

There Is This Book



Keith Peterson

A transplant a lifetime ago from Wisconsin, Keith Peterson first landed in Minnesota at St. Olaf College, Northfield circa 1980, which may account for some of his preferences in music and theatre, which, as to the latter, means “musicals.” As the theatre world almost shut down entirely from Broadway to Brainerd and beyond, theatres everywhere immediately re-invented the theatre arts. At Brainerd Community Theatre, Central Lakes College, among other virtual presentations in the pandemic year of 2020, BCT produced two outdoor musical offerings, right down the pike for this longtime baseball coach at Brainerd High School, who caught one of them, “Sh-Boom! Life Could Be a Dream.”

And this says much about Keith Peterson: Brainerd High School assistant coach for baseball and boys basketball into four decades, but also a Brainerd High School (and, earlier, a 7th grade teacher, too) teacher of American History (including several Advanced Placement history courses) over those same years, starting in Brainerd when George H. W. Bush was first elected president (1988), and only now (2020) ending, and the insight to recognize and enjoy, albeit with performers in face shields, three art forms: Musicals, live theatre and pop music “oldies.”

Readers of the following Q and A with Mr. Peterson will be the judge of whether he is “well read” or not, in part because he admits that “novels” are not his thing. But look closely at the array of titles, and the depth of them, that Mr. Peterson identifies as being in his wheelhouse, and then decide how well read he is.

And when you do, take special note of his admission that he loves Dave Barry, especially *Dave Barry Slept Here*. And why he is so taken by this book: “Sheer

entertainment” and, true to form, the art of satire applied to the most serious of subjects, especially for Keith Peterson, that is, American history.

That said, if there is one book he would grab on his way into a 14 day pandemic induced quarantine, then don’t be surprised when you read on to find out what the book is and why this American History Advanced Placement Teacher Theatre Arts Supporter Oldies Music Fan Brother in Law to a Rhodes Scholar and Ordained Methodist Minister Connoisseur of American History Satire wants that book with him.

Just to make this recent retiree even more mystifying, and some might say complex, look who he is inviting over to dinner soon.

[This interview was edited for clarity and was completed prior to the November 2020 national elections].

Q. What is the last great book you read?

This spring, I finally read *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations*, by New York Times columnist and St. Louis Park, Minnesota native Thomas L. Friedman. As more and more information becomes available to all of us at ever-increasing speeds (because of the smartphone, the cloud, and so forth), it is more important than ever that we pause occasionally to stop and think as to how we might improve the human condition with those capabilities. Collaboration and “internationalism” appear to be here to stay. Hopefully, we as a nation will not regress against the flow.

Q. What is your favorite book no one has heard of?

I am curious to know how many people have read *Watergate in American Memory*, by Michael Schudson, a Wisconsin native (Milwaukee) who holds a Ph.D. from Harvard, and now is a *professor emeritus* of Communication and Sociology at the University of California, San Diego. I am old enough to have been in “middle school” (a new concept in the early 1970s) when most of the Watergate story unfolded in what was then called “current events.” Since I love to read and discuss American history, I would be interested in younger readers’ takes on the various versions of the Watergate story, or even what those readers know about “Watergate.” **I used to think** that “Watergate” was the most outstanding example

of government corruption or, rather abuse of power and privilege, in our nation's history.

Q. Do you consider any books to be “guilty pleasures” and if so, or if not, then why or why not?

I laugh out loud every time I pick up *Dave Barry Slept Here*. It is the funniest satire of the whole of American history that I've read. I typically don't read for sheer entertainment, but this one is my exception. The more history you know, the harder you will bust out laughing reading *Dave Barry Slept Here*. It's like knowing all the inside jokes on everything that has ever happened in our country - well, most of the important stuff, at least.

Q. What is your favorite book to recommend to others, and why?

Since I read mostly history and biographies, and I know that's not what most avid readers dive into, I would suggest *The Wright Brothers*, by David McCullough. It's a classic story of what risk-taking and persistence can bring to life, but it won't take forever to wade through, and it's nonfiction! McCullough is an expert historian, but his writing is truly accessible to both history nut and novice. I would have watched the movie, but there isn't one.

Q. Do you consider any books that are considered to be “great books” to be overrated, and if so, then why?

Since I don't consider myself an avid reader, and especially since I read so little fiction, far be it from me to call any author's work “overrated.” BUT, I do wonder what might have been accomplished for the good of humanity if every person-hour spent reading *Harry Potter* had instead been spent contemplating real resource or relationship problems?

