

# There Is This Book



## Dr. Michael O'Leary

As you become familiar with Dr. O'Leary (BHS 1969, member, Brainerd Public Schools Distinguished Achievement Hall of Fame) by reading his answers to interview questions asked of him below, it will not surprise you that life has taken him far from his childhood home on Brainerd's Northside.

He and his spouse, Pakawan, currently live in Hanoi, Vietnam, where Dr. O'Leary is a senior infectious diseases advisor, USAID (US Agency for International Development) Vietnam. He also is the executive director of a small health non-profit in The Gambia (Africa) providing clean water supply, safer sanitation and primary health care in places that have essentially none, and is an adjunct faculty member in public health at Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand.

Dr. O'Leary obtained a BA in anthropology and a MD from the University of Minnesota, followed by a Masters in Public Health (International Health) from the University of Hawaii, where he also became board certified in internal medicine and served a residency in preventative medicine. Dr. O'Leary then embarked on a life of public service within the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the US Public Health Service and USAID, as well as the World Health Organization (WHO), a United Nations organization, with experience in clinical medicine, public health and infectious disease epidemiology, focusing on surveillance and outbreak response and public health programming, primarily stationed in the western Pacific and Asia.

Dr. O'Leary spent eight years at the senior management level (which is to say "head of office") of the WHO in China and Cambodia, and early in his career, served in various epidemic intelligence roles in the Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Guam. His current senior infectious diseases advisor, USAID

Vietnam position is in the USAID Global Health Security Program. The focus of his work there is forms of influenza and zoonotic (non-human animal to human animal “jump” disease transmission). His past work has been associated with polio, AIDS, tuberculosis, respiratory infections, HIV, STDs, SARS, cholera, malaria and other infectious diseases.

Dr. O’Leary, whose father was a Brainerd and Nisswa physician and who, in WWII, was a lead navigator in USAF bombing missions on D-Day, has served on numerous international committees and working groups regarding a wide variety of infectious diseases, including pandemic threats, mirroring his expertise in his many public health assignments over the past 40 years, has taught numerous courses in public health, published approximately 50 scientific papers on technical issues, and made more than 100 presentations at scientific conferences and national and international meetings. Dr. O’Leary received professional awards from the US Public Health Service, including that agency’s Outstanding Service Medal.

Retired from the US Public Health Service, it is little known, but true that Dr. O’Leary is also, officially, Captain (ret) Michael O’Leary. That said, Dr. John O’Leary, Captain O’Leary’s father and who is still alive, was General O’Leary prior to his retirement from military service to his country. Thus, Captain O’Leary remains obligated, to this day, to salute his father, officially and as his father.

It is even lesser known, but also true, that early in his career, Captain O’Leary encountered another prominent flyer: Senator John McCain, and his wife, Cindy. Captain O’Leary’s wife, Pakawan, was the Micronesia liaison for Cindy McCain, who along with Senator McCain brought Arizona doctors and medical equipment to Chuuk, part of Micronesia (and where Mike and Pakawan O’Leary first met). The McCains and O’Learys became friends and to this day Dr. O’Leary refers to the late Senator McCain as a “man of principle, honesty and integrity.”

Today, Captain (ret) Dr. Michael O’Leary, from Brainerd, Minnesota, and Pakawan O’Leary, from Vietnam, live two blocks from the former Hoa Lo Prison, known then as the “Hanoi Hilton,” where Navy Captain (ret) Senator John McCain was imprisoned during the war called the “Vietnam War” in America and the “American War” in Vietnam. The Hanoi Hilton is now a museum; in the museum are pictures of John McCain, who famously refused repatriation because to do so would be to leave military brothers behind, still in prison.

Look at the picture of Captain (ret) O’Leary accompanying his “There Is This Book” appearance; consider the appearance of Captain (ret) Senator McCain, now deceased, and contemplate the similarities of appearance and the serendipitous nature of life.

**Q. What is the last great book you read?**

*The Plague*, Albert Camus. This was a recent “re-read,” probably 45+ years since I first read it, and it seems especially appropriate to our current “COVID-19” times. Camus says, early in the book, that “a pestilence is [like a] bad dream that will pass away. But it doesn’t always pass away ... it is men who pass away ... because they haven’t taken their precautions.” This is a novel, not a book about “plague,” and instead is a deep meditation on human resilience and coming together in times of adversity.

