunny prognosis (though I am not one of them). It seemed to me that his actual symptoms were more like a schizoaffective/bipolar-mania sort of thing, but that is just my very nonprofessional opinion. Also, this one gives you a great

innovator, Pessoa is also good, damn good; the kind of innovator you don't say is good because he does things no one has done before. You say he's good because what he's done is brilliant, and that no one has done it first is beside the point.

Steppenwolf - Hermann Hesse

A quote from the beginning pages of this one, a pseudo-introduction written by a character in the novel, reads, "Every age, every culture, every custom and tradition has its own character, its own weakness and its own strength, its own beauties and ugliness; accepts certain sufferings as a matter of course, puts up patiently with certain evils. Human life is reduced to real suffering, to hell, only when two ages, two cultures and religions overlap. . . . Now there are times when a whole generation is caught in this way between two ages, two modes of life, with the consequence that it loses all power to understand itself and has no standard . . ." This was written about the generation just after the turn of the 20th century. I would say that my generation is in the same limbo. At least it feels that way to me. This sort of alienation in the face of a technological leap is the single most prominent thread in the novel, and it had a profound effect on me. Also recommended by Hesse is *Narcissus and Goldmund*.

The Crucible - Arthur Miller (RIP)

This one is a bit nostalgic for me because when I was just turning schizophrenic and caught in a months-long, powerful delusion, we were studying this in my high school English class. Suffice it to say, I thought I was a shaman and witch, and this book figured into it somehow. It's a complicated story just how. I still have the same copy of it that I'd been issued in that HS English class, and it has some sort of vague but powerful meaning to me.

To the Lighthouse - Virginia Woolf

feeling for the hippie '60s, in which it takes place (communes, draft dodging, that sort of stuff).

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire - Volumes 1 through 3 - Edward Gibbon

This is the first three volumes in a six-volume history of the Roman Empire's latter centuries, beginning around the time of the first century AD. These three volumes follow Rome through the persecution, then rise, of the Christian religion; the copious civil wars, and battles with northern barbarians and the Persian empire; the assassinations of, usurpations by, and disputes between various emperors; and finally the collapse of the Western Empire. Volumes 4 through 6 deal with the much more protracted collapse of the Eastern Empire at Constantinople (which I have on my to-read shelf, but I have not yet read the last three volumes). Written by Gibbon in the 18th century, this is widely considered the first modern history, and one of the most important histories ever written. Some of the travails of the various dozens of emperors that parade one after another through this work get somewhat homogenous and tedious; but the most interesting parts to me were those that dealt with the Christian religion, why it was so successful in spreading, how it survived and why the Catholic sect eventually took over the whole Christian community.

The Constitution of the United States of America - HarperCollins College Outline

This is not only an excellent introduction to Constitutional law, but comes in mighty handy at internet forum disputes. The Constitution itself is actually a very short document; but this HarperCollins edition is a great book on the Constitution for its detailed exposition of the way the Constitution was crafted; summaries of the major Supreme Court rulings and how they affected our law; appendixes with the Constitution of the Confederate States of America, some of the Federalist Papers, the Declaration of Independence; and tons of

without being boring, and sparse without being self-consciously minimalist, this is a lovely little book. Maybe not brilliant, maybe not even all that ambitious, but a beautiful work.

Tropic of Cancer - Henry Miller

Now somewhat passe, Henry Miller invented the life-full-of-sin-wandering-pauper-but-brilliant-novelist ideal. In the 1930s, Miller left his wife in New York, arrived in Paris penniless, something like 40 years old, having written almost nothing before then, with the absurd notion that he was going to become a great novelist at that age, just like that. And he did it. Just like that. Major forerunner to the Beat generation and latecomer to the Paris American expatriate scene, Miller is best at his bitterest, and *Tropic of Cancer* is plenty bitter.

Naked Lunch - William S. Burroughs

A nightmarish freeform descent into hell, with a sense of humor. This one removed the blinders from the novel's possibilities for me nearly as much as Joyce had done. Purely inspired, purely insane, and not too hard to read either. They made a movie on it too. They would have saved some dough by not buying the rights to the novel and simply changing the movie's name, because the movie had nothing at all to do with the book.

The Sea of Fertility Tetralogy

Consisting of, in order,

Spring Snow, *Runaway Horses*

The Temple of Dawn

and *The Decay of the Angel* - Yukio Mishima

This is what Mishima called a "cycle of novels" consisting of, in order (and they should be read in order), *Spring Snow*, *Runaway Horses*, *The Temple of Dawn*, and *The Decay of the Angel*. Realistic prose at its most profound. And Mishima believed passionately in what he wrote. So passionately that the day he turned the final

other great stuff on America.

