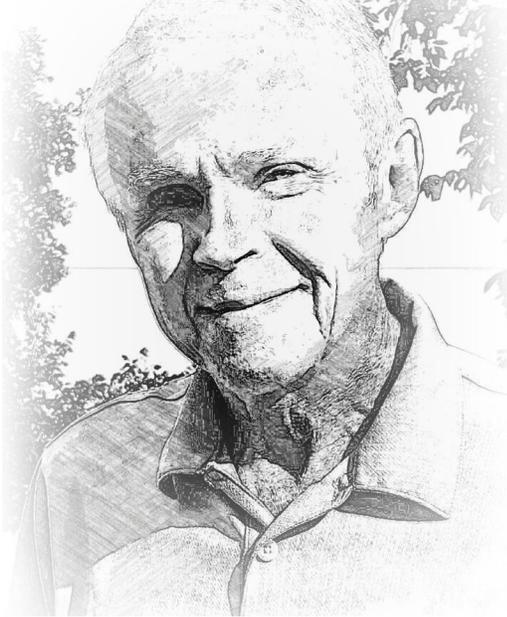


There Is This Book



Dr. Darrel Robertson

After BHS graduation in 1968, Dr. Robertson became, by his own admission, a career student: A bachelor of science in English from Moorhead State, a Master of Divinity, with an emphasis on American Church History from Bethel Theological Seminary and a doctorate of philosophy in American History from the University of Iowa.

Having “aged out” of degree programs, he decided to follow both of his loves in Ashland, Wisconsin, where he served 31 years as pastor of the Presbyterian-Congregational Church in Ashland and as an adjunct professor of history at the private four year liberal arts Northland College, a notable graduate of which is the conservationist, award winning author and environmental advocate Sigurd Olson.

With his wife, Pat (formerly Pat Dechaine, BHS Class of 1969), he now enjoys retirement on the north shore of Mille Lacs Lake, fishing, golfing, serving in his church and reading “lots of books.”

Recently, Pat and Dr. Robertson saw *Hamilton*, which he found to be an “unique and thrilling” experience to see the transformation of a book about a “fascinating and brilliant man (Hamilton) whose contributions to the early formation of our country are underappreciated into a Broadway play of the first order. He also likes that his two granddaughters, ages 6 and 9, know all the *Hamilton* lyrics by heart.

Q. What is the last great book you read?

Basketball, by three authors, one of whom, Rafe Bartholomew, is a good friend of my son. This is not “great literature,” but it is a “great book” if one loves basketball. *Basketball* is a compilation of interviews with great basketball players, coaches and sportswriters from the beginnings of the game to its current worldwide popularity.

The enduring and troubling testimony of the book is the chronic presence of racism. You can't read this book and dismiss the problem of racism in America's recent past and present. And the basketball stories are truly legendary, one bringing tears to my eyes.

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

Walter Brueggemann's *Genesis: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Brueggemann is known almost exclusively by preachers and academics. His scholarship into the ancient stories of the Bible's first book is renowned and, in particular, his treatment of the stories of human origin are both helpful and needed in reconciling the current "conflicts" between science and religion that, sadly, divide American culture today.

The Bible is a wonderful collection of documents, but it is not a simple literary work: Brueggemann, with his readable style, helps immensely.

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

I have never experienced "guilt" with a good book. However, there is real "pleasure" in a book that you can't put down because the adventure or the suspense is so intense. I especially love reading "fantasy" and I suffer no guilt about it, whatsoever.

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

The answer varies depending on what the other person likes to read. But a recent wonderfully written series of books, collectively known as *The Expanse*, by James S. A. Corey (the pen name of two writers, Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck), is fantasy/science fiction at its best. The books take the reader far into the distant future, a time when Mars and the moon are occupied, the asteroid belt is mined and, eventually, alien objects and civilizations are encountered. And it all makes sense, even if it is speculative in nature: Human beings are still, predictably, human.

For my contemporaries from the Class of 1968, or anyone who wants better to understand the late 1960s, read *They Marched into Sunlight*, by the Pulitzer prize winning author David Maraniss.