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

Until age 10 or 11, I read every *Hardy Boys* (Franklin W. Dixon) book I could. This series was about the crime-solving adventures of teenage brothers Frank and Joe Hardy. *Hardy Boys* books were my most requested present for both my birthday and for Christmas. I share this only because at that age they sparked my interest in reading. So my “favorite book no one has heard of” is any book that stimulates a kid to read. But the adult me says “*1421: The Year China Discovered America*, by Gavin Menzies.” This book is a reminder that it is a big and amazing world, and there is so much we don’t know about it. Zheng He, a eunuch, led these expeditions pretty much around the world. The 1492 voyage of Columbus, as impactful as it was, was a short rafting trip by comparison.

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

True crime. I don’t know why. Maybe some defect in my personality. Probably started with *In Cold Blood* (Truman Capote). More recently *The Devil in the White City* (Erik Larson) and *The Last Stone* (Mark Bowden). Let me know if I need counselling.

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

Right now, David Quammen's *Spillover* (2013) is an excellent, informative and particularly timely read. *The Song of the Dodo* (1997), same author, also is excellent. These books speak to our shared environment, especially the biologic one, under threat. *Spillover* takes the reader, in highly readable form, through the dynamics and true stories of how viruses mutate and spill over from wildlife to humans, giving rise to new and dangerous diseases. Anyone who thinks COVID-19 is "an unforeseen problem" which "came out of nowhere" clearly is not familiar with this book and many others with the same message. *The Song of the Dodo* is from a different angle – loss of biodiversity and extinction. Both are illuminating.

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

*Moby Dick* (Herman Melville). I am kind of like Woody Allen in one of his movies where his recurring life failure was trying unsuccessfully to get through *Moby Dick*. It just goes on and on. I think a lot of writing of 150+ years ago used 500 words where modern authors use 100. Maybe I am sometimes too impatient to get on with the story. OK, *Moby Dick* is certainly a great primer on Pacific whaling in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, I suppose, allegorical on human ambition or something, but I couldn't get through it even when I was reading it in Samoa, and if I couldn't do it there, I probably couldn't do it anywhere.

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

There are plenty of books on the market to keep me busy. Sometimes I look for humor, to lighten things up and make me smile, and I don't find it as easily as I want to, although maybe I need to look harder (or smile more). But more David Sedaris, Bill Bryson and Dave Barry would be fine with me.

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

Learning new things. That is why I am pretty indiscriminate in my reading. I don't care if it is something new about history, or religion, or science, or why people, including me, often act like idiots. Non-fiction might be best for much of this, but

fiction, able to plumb the depths of human idiosyncrasies without restraint, works well for exploration of the human “idiot factor.”

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

This has, naturally, changed over time. Beyond my *Hardy Boys* years, I once most enjoyed travel books (Paul Theroux, a good example), but now I might say it is science for the non-specialist: *Sapiens* (Yuval Noah Harari), *Guns, Germs and Steel* (Jared Diamond), *A Brief History of Time* (Steven Hawking), and the like. Also, political history, and of course true crime (the latter two often overlap). I don't avoid much of anything although, most poetry, wonderful as I know it is, has never fully captured me.

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

*The Bible*. I am not a religious person, but I really enjoy reading about religion, so I cover a spectrum, pro and con, from the *Bible* to *A History of God* (Karen Armstrong) to *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Reza Aslan), which is especially interesting to me, to *The God Delusion* (Richard Dawkins). Some people are very driven by scientific evidence (me), some by religious faith, and some by both - they are not mutually exclusive. But I understand one much better than the other, so I often read about my weakness (religion).

