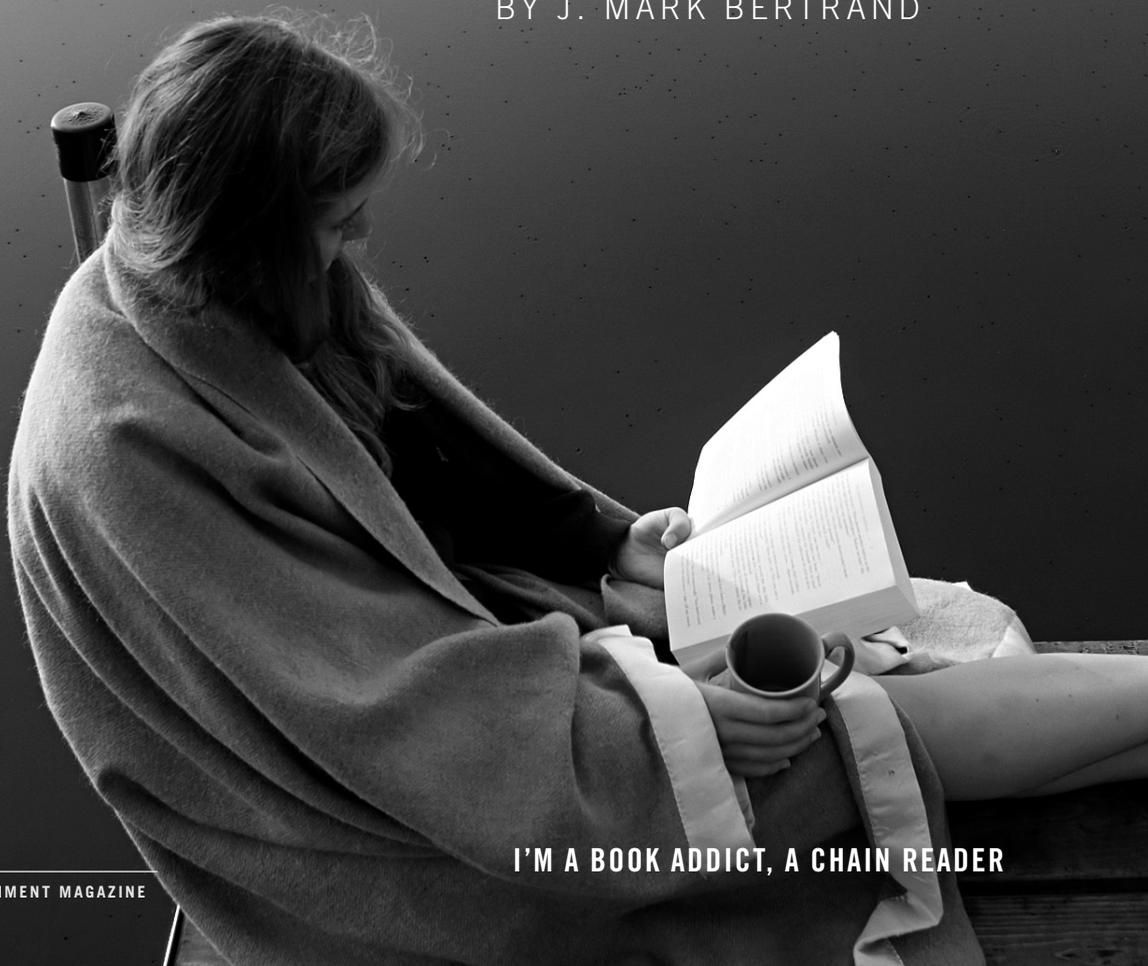


I KNOW WHAT YOU READ LAST SUMMER

HIGH-BROW OR LOW-BROW, GENRE OR LITERARY,
TIMELESS OR TRENDY—READ WHAT YOU *LIKE*

BY J. MARK BERTRAND



I'M A BOOK ADDICT, A CHAIN READER



Before the package from *Amazon UK* reached my doorstep, someone had given it a good kicking. The corners dimpled inward and a jagged gash ran like a scar down one side of the box, giving the cardboard a battered, sinister air.