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

In terms of the “classics”, who am I to judge? Time and readership give proof of their greatness. Lots of more recent and very popular books seem to me to be overrated, but that is often just a matter of interest and taste. “Political” books are at the top of my “overrated” list.

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

I think of this question from an historical perspective. I wish there were more Native American writers exploring stories and histories from their cultural roots. I think the same about Hispanic writers and their histories and culture. In this country, with many ethnic and cultural roots, we need better to understand, value and know each other. Books help.

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

It is always the characters and their relationships, their humanity, struggles, joys, loves. I’m also moved by the use of words, wonderfully descriptive words that so captivate me that, at least for a time, bring me into the world created by the author.

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

I love historical fiction. Ken Follett’s Kingsbridge series, beginning with *The Pillars of the Earth* (the story of the building of a great cathedral in the medieval town of Kingsbridge) comes to mind. I also loved Bernard Cornwell’s tales about the Viking warrior Utred and set in medieval England (but I’m prejudiced in favor of Viking tales). I also love epics like *Lord of the Rings* and great fantasy.

I read political history, but avoid books that have a clear political agenda.

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

I had to look at my bookshelves! I found Sam Harris's book, *The End of Faith*, which is a wide-ranging attack on religion in general and predicts the demise of organized religion. This is a fascinating book because it chronicles the long history of abuse and atrocity connected to organized religion. Harris paints an historic conflict between reason and religion that persists into the modern era and especially fears the encroachment of organized religion into the political realm. The book is an outright attack on the faith that I love. Yet there is truth in this analysis that people of faith, including me, need to hear.

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

I love Gandolf, the white wizard from Tolkien's trilogy, but a more recent candidate is Armand Gamache, who is the chief inspector in Louise Penny's many murder mysteries. Thirteen of her books on the shelf! Gamache is Canadian, a Quebecois, who has amazing integrity, wisdom and insight. He "feels" the crime. He also treats his wife with wonderful devotion and appreciation.

A villain is a villain: No favorites. But a really bad one is the German concentration camp commandant in *Schindler's List*, a must-read novel for everyone.

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'm uncertain if *Lord of the Rings* is considered to be "great literature," but I think it is! I also think Eli Wiesel's *Night* is great and important literature, and a last candidate is Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings*, which recounts Hammarskjöld's spiritual journey during in his remarkable life through world war and as Secretary General of the UN: It is a "great book."

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

Old Man River: The Mississippi River in North American History, by Paul Schneider, and a novel by Chuck Wendig, *Wanderers*, which my published novelist daughter loved and recommended to me.

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

Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? by Beverley Daniel Tatum. I intend to read, and finish, this book because understanding other people, in this case young black Americans, is crucial to our nation being "as one." I'm hopeful this book (and others) will help me better understand the experience of "being Black" in America. Racism has been a chronic problem in our nation and I'd like to be part of the solution, rather than the problem.

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

Maybe 300. We have downsized severely, giving books to our kids and to the "friends of the library." Better for the books to be read than to sit on my shelf unread!

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

J. R. Tolkien. Tolkien was part of an amazing writer's club at Cambridge University, England, along with C. S. Lewis and others. His writing, and the imagination which informed his writing, is remarkable. Everything I've learned about him tells me I could not only learn so much from Tolkien, but also and most importantly enjoy his company!

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. If it's a good book, then I don't want to put it down.

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

I always read the book first. Usually, the book is a better product, almost always having better character development and a more complete story. Movies take short cuts. But there are great movies, too.

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'm very impressed. I know how challenging this can be and how many authors have labored for years to find a publisher for what turned out to be a great novel. I am, however, prejudiced since my daughter writes fantasy novels for Penguin Press (her twelfth novel was just published). Her experience also has informed me of what a company like Penguin does in promoting a book: It is quite the operation.

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?

Only *one* book is a challenge.

I would sneak a tiny Bible past the guard, for spiritual support in my isolation, and I would show the guard the one book I am "officially" bringing in, which would have to be something really big, in the nature of a lengthy epic novel, maybe something like *Anna Karina* or *War and Peace*. Two weeks is a long time, so the "official" book to go "in" must be able to absorb my tendency to *consume* books.

Darrel Robertson
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