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Five Books to Read Before You Die

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – It seemed a simple request – ask Illinois Wesleyan University English professors what one book they would recommend people read before they die. Perhaps it would be something moving, profound – a book with which you would want to be buried so the words could remain close to you.

Even in their kind responses, there were questions. *What if everyone says The Bible? Do you mean every book ever written? How do we choose JUST one book?*

In the end, several brave faculty members overcame all worries and submitted their suggestions, even in the midst of preparing for their fall 2007 semester classes. Their replies, as rich and fulfilling as the books they chose, may offer insight into their personalities, perspectives and interests. Or perhaps they are simply a great introduction to the diverse and wondrous English faculty at Illinois Wesleyan.

***The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald – Professor James Plath**

“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,” said professor Jim Plath, who will teach “Writing Fiction” and “Newswriting and Reporting” this semester. “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-two years after the novel was written, money is still power. 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 – Professor Wes Chapman**

Although he admits Woolf’s novel is not an easy read, Chapman, who teaches courses such as “Web of American Poetry” and “Literary Theories” this semester, calls the book “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. Rather than describing what the 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.”

***Commedia* by Dante Alighieri – Professor Dan Terkla**

Though he had a hard time deciding between Homer's epic *Odyssey* and Dante, Terkla, who teaches a course on Chaucer this semester, said, “Even after reading Dante's *Commedia* for some twenty years, I still think it's the greatest work in the western literary tradition. I spent three years in grad school learning enough Italian to read the original, which confirmed me in that belief. Hey, if nothing else, it means I "get" Jon Stewart's allusions to it, which come pretty frequently.”

John Donne's "Songs and Sonnets" – Professor Mary Ann Bushman

“So many books, so hard to choose,” lamented Bushman, who teaches the special topics in literature class “A Woman's Place” and a survey of English poems from 1500-1700 this fall. “I am imagining a book to read as I'm facing death, and for me, it would have to make me laugh. I would nominate John 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 – Professor Michael Theune**

“Why read a book before you die? Why not listen to a symphony or see a film?” questioned Theune, instructor of “Introduction to Creative Writing” and “Writing Poetry” this fall. “*Dreaming by the Book*, a tremendous act of supple and moving literary theory, offers some illuminating and enlivening answers to such questions, revealing some of the many ways that literature makes the mind spark into imaginative life,” said Theune, who is also the advisor to the student publications *Tributaries* and *The Delta*. “A great read, this book also makes great readers. Read it now, so that it can make even more wondrous and fruitful all the glorious reading your life allows.”

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