I probably yelped at the sight. I don't remember. It all happened so quickly. I hoisted the package and moved it inside to the dining room table, then rummaged around for a knife to undo its taped edges. I peeled back the damaged layers, afraid of what I might find, only to breathe a sigh of relief upon discovering the contents safely wrapped in a protective sheen of plastic.

About this time, my wife came in, arms crossed, shaking her head at my anxiety.

"We have thousands of books already," she said. "The walls are lined with them. But you still had to order more."

When I lifted my new treasure out of the box, she rolled her eyes. But I paid no attention.

Instead, I was mesmerized by the orange slipcase, about a foot and a half long, and the row of tiny paperbacks contained within it, their spines arranged by color in a spectrum that ran from blue to orange. Seventy slender volumes, printed in honour of Penguin's seventy years in publishing, but to me they represented more than a milestone. This set was the answer to a baffling conundrum, a problem that had kept me up at night. This was my solution. This was my Godsend.

This was my summer reading.

A HEALTHY ADDICTION

For me, summer reading is complicated, because I spend the months of June and July on the road. Every traveller knows the importance of packing light, but books tend to be on the heavy side. So leave them at home, you say. Not an option. Erasmus bought essentials like

**I PILE UP MORE BOOKS THAN
I CAN REASONABLY CARRY**



food and clothing with the change left over from acquiring new books, which makes perfect sense to me. I'm a book addict, a chain reader who finishes one novel and immediately starts the next. Sometimes I read two, three or even

four books at a time. I can't go to sleep at night without reading.

Nine months out of the year, this isn't a problem. I'm surrounded by unread books. I've lined the walls with them, with stashes tucked away in closets and basements. So far, things haven't reached the point where I'm emptying the coffee jar and hiding a few paperbacks inside, but to be honest, I welcome that day.

Only it makes travelling light a bit of a challenge. My collection of Penguin 70s was just one of the many clever workarounds I'd explored over the years. The inspiration came from a 19th-century travelling library I'd seen at an antiquarian bookseller—one of those crowded, dusty warrens smelling of cigarette smoke and cat pee. Lined in aged silk, the lid opened to reveal a column of shelves packed with miniature vellum-bound books divided by topic: poetry, history, plays of Shakespeare. Naturally, the real thing was too expensive and impractical for me to use, but my slip-covered Penguins were meant to do a similar job. The set included short stories, biography, history, assorted nonfiction, pretty much anything I might have the urge to read while on the road. Sure, it was a little big, a little heavy, but the benefits far outweighed these considerations.

THE SUMMER OF THE TRAVELLING LIBRARY

Soon enough, I discovered that the beating my package received had not left the Penguins as unscathed as I thought. Lateral pressure on the slipcase had all but shorn one of the hinges off, so that the first time I lifted it, all the paperbacks spilled out the side. Generous application of translucent tape soon remedied the flaw, and I took my bandaged bookcase out for the summer.

In a way, the damage was poetic. The books had fared no worse at the post office than readers do in the world. We got knocked around, slighted.

We're the proverbial ninety-pound weakling having sand kicked in his face at the beach. Since these books were summer reading, and I had no intention of going near the beach, it seems that fate had conspired to kick some sand in my face anyway. So be it.

The Summer of the Travelling Library didn't turn out as well as I'd hoped. I ended up lugging those slip-cased books around for a couple of weeks, then abandoning them in my trunk as I acquired more and more new books during my travels. I think of this as Living Off the Land, scouting out the bookstores in each new town for fuel and fodder. A reader can live like this indefinitely, assuming he has a place to keep the books. By the end of the Summer of the Travelling Library, I'd acquired an additional shelf-full of new titles—in fact, to this day they're still grouped together in a bookcase, untouched since then.

OTHER THEORIES

My first summer on the road, I gave Living Off the Land a go. I took one book with me—Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*—and foraged for the rest. I soon discovered the flaw in this approach: it left me at the mercy of whatever books I could find. One memory in particular stands out, a dog-eared anthology of Descartes that transferred a ghastly, persistent stink to anything it touched.

To escape such catastrophes, I started planning ahead. First came the Summer of Relevant Texts, in which I packed a group of nonfiction titles essential to my teaching—a heady mix of theology and culture studies—the idea being to read for pleasure books I needed to carry with me anyway. Unfortunately, Relevant Texts kept me busy for a weekend at most. After finishing Jeremy Begbie's excellent *Voicing Creation's Praise*, I rewarded myself with a trip to the bookstore and started living off the land again. I dipped into the Relevant Texts from time to time, but that didn't stop me from piling up more books than I could reasonably carry.

