

May 21, 2020

In a Face Book post, someone asked me for recommendations of books, so here are some books that I think people might consider reading.

The Brief Wondrous life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz

Oblivion by Hector Abad

Actress: A Novel by Anne Enright

Anything by Joyce Carol Oates but I am looking forward to NIGHT. SLEEP. DEATH.

The STARS.

History of Violence: A Novel by Edouard Louis a young French author/activist and an international best seller but not for everyone.

Deacon King Kong: A Novel by James McBride

Open City: A Novel and Known and Strange Things both by Teju Cole

These are books that I have read, or I am looking forward to reading some are by young men who write out a particular political and moral conviction, so they are not going to be appealing to everyone and you may find their contents not to your liking.

One of the consequences of life for many of us over the last 50 years or so in our country was that many of us increasingly privatized our lives in such a manner that we lost a sense of neighborhood. The internet only increased our ability to live at a distance from one another. A great deal of that was because of income and other economic realities but, I think, that in our privatization we no longer actually had to experience democracy in action and that has given rise to a gradual loss in our ability to think for ourselves.

I remember when 60 Minutes first appeared on Sunday evenings, it became gospel for me. If 60 Minutes said it, it had to be true.

The “news” became and business and was able to influence us by choosing what “stories” to cover and how to cover them and, probably, even of more consequence, by what goods and services were advertised.

Many of us became consumers of what other people thought we should be and what we should think and we largely quit reading except for romance and fictional mystery novels which we simply escapes from the real difficulties in human relationships and the human capacity for evil.

Education in elementary and high schools became about “tests” and college and beyond became about job placement. Knowledge and wisdom were replaced by profit and, especially, in the case of select schools the endowment.

I have said all of this before but the breakdown of a concern for the common good is extremely dangerous to the future of a democracy as a democracy depends on an educated electorate and the absence of any shared understanding of the underlying assumptions and individual responsibilities is painfully evident.

The poets I am reading have a substantial presence online and therefore less costly than purchasing the books. A lot of them are dead white men but not all. Among them, but I change often:

Henri Cole, James Brodsky, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Natalie Diaz, and Ocean Vuong.

If you are sincerely interested in patriotism you can learn a lot from Whitman specifically, but all of these poets speak out of an American experience different than mine including Brodsky who was a political prisoner and internal exile in Russia until he was freed to come to Ann Arbor in the 1970's.

Books can expand our boundaries and make us feel less isolated and new ideas might make the transitions that await us more understandable and we might be a little less inclined to let others think for us and do the homework that mature thinking demands.