



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

Volume 17
Issue 3 *Fall 2008*

Article 4

2008

Books of a Lifetime

IWU Magazine

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Recommended Citation

Magazine, IWU (2008) "Books of a Lifetime," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 17: Iss. 3, Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol17/iss3/4>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

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Books of a Lifetime

Story by Rachel Hatch



It seemed a simple request — ask members of the Illinois Wesleyan English faculty what one book they would recommend people read before they die. Perhaps it would be something moving, profound — a book which you would want to keep always nearby so the words could remain close to you.

There were questions, most prominent among them: How can you possibly ask us to pick just one book?

In the end, five professors submitted their suggestions. Their replies, as rich and fulfilling as the books they chose, offer a revealing glimpse into the diverse literary interests of the University’s English faculty.

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

(Published in 1925)

Recommended by Professor James Plath

The margins of favorite books owned by Plath and Theune are filled with notes.

masterpiece. “It’s arguably as close as we have to the Great American Novel because of its themes (class, race, gender and the American dream) and because Fitzgerald’s novel, though written in 1925, still feels highly contemporary because of its distinctive style,” says Plath. “You can read it over and over and still see new things, and there are enough symbols and allusions to keep people guessing about the novel’s meanings and nuances.

“Eighty-three years after the novel was written, money is still power,” Plath observes. “Fitzgerald’s rich and careless people, who act impetuously and leave disasters in their wake, aren’t all that different from the rich people in power today.”

The Waves by Virginia Woolf

(Published in 1931)

Recommended by Associate Professor Wes Chapman

Chapman likes a textual challenge: his research interests include literary hypertexts, men and feminism, modernism and postmodernism. He admits Woolf’s novel is not an easy read. Yet it remains, for him, “the most profound and moving meditation on personality, identity, growth and mortality that I’ve ever read.

“The book follows six friends, each with a different personality and view of life, from childhood to old age,” Chapman says. “But rather than describing what these characters say and do, as in a conventional narrative, the novel portrays the interior states of the characters — their thoughts and feelings and essential personalities — in sumptuous, poetic language. I know of nothing which captures better the beauty and poignancy of life.”

La Divina Commedia (The Divine Comedy) by Dante Alighieri

(Written 1308-1321)

Recommended by Professor Daniel Terkla

Terkla, whose scholarly passions range from Chaucer to “Beat Generation” authors, considered choosing Homer’s *The Odyssey* but instead went with Dante’s sprawling, allegorical vision of the Christian afterlife. “Even after reading Dante’s *Commedia* for some 20 years, I still think it’s the greatest work in the Western literary tradition. I spent three years in graduate school learning enough Italian to read the original, which confirmed that belief.

“Hey, if nothing else,” he adds, “it means I ‘get’ (*Daily Show* host) Jon Stewart’s allusions to it, which come pretty frequently.”

Songs and Sonnets by John Donne

(Published posthumously in 1633)

Recommended by Associate Professor Mary Ann Bushman

“So many books, so hard to choose,” lamented Bushman, who took the directive to pick a book to read “before you die” quite literally.

“I am imagining a book to read as I’m facing death, and for me, it would have to make me laugh,” says Bushman, whose research interests include Shakespeare, Renaissance poetry and drama, and feminist theory.

“I would nominate Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets* because so many of the poems address the issues of mortality and mutability. They’re also wickedly funny, so outrageous in their claims. It’s just fun to think about the ways he constructs the body and the spirit.”

Dreaming by the Book by Elaine Scarry

(Published in 1999)

Recommended by Assistant Professor Michael Theune

“Why read a book before you die? Why not listen to a symphony or see a film?” asks Theune, a question that would likely appeal to Harvard English Professor Elaine Scarry, whose published works regularly venture into non-literary areas such as physical pain and nuclear weapons. *Dreaming by the Book* is “a tremendous act of supple and moving literary theory,” says Theune, who himself writes, and writes about, poetry. Scarry offers “illuminating and enlivening answers” to the question of how poems and stories make us perceive what they describe. It reveals “some of the many ways that literature makes the mind spark into imaginative life.”

“A great read, this book also makes great readers,” says Theune. Instead of waiting to pick it up before you die, he urges, “Read it now, so that it can make even more wondrous and fruitful all the glorious reading your life allows.”