Plutarch's Lives

(Volume I)

(Volume II)

A very long but meaningful text from Ancient Rome, composed of 50 short biographies of major Roman and Greek figures. No, there is nothing on Socrates; no biography of Plato or Aristotle. Mainly these are statesmen and military figures it deals with, most of their names unknown to me before reading it. But in reading this book you get a very definite picture of the ancient world and what life was like there, how war was fought, the character of the populace and government, and so on. Hard to retain a lot of these names, battles and places (the fact that it was written before we even had the BC/AD dating system doesn't help); but overall it gives you a panoramic view of ancient Greece and Rome.

Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years - Carl Sandburg

Anyone even remotely interested in American history should read at least one biography of Abraham Lincoln. This excellent, detailed, visceral view of our greatest President is the single volume, abridged version of poet Carl Sandburg's landmark six-volume biography of the man. Sandburg's biography is probably one of the most respected biographies of Lincoln in existence. Peripherally, it serves as a mini-history of the Civil War itself. An insightful look into Lincoln as a man and personality, and yet careful enough to not drift from the written record into speculation.

The Life & Times of Frederick Douglass - Frederick Douglass

Firsthand accounts by American ex-slaves about slavery are rare, and usually fragmentary. The fact that Frederick Douglass was born into slavery, grew up as a slave, worked the fields as a slave,

his publisher, he took over a Japanese army headquarters with his band of Japanese-style right-wing fanatics, in true Samurai fashion, then Mishima ritually committed suicide. This was in protest to Japan's loss of the militaristic, warrior ideal after World War II (which, interestingly, Mishima was of age to fight in, but did not). But all this is beside the point. The point is that it's an excellent piece of work. According to my memory I've read more Mishima books than those of any other single author (seven). I also highly recommend his first book, *Confessions of a Mask*, and his later novel *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*.

The Making of Americans - Gertrude Stein

This book is good in that it's written in a syntax that is like none other. When I read it at first I thought Stein had discovered a new way to write. Then I realized that what she'd really done is shown that there are near to *infinite* ways to write, and the blinders were gone. But this book is long, very long, painfully long, especially given the repetitive style. A must-read perhaps, but then again perhaps just a tad too ambitious for its own good. For more on Stein and other books by her, visit my [Gertrude Stein site](#).

The Sot-Weed Factor - John Barth

"Sot-weed factor" sound like a part of some arcane scientific system? It did to me too, but as Barth explains in the intro, "sot-weed" was the 17th century slang for "tobacco" and "factor" just means agent in business. The "sot-weed factor" in this book is just a tobacco dealer, or at least he eventually becomes one. Not the most significant book I've read, but a true comedy done with virtuoso technique with language, character and story. A light - if long - read about a young man determined to hold onto his virginity among 17th century pirates, deceitful American colonials, and one very vulgar tutor.

Forty Stories - Donald Barthelme

experienced the auction block and the lash, both domestic and agricultural servitude, and finally escaped when a young adult, makes this an important historical document. The fact that Douglass had educated himself since his escape, worked closely with other important abolitionist figures of the mid-19th century, and become a central figure in the Civil War era himself before writing this autobiography, makes this work invaluable to American history.

Six Memos for the Next Millennium - Italo Calvino

A thin collection of lectures by novelist Italo Calvino on literature in the 20th century, where it was then and where he thought it would go. These lectures were written in the 1980s shortly before Calvino's death, and never delivered, a parting word from the man on where literature was headed, and where it should be headed. Perhaps it is vague in its message in places, but some ideas after all can only be communicated fully if they remain vague.

The ABC of Relativity - Bertrand Russell

I guess the best advertisement I can give this book is that, quite simply, it makes the layman understand Einstein. Everybody knows Einstein was a genius; even bums and junkies know it, but very few people actually know what Einstein's theories mean. This is a very lucid exposition that simply helps you understand what Einstein said.

Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind - Shunryu Suzuki

An interesting work that has become a classic in American Zen. Buddhism is invariably transformed wherever it spreads. Unfortunately, it seems the '60s American Zen explosion just became a religious defense of dropout culture with its sex, drugs and rock & roll. But that wasn't the fault of Zen missionaries like Suzuki. Significant wisdom here.

If only for the very bizarre "At the Tolstoy Museum" story that comes complete with illustrations that make you shake your head. If it were possible to read on acid, this is what you'd read on it. Also recommended by Barthelme, *Snow White*.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Love - Raymond Carver.

Ah, 1980s minimalist realism at its finest. It makes you think Carver could make a story out of just about anything. Too bad this sort of thing pushed most of the lit journals into an ultra-conservative no-such-thing-as-good-postmodernism mode for quite a while.

