

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.