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

I had trouble with this one, so I have deleted the words “fictional” and “villain” from the question. There are many real-life heroes/heroines in non-fiction, but I like adventurers, so for my hero I will go with Sir Ernest Shackleton (e.g., *Endurance*, by Alfred Lansing). *Endurance* is an incredible true adventure, documenting incredible leadership. Not far behind is Meriwether Lewis, of Lewis and Clark, with Sacagawea (*Undaunted Courage*, by Stephen Ambrose). “Incredible” feats today are more likely to be identified as those of athletes or masters of the digital and technical world. But Shackleton and Lewis overcame physical odds we can barely imagine and held together teams of people, through the greatest of adversities, by sheer will and “leadership.” Since their stories are by great writers, too, the adventurers and their adventures are vivid.

**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?**

Only considering this from my personal perspective, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, by Alan Paton. I lived in Swaziland (now Eswatini) when I was 16, a small multi-racial (but very colonial at the time) country nearly surrounded by (at the time) apartheid South Africa. Paton: "I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find that we are turned to hating." This book was significant in forming my political consciousness. Having been transported abroad, for a year as a foreign student, from northern Minnesota to southern Africa, I learned that the world, especially in a 1968-long-before-internet, is a very big place, and that people everywhere are both different (in some cultural ways), and very much the same – a shared humanity. I had the great good fortune to experience that world while still young and impressionable, before my opinions sclerosed.

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

At this moment, next to my bed (I almost always read for at least 10 minutes before shutting off the lights) are: *Born a Crime* (growing up mixed race in South Africa, by Trevor Noah); *Known and Strange Things* (a collection of essays by Teju Cole); and *The Odyssey* (by Homer or somebody). All of them underway. About *The Odyssey*: in recent years I have considered that there were "great books," classics that I failed to read when young, prompting me to start *The Iliad*, again, but I only made it half-way: It was a slog – about a thousand different characters (two Ajaxes!) and demi-gods, who did nothing but fight, and their armor was always "clattering to the ground" after a spear pierced their left eye, or some such graphic description. *The Odyssey*, though, is a decent story.

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

*The Stand*, by Stephen King. At 1,150 pages, I still have a few hundred to go. I had almost never read Stephen King but I figured there was a reason he had so many millions of readers, besides the fact that he has written around 372 books (give or take a few hundred). He is, of course, very readable. *The Stand* happens to be about a post-apocalyptic USA after it is devastated by a respiratory virus. Hmmm.

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

400 - 500.

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

Mark Twain. What a genius. Keen observer of human nature, humorous and an excellent writer, besides. Maybe brain osmosis would work at the dinner table. I struggled a bit with Melville's *Moby Dick*, but *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, around the same era, is a joy to read, as would be the author to converse with. Of course, William Shakespeare, perhaps the first "modern" storyteller to share so much of what we understand about human nature, in the process becoming the source of so many cultural touchstones. Hundreds of years ahead of his time. Plus, the controversy over authorship: I would ask him if he really did write all those plays.

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

I'm one of those people who has a few different books going at any one time. I like variety and am always anxious to get on to a book that is waiting to be read. Or maybe I'm easily bored. One or the other. I do finish most of them, but sometimes I stop.

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

Book, almost always. Although I really like going to the movies, and do so often, it is the very rare movie that outshines the book. I was 11 years old when "*To Kill a Mockingbird*" was released as a movie (only in black and white!). My dad told me that if I read the book (Harper Lee) first, then he would take me to the movie – a rare thing for a young boy whose dad seemed to work constantly. So, I did, and he did. The movie is great. The book is better. The memory is the best of all.

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

They have a creativity that I lack. I consider myself perfectly adequate at the mechanical parts of writing (grammar, sentence structure, editing, spelling), but great authors have some creative inspiration that drives them, plus an ability to carry forward a story with compelling characters, and hook the reader into seeing what happens next. I could maybe be an editor, but not likely a successful writer.

**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?**

Two weeks of quarantine! Who ever heard of such a thing? If it's only one book, then it would have to be a long one. I can read a book twice, but don't do it often, and 4 or 5 times – no. Maybe something I might not otherwise wrap my head around, like *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Edward Gibbon), or an historical multi-volume set by Robert Caro (with Caro, maybe one book would do it, actually). Two weeks of quarantine might get me going. Or a *Hardy Boys* book: I can read any of them 14 times.

Michael O'Leary

October 3, 2020