Madame Bovary - Gustave Flaubert

Nothing like a good old fashioned, 19th century plot-heavy, character-driven novel. This sort of thing is a beach book for me. I am a big fan of Dickens, Hawthorne, Melville and the rest of the 19th century pre-modern crew. It's the sort of thing I read when I just want to read a nice, conventional story.

Sons and Lovers - D. H. Lawrence

A deep emotional look into love, marriage and family. When I think of this book I think that all I've read is its surface, and really its import goes much, much deeper. Beautifully crafted.

The Fountainhead - Ayn Rand

Can a philosopher expound her thesis, and convince you of its truth, in a novel that seldom if ever moves into essay exposition? After reading this one, I'd have to say yes. A story written with a novelist technique among the best of the best, but with a cognitive, philosophical thesis as its purpose. Basically Rand is a fierce capitalist, and celebrates the most gifted among us, saying that the most talented men and women in our society should not be held back by the poor and inept, but should be allowed to soar and do what they

Myths To Live By - Joseph Campbell

A nice work, part Jungian theory and part anthropology of the human race as a whole. Campbell takes a wide, encompassing glance not only at ancient myths but even things like the rituals Americans perform at Presidential funerals. He finds the links and commonalities between widely dispersed and markedly different peoples. There's an interesting section on schizophrenia, by the way, though it romanticizes the disease a little too much for my taste.

The Savage Mind - Claude Levi-Strauss

An excellent work of cultural anthropology absolutely packed with significant theses and points, practically one right after another. It is a work that attempts to find the superstructures through which primitive cultures, wherever they are found, work and function within as a reaction both to other societies and to nature. Definitely a panoramic view like Campbell's, but more plentiful with original ideas and analyses.

Cabeza de Vaca's Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America - Alvar Cabeza de Vaca

One of the rare true-life, firsthand adventure narratives in the world's history. Stranded in what is now Florida with a party of 300 in 1527, Cabeza de Vaca survived finally with just three others, rescued on the now North Mexican West Coast after walking across North America over an eight-year odyssey. Priceless in its account of the state of America before its European colonization got into full swing. This was the inspiration for my very fictionalized novella, *Cabeza de Vaca*.

On Liberty - John Stuart Mill

A lucid, understandable manifesto of the political philosophy of freedom. A work on the theory of the proper restrictions on the span of government interference with liberty, and where the lines should be drawn

do best for us and for themselves.

The Satanic Verses - Salman Rushdie

This one isn't great but isn't bad either. It is a lovely read and parts of it stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the classics. But unfortunately it has a few flaws. First of all, it is very long. This wouldn't be so bad, if it didn't occasionally close an aspect of plot and begin a brand new one that has very little to do with the first. For instance, it begins about a story where a man turns to an angel and another to a devil. Good story, good idea. But then about halfway through, each turns back to normal and the angel/devil thing is utterly forgotten. The novel concludes without ever even really using the whole angel/devil thing. Whoa, this guy turns into a devil, another turns to an angel; then they both turn back to normal and go on with their lives for a few hundred more pages. Good book, but flawed on the level of plot.

House of Leaves - Mark Z. Danielewski

Another very good but flawed book. Sucks you in like crazy - you'll be flipping pages like mad, sometimes because there is just a couple of words on each page, but mostly because it is simply so engrossing. A brilliant idea - the idea is that there is a house that is bigger on the inside than the outside. It is amazing to me that no one has thought of this before. This is one book that would have been written had Danielewski become a surgeon instead of a writer - in all eventuality *someone* would have written this book, by necessity. However, it is not without its minor flaws. It is just a tad too device-oriented. It has been touted as a radically experimental novel, which is a bit of an overstatement in my opinion. Actually, it is very plot-heavy and character driven; and about the only experimental aspects it has are typographical devices like colored words, creative typesetting and linguistic codes. It would be hard to point out *anything* experimental in this novel that is not merely

around each person's autonomy.

The Story of Philosophy - Will Durant

This book is a good, solid introduction to certain, mostly Modern philosophers. Its biggest weakness is that it is one big misnomer; hardly a third of the most important philosophers are even profiled. None of the Presocratics, nothing on the Scholastics; no Descartes, no Hume or Leibniz chapters. But however fragmentary it may be, it is worthwhile in its very successful attempt to distill the essence of the various thinkers it does profile, in a way probably impossible for any writer but one that can see the fundamental marrow in a given philosopher's work with supreme accuracy.