Last year's approach met with much greater success. This was the Summer of the Big Read. The idea was simple: find a massive, great book I'd never read before, and devote the whole summer to it. After entertaining a host of possibilities—there are plenty of great books I've never read—I whittled the list down to two, and then posted them to my blog to let readers decide. They chose *Moby Dick* over *The Brothers Karamazov*, and it just so happened I had a very handy little hardback edition of Melville. That book was my companion throughout the summer of 2006. I read it as a forest fire encircled me in Flagstaff, Arizona, and polished off a few chapters while overlooking the ocean in San Diego, finally finishing that greatest of all American novels at around midnight in a Seattle dorm room—only to discover that my edition didn't include the epilogue, even though the critical introduction made reference to it!

I had to hunt down another copy to actually finish, and then it was open season on books. With a week left on the road, I walked into Wessel and Lieberman near Pioneer Square and found nine mid-century English translations of novels by François Mauriac, a set that had once belonged to the poet Denise Levertov. How could I pass that up? So the Summer of the Big Read ended with another shelf-full of books in tow, but it was nice while it lasted.

NOT AN OXYMORON

If you've read this far, then my obsession must not seem as crazy to you as it would to most. For the vast majority, the words summer and reading do not go together. If anything, summer signifies freedom from books. No one is forcing you to read. There are no petty assignments, no books that, if they were any good, would have been made into films already.

The form of literacy we associate with summer is "beach reading," which seeks to provide through limited vocabulary and familiar characters and plots a sort of simulated movie for times when



the ANTIQUARIAN

In the first meeting of my first creative writing workshop in graduate school, the professor decided to go around the table and ask us what we'd read over the summer. As I listened to the answers, my palms began to sweat. How had I spent my summer? Reading Alexandre Dumas, the guy who wrote *The Three Musketeers*.



the CONVERSATIONALIST

For some people though, being able to talk about the book is the whole point. A few years ago, some friends of mine started a book club and, in need of a reading regimen, settled on the Modern Library Top 100 list. We met every few weeks, working backward from number 100—Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons*, which I read in July of 2003. This summer

SUMMER READING

Famous as Dumas is, most of his books are out of print. That summer, I went in search of them. I found an almost complete set of Dumas books, a numbered edition from the 1930s plagued by leather-rot (and therefore cheap). I devoured *La Dame de Monsoreau* and *The Forty-Five*, and fell in love with *Le Chevalier D'Harmental*. These were all popular adventure novels, sentimental trash in the eyes of my professors, hallowed only by the passage of time. But I was proud to have discovered them, to have read them when no one else even suspected their existence.

The Antiquarian smokes out summer reading in old bookstores and obscure Internet sites, taking special delight in losing himself in a world no one else can even dream about. If you aren't allergic to dust and you don't mind the idea of reading a book you'll never really be able to talk to anyone else about, then the way of the Antiquarian is for you.

will mark the group's fourth year in existence, and we have just reached the half-way point. Our plan is to visit Dublin for the discussion of book number-one, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, but we have a long way to go before then. Thanks to this group, I've read books I never would have chosen on my own, and I've picked up a few favourites along the way, including two novels by V. S. Naipaul: *A Bend in the River* and *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Conversationalists who don't have book clubs and aren't interested in starting them can always turn to the Books Everyone's Reading. If your tastes are high-brow, you can find them reviewed in the front of the *New York Times Book Review*. If your tastes run to the popular, you can find the bestseller lists in the back.



3.

the ESCAPE ARTIST

Reading offers a great escape, an imaginative portal into a life more interesting than your own. So-called ‘escapist’ fiction gets a bad rap, but there’s a sense in which every novel is an escape. The trick is to find books that enlighten while they entertain—or at the very least, books too cool for your snobby friends to diss. Romance readers have been digging into Jane Austen for ages, because no one



4.

the EXPLORER

Ilike to find a new author and read everything I can. If the author is prolific or out of print, it can be a daunting task. But there are some writers who can be mastered during the course of a summer and will reward the effort well. In the spirit of summer reading, I’ll mention a few whose work is collected in accessible anthologies.

