

**Recommended Reading:
the National Association of Scholars, and the Limits of Consensualism**

Robert Oliphant*

Recommended reading, very much like physical exercise, has always been fair game for American cranks. Certainly anyone who has looked at the Harvard Classics will be puzzled by the presence of Calvin's "Institutes," or the Syntopticon's puzzling decision to reject the Samuel Putnam translation of Rabelais in favor of Sir Thomas Urquhart's (1611-1660) melange of personally coined new words.

By way of cautionary contrast the National Association of Scholars has elected a consensual system for producing its "Books for Common Reading," a 50-book selection of high quality fiction and nonfiction for all Americans, not just high school students. Even better, each choice is accompanied by a well-written and energetic description, presumably by the NAS member who nominated it.

To be frank, this is the best recommended-reading list I've seen in the last 20 years. I hope it stimulates other organizations to explore this genre further. So on this assumption, I propose to make a few friendly suggestions based upon my own experience, including my mistakes, in trying to get students to read good books on their own.

Selection. . . . To me recommending a book is like recommending an accountant to a friend: I'm always afraid the pairing won't work. So by way of ducking this responsibility, I simply asked my ESL students some years back to pick their reading selections from a list of Pulitzer prizewinners in the field of biography.

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Today this group comprises 280 books, each of them fairly short and well written; it can be extended to encompass biographies honored by the National Book Awards and other organizations listed on the internet. As indicated by the relative sympathy biographers display regarding their subjects (even Hitler or Franco), a biography invites fast, retentive reading more than any other prose form, including history. Why couldn't the NAS participants have used an external authority like Pulitzer as a starting point for their personal choices?

Compliance. . . . Readers and viewers deserve a chance to display the results of their experience, e.g., asking a four year old, "Whom did Alice meet FIRST on the Yellow Brick Road? — The Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow, or the Tin Woodman? Consequently, since brute force reading is a practical goal, I've had good luck by erasing the page numbers on photocopied pages, re-sequencing them in random order, and asking readers to identify their original sequence, e.g., "Which page appears first — a, b, or c?"

By way of cutting costs, I and other reader-friendly teachers now ask each student to prepare a group of 20 non-numbered pages, from which the instructor or office assistant can choose ten to serve as a re-sequencing target. Given 15 biographies read by each student, this testing system monitors almost 2 million words of sequential nonfiction reading by each student.

Even better, this approach entails relatively little effort by the instructor, whose talents are thereby freed for use in other professional areas: memorizing poetry, doing research, writing and delivering professional papers, etc. More important, assuming the NAS list would be used by teachers, why didn't the participants give some attention to tests that ruled out shortcuts like cribbing from book reviews?

Impact. . . . All students deserve to be reminded that their futures may well be far more brilliant and productive than some of their more precocious colleagues. Since high-volume reading is our quickest route to vocabulary growth, instructors can build their students' self esteem by encouraging them to measure that growth via dictionary-based questions like "Please identify the 9-letter word whose pronunciation is represented as /kwes"cheuhn/ and whose 4th definition is 'a subject of dispute or controversy' in the Random House College Dictionary."

Like other college-size dictionaries (roughly 1600 pp.), Random House College contains different kinds of entries: foreign words, abbreviations, proper names, phrases like HIGH SCHOOL, etc. But the key feature in any dictionary is its collection of roughly 60,000 headword-pronunciation-definition combinations used to form the above question (answer: QUESTION).

Given the commitment of NAS to stemming the rise of multiculturalism in America, it's surprising that the participants failed to include the American dictionary as a unifying element

in their program.

Frugality. . . . This term is currently used in India as a criterion for educational innovation, e.g., the AMCAT program (“American Course Achievement Testing). The AMCAT program, incidentally, is now beginning to compete internationally against our own Graduation Record Exam (GRE), especially in multi-lingual nations like India and China (15 mutually unintelligible languages sharing a common writing system).

Right now more than over 2 billion earthlings speak SWADE, many of them with better articulation than the average American college student, judging from our own positive reactions to recent telephone interviews with Egyptian rioters and Japanese refugees. Why shouldn’t the NAS see its reading program as a vital anti-multiculturalism step against surrendering American students against being conquered by their own language — in graduate schools and even in telephone salesmanship.

TO CONCLUDE. . . . As asserted at the outset, the National Association of Scholars has given Americans, all of them, an excellent 50-book reading list that includes a graceful commentary for each book. But its lofty concerns with western civilization and multiculturalism imply, for me, at least, the desire to give Americans something more ambitious than an off-the-wall list of personal favorites.

Ideology aside, it strikes me that the mark of Cain for liberals shows up as corruption, while conservatives are far more subject to simple indolence — Greed versus Sloth, it were. Of the two I feel indolence is far less vicious; so I hope what’s here comes across as a small sheaf of suggestions, not a snarling objection to what is fundamentally a genuine contribution to America’s intellectual health.

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