The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener - Martin Gardner

This one is another broad overview of modern philosophy, partitioned into chapters not on various philosophers but on various debates: free will, political philosophy, the existence of God, immortality of the soul, the problem of evil and many, many other topics have their own chapters. To be sure, Gardner makes use of various philosophers' ideas in grappling with these questions; in fact, he offers very little thought original to him, and serves as an organizer of solutions to these problems that other thinkers have already discovered (hence the "scrivener" part of the title. For those that don't know, a scrivener was someone who hand-wrote copies of documents before the days of photocopy machines.). When I bought this book I wrote Gardner a letter (addressed to the publisher), and lo and behold he replied. He even sent me a copy of his novel *The Flight of Peter Fromm*, which he'd said was just then out of print. We exchanged a couple of letters and I still have his, which I intend to save forever.

Philosophy Before Socrates - Richard D. McKirahan Jr.

the actual content. But this is not exactly Danielewski's fault; I'm sure it was the publishers that pushed the "radically experimental" angle for this one and not he himself. It is still a highly recommended book. When I first read it, it got me so enthusiastic for it that I gave copies to three different family members that year for Christmas. You might too.

Extraterrestrial Sex Fetish - Supervert

Sometimes it's fun to order self-published books just to seek out that genius gem that wasn't published by Little Brown because it was bad - it wasn't published by them because it's so damn *good*. ESF is just such a book. Basically this book is about an eternally frustrated desire - the desire to copulate with aliens from another world, thwarted because these aliens are nowhere to be found. Now, there are very serious people in this world who will look you in the eye and say how they've been abducted and raped by aliens. Perhaps some of them are liars, but I am sure at least some of them really believe it. This book serves both as a parody of the whole alien scene, an intellectual exploration of the theoretical points of aliens, Earthlings and sex, and a work of pure entertainment at the same time. Supervert is up there with the best contemporary authors there are.

All Quiet on the Western Front - Erich Maria Remarque

Another great war novel, as good as Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* above or better. This time it is about World War I, from the perspective of a German soldier. The German author really did fight in that war, was wounded five times and lived to tell the tale. This book is the tale. And boy is it a good one.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest - Ken Kesey

A true tragedy, in the literary specialist's sense of the term. Moving, chilling, and

Probably one of the most interesting and insightful analyses of the Presocratics I have ever come across. Heraclitus, for instance, is portrayed as saying a whole hell of a lot more than just "everything changes". It is probably the most accurate and at the same time exhaustive analyses of these early thinkers possible, given the fragmentary nature of the extant written record.

The Interpretation of Dreams - Sigmund Freud

An amazing book. Freud shines most where he picks apart dreams and shows the fundamental processes by which the mind puts them together. He is lacking in accuracy, in my opinion, in his overall thesis (that dreams are meant to please us into staying asleep notwithstanding external and biological distractions). I do not believe he is right in his conclusion that dreams just have the function of pleasing us into staying asleep. But in his analysis of the nature of dreams as condensed, symbolic picture-thoughts with compound meanings that draw on multiple references - this makes the book an important and landmark work in the study of dreams. It has helped me analyze my own dreams to a much more accurate degree than I could before reading it. Also recommended by Freud, the two short essays *Civilization and Its Discontents* and *The Future of an Illusion*.

The Holy Bible - Revised Standard Version

Every, and I mean every educated person should have read the Bible at least once. But which translation is best? They range from the King James translation with language that makes you think the ancient Jews lived in feudal England in the world of King Arthur, to the abominable *Living Bible* which is hardly really the Bible at all. According to my knowledge the Revised Standard Version is among the most accurate and scholarly that there is. My version is the New Revised Standard

heartwarming at the same time. Brought back some bad memories for me of a certain mental institution, and at the same time made me grateful that I did not suffer schizophrenia a generation ago instead of now.

Underworld - Don DeLillo

This is the best DeLillo book I've read yet. Engrossing and detailed, it serves as a sort of cross-section of all America over several decades. Not the most ambitious writer, DeLillo writes conventional realism well, very well. Also recommended by him, *Mao II* and *Great Jones Street*.

Soul Mountain - Gao Xingjian

Considered as one of the principal works of this Chinese Nobel laureate, *Soul Mountain* is insightful, serene, and just in the right places profound. It takes place in the Western Chinese countryside where the narrator went to escape some heat from Chinese authorities in Beijing. Apparently this much is true - the author himself traveled to that very place for the very same reason in the 1980s. A lot of it talks about the Chinese version of Bigfoot, known there as the "Wild Man". For a long time I was saying, "What's all this about Bigfoot?" But it ties in, and in a serious and incisive way.

only in that it takes the politically correct pains of adding "brothers and sisters" everywhere it just says "brothers" and "men and women" everywhere it just says "men". I would not go with that sort of alteration again were I to buy a new copy, so I'm putting the link above to the regular Revised Standard Version, which is a very respected contemporary translation.

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