Q. What subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

I wish more authors would write about what is happening to us as people as we spend more and more of our waking hours staring at our illuminated screens of various shapes and sizes. I felt so enlightened by Thomas Friedman's work. Are we

making progress as a species, or finding different and more exciting and dangerous means of entertaining ourselves?

Q. What moves you most in a work of literature?

Most moving for me are shortfalls that become strengths, or obstacles that are overcome. Especially so if the story is true, or “based on true events” (baseball reference: Pete Gray and Jim Abbott come to mind).

Q. Which genres do you especially enjoy reading, and which do you avoid?

I read mostly biographies and history, along with commentaries on current events and trends. Generally, I read to be informed, rather than to be entertained, and so I avoid fantasy and science fiction.

Q. What book might people be surprised to find on your bookshelves?

Many people would be surprised to see *Younger Next Year*, by Crowley & Lodge, on my bookshelf. I consider it to be a self-help book in terms of maintaining good health and appropriate weight while aging gracefully. Maintaining control of my weight has been an issue for about two decades now, and it will continue to be a focus area during my impending retirement. I’ve been through the book twice, so I know what I can do, but I’m hoping now to have the time and motivation to follow through!

Q. Who is your favorite fictional hero or heroine, and who is your favorite antihero or villain?

Although I have never read any Erle Stanley Gardner, my favorite fictional hero is Perry Mason. Through the magic of the DVR, I’m pretty sure I’ve watched all of the 280-plus episodes that aired from 1957-1966; most of them twice. For favorite antihero, I have to choose Gilligan. How can a guy with such a good heart ruin things so consistently?

Q. Do you consider any books, which are not generally thought of as being among the great books, to be candidates for such a list, and why?

I have to pass on this one, because I am not a truly accomplished reader of “the great books.”

Q. What books are stacked by your favorite place to read, waiting for you?

Only two titles are in the queue right now: Theodore White’s *The Making of the President 1960*, which was a gift from a class of AP History students, and *White Fragility*, by Robin DiAngelo.

Q. What book do you intend to read – and finish – next?

Up next is *The Making of the President 1960*. I expect to finish it before the November election. My wish is that the remaining days of the 2020 campaign will be as civil as the campaign was in 1960, before I was around. We do have the right to wish for that.

Q. Just guessing, how many books are in your personal library?

My wife and I have at least 200 titles in our “library.” Of those, I have mastered only about 25, while Jane has read maybe 150 of those, plus countless e-books on her Kindle.

Q. If you could invite one author, living or deceased, to dine with you, then who and why?

I’d love to have a dinner conversation with noted American historian David McCullough. I would like to ask him about the people he has interviewed for his work over the years. Plus, as a narrator for many documentaries, he has that distinctive voice that I could listen to all evening. In the event that he was unavailable or had to cancel, I would invite either Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud, and during appetizers, I would start with “What did you *really* intend to say?”

Q. Do you read one book at a time, or more, and whichever way you read, why do you do so “that way”?

One book at a time for me. Since I’m mainly reading for information or persuasion (rather than fiction and entertainment), if I have more than one volume in progress, then I will get confused and not finish.

Q. If you know there is a movie and there is a book, which do you “consume” first, and why?

I would almost always choose the movie first, in the event the story is fictional, because the multi-sensory version would likely be more entertaining for me. If the movie/book is history, I would try the book first because I would have more faith in its authenticity.

Q. What do you think about the skills and abilities of those who reach the level of authors who are published by established publishers?

I view established authors as intelligent and very literate. Part of the reason I have never taught at a university is that I did not want the pressure of having to research and publish. My brother-in-law, John Fanestil (a Rhodes Scholar and ordained Methodist minister), has been published twice. He might say that his most important attribute as an author is patience, so I will take him at his word.

Q. If you are about to be quarantined for two weeks, and can only bring one book with you, then which book will you bring, and why?

At the risk of sounding cliched, heading into quarantine I would grab the Bible. There are so many parts that I have not read that it could keep me busy for the entire two weeks. I started a “read the Bible in a year” guide once, but I got sidetracked about two months into the program when our basketball season started. Major regret leading to bucket (no pun intended) list item.

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