Flannery O’Connor was one of those giants I’d always meant to read, but my exposure to her was limited to the usual anthology selections. With my penchant for Library of America books,

though, it was only a matter of time before I picked up their fat volume of O’Connor’s collected works. To people who haven’t read her, or to those who (like me) had only read “A Good Man is Hard to Find” or “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” I heartily recommend the experience.

Another author worth exploring over the course of a summer is Graham Greene. My favorite novel is Greene’s *The Heart of the Matter*—which is ironic, since it wasn’t a favourite of his. One summer while living off the land, I found an old volume of his essays that was quite exciting, and Penguin recently released a handy paperback of his Complete Short Stories.

Speaking of essays, there is a massive single-volume collection of George Orwell’s nonfiction that is a model of lucid, engaging prose. For readers interested in opaque, engaging prose, there is a splendid set of paperbacks featuring the *Collected Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges*, as well as a selection of his nonfiction and poetry.

—J. Mark Bertrand

PERSONAS . . .

looks down on you for toting around a copy of *Persuasion*. My guilty pleasure has always been crime fiction (and to be honest, I don’t feel in the least bit guilty).

The great pulp novels of the thirties and forties and fifties are practically canonical now. Some of the grittiest books on my shelf are published by Library of America, which bestows a special dignity on the pastime. A whole section of my personal library is devoted to Library of America volumes, including classics like James Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (number 98 on the Modern Library list), Kenneth Fearing’s *The Big Clock*, and Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*.

By the way, Library of America has also done horror fans a great service recently by publishing a collection of H. P. Lovecraft’s stories, which finally allowed me to retire the sad, little lurid paperbacks I’ve kept since childhood, with their bleached skulls and glowing red eyes.

it isn't convenient to watch a real one. Beach books are thick and brightly colored, and it doesn't matter if they get wet. (Not because the pages are impervious to moisture, but because the consumer is impervious to caring).

How do you know if you're a beach reader? For one thing, you don't read essays about summer reading. You get all the information you need

“**IF YOU'RE A BEACH READER, YOU DON'T READ ESSAYS ABOUT SUMMER READING**”

from lists of bullet-points in the glossy magazines. Not that recommendations are needed: beach books have a certain look in common, and operate

on the Garanimals principle. You can find more of what you like by matching the covers. Another giveaway: if you're a beach reader, then you know deep down that everyone carrying around some other kind of book is just a poseur. Nobody reads the kind of books they assign in school unless they're trying to impress people.

THE SUMMER OF ESSAYS

For 2007, I'm planning the Summer of Essays. I want to finish one book I've been reading off and on for a while, and delve into another I just picked up. When Marilynne Robinson's excellent novel *Gilead* was reviewed by the *Times Literary Supplement*, the reviewer mentioned an earlier collection of essays called *The Death of Adam*, describing it as "a polemical defense of Calvinism." That was enough to pique my curiosity. Unfortunately, the book was out of print and hardback editions were listed online at anywhere from \$100 to \$200. Eventually, I managed to find one for just \$50 and, of course, that turned out to be the week before the paperback reprint arrived.

Robinson's writing is superb, but it seems my good intentions are always thwarted when it comes to finishing the book. I have the same

problem with her that I have with Proust. After a few pages, I feel like I've missed so much good stuff that it's time to go back and start again. Based on the first half of *The Death of Adam*, I'm enraptured. This summer I'll see it through to the end.

The second book on my list is *Cultural Amnesia*, a weighty new collection by Clive James. Slate.com ran an excerpt from a piece about the nature of good and bad writing, and it was so sensible, so quotable, that I had to have the book. When it arrived on my doorstep, having eluded the pointy-toed jack boots of the postal bullies, I knew this was a book to tote cross-country, one to read over the course of a long, hot summer.

As much as I agonize over summer reading, you can't get it wrong. High-brow or low-brow, genre or literary, timeless or trendy, you can read what you like. And if, come September, you find yourself in a classroom where some brooding professor wants to know what you read over the past few months, you can always mention a certain article that took the whole thing too seriously and put you off the project once and for all. I won't be there to give you a good kicking. ☐



J. MARK BERTRAND spends his summers teaching at Worldview Academy, in camps across the United States. He airs his views at his blog (jmarkbertrand.com).