

Book Recommendations
Mr. Scott Taylor

December 2012

This is 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 of 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 borne 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 20th 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.

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 life time 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 Mr. Scott Taylor

December 2014

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 19th and early 20th centuries. For the Sisters of the Crucifixion, each day is a ceaseless routine of work, study, devotion, and prayer—none 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 19th 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 Krechetovka 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 20th century's great warriors for faith and freedom.

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 20th 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 19th 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.