

## Dad's Books, Movies, Music

### Books

I've never gotten on very well with novels. I find it's difficult for an author to keep up a high quality of writing for hundreds of pages, and I read slowly. So a lot of my favorite reading is short stories.

Having said that, two of my favorite books are novels by John Le Carre: *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, and *Smiley's People*, read in that order; (also see the two TV series with Alec Guinness - terrific!) his other books are good but these are the height of his craft. And all the *Flashman* novels by George MacDonald Fraser, with the action moving at a brisk pace and the historical details incredibly good.

I like books that move, so a lot of literature doesn't suit me because there's too much introspection going on. I've never been able to read Vladimir Nabokov or Henry James or James Joyce, for example. On the other hand, I love all of Jane Austen, where almost nothing happens. Hemingway is good, but I haven't read all his books. Older novels I re-read are *Tom Jones* by Henry Fielding, and *The History of Henry Esmond*, and *Vanity Fair*, by William Thackeray. I can't seem to get a grip on Dickens or Tolstoy. In poetry all I know is W.B. Yeats.

I've read a lot of history, and for both the writing and the story the best are three books about the English Civil War in the 1600s by C.V. Wedgwood: *The King's Peace*, *The King's War*, and *The Trial of King Charles*.

The detective stories of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler have atmosphere and incisive writing. The writing is just terrible, but for good plots the Agatha Christie books are fun. Nobody comes close to the Sherlock Holmes stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, I've re-read them dozens of times. Some more recent detective books are *Gorky Park* and *Wolves Eat Dogs*, by Martin Cruz Smith, and *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* and *Cogan's Trade*, by George Higgins.

I find P.G. Wodehouse incredibly funny, but you have to have a taste for it. Try a volume of short stories called *Mulliner Nights*. The Jeeves stories are his best-known works. Also very funny are the Rumpole stories by John Mortimer. My favorite novel in college was *The Sot Weed Factor*, by John Barth. It wasn't as good when I re-read it

recently, but the parts that pretend to be historical diaries are hilarious.

I've read all the books of V.S. Naipaul, some are novels, some travel books. His best are A Bend in the River and The Enigma of Arrival. I didn't like Guerillas. His books always have a low level of tension that keeps you alert.

I've read all the works of Evelyn Waugh, which are often funny, and of Anthony Powell, the best of which is his multi-volume A Dance to the Music of Time. They're heavily immersed in British society in the mid-1900s, so it's a specialized taste.

I like books by Alexander McCall Smith, starting with a series called The Ladies #1 Detective Agency, taking place in Botswana. He has several other series that take place in Scotland. These books are gently insightful and often funny but not much happens.

I'm a difficult book critic, if I don't like a book after 50 pages or so I'll stop reading. I keep trying to find new authors, but either the writing is lacking or the story sucks, so I find myself re-reading the old stuff. I've liked some recent things, like Snow Falling on Cedars, by David Guterson, and The Shipping News, by Annie Proulx, but didn't like their other stuff. Girl With the Dragon Tattoo had me bored after 20 pages, probably because translations lose all the flavor. The best thing by far in recent years is the Harry Potter series.

## Movies

In no particular order: [I can watch these again and again, doesn't matter that I know what will happen next]

The second half of Zero Dark Thirty

Lord of the Rings 1

High Fidelity

The Silence of the Lambs

The Incredibles

Pulp Fiction

The Terminator

The Three Musketeers [1973 - Richard Lester]

The Four Musketeers [1974 - Richard Lester]

Lost in Translation  
Ace Ventura - When Nature Calls  
Young Frankenstein  
Legally Blonde  
Toy Story  
Toy Story 2  
Some Like it Hot  
Y Tu Mama Tambien  
Kill Bill  
Kill Bill 2  
Election  
Tom Jones  
Trading Places  
The Matrix  
Shakespeare in Love

Not quite on the first team:

Three Kings  
Erin Brockovich [even though I don't like Julia Roberts]  
Diamonds are Forever [best of the Sean Connery Bond movies]  
Octopussy [best Bond story, but no Connery]  
Men in Black  
Casablanca  
The Maltese Falcon  
Jurassic Park  
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, but dislike the ending  
The Last Seduction  
Swimming Pool  
2001  
any movie starring Gong Li [Raise the Red Lantern, Ju Dou]  
Matilda  
Babe  
Wallace & Gromit shorts  
Chicken Run  
Romancing the Stone [stupid but fun with Danny DeVito]  
The Godfather, I and II  
Star Wars and The Empire Strikes Back  
Raiders of the Lost Ark  
In the Name of the Father  
Day of the Jackal (1973)

There are big movies it's good to have seen once, Bridge on the River Kwai, Dr. Zhivago, Ghandi, Lawrence of Arabia, Gone With the Wind, Citizen Kane. And Hitchcock films like Rear Window and North by Northwest. Older Woody Allen movies [Annie Hall] although they haven't aged well. I like old Italian movies with Marcello Mastroiani or Sophia Loren, and Japanese samurai movies with Toshiro Mifune, but it's a specialized taste. I've seen lots of good small French movies but can't think of any to mention here, aside from Bob le Flambeur, which tells you something. Spanish films by Almodovar are very interesting but always weird.

## Music

Essential classical:

Dvorak - New World Symphony  
Beethoven - Violin Concerto  
Rachmaninoff - Second Piano Concerto  
Chopin - Nocturnes (Arthur Rubinstein)  
Bach - Organ music [Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor]  
Domenico Scarlatti - Harpsichord music  
Mozart - Overtures  
Wagner - Overtures

Some classical music is more intricate, you need to really listen:

Beethoven - Piano Sonatas 30, 31, and 32  
Rachmaninoff - Third Piano Concerto (Martha Argerich - 1982)  
Beethoven - Triple Concerto  
Mahler - Second Symphony

Opera arias by Puccini and Verdi. My favorite is Casta Diva, by Bellini, sung in 1961 by Maria Callas, originally a hefty singer who lost a lot of weight to become the diva of her day. It took a toll on her voice, as you can hear, but the way she handles every note in this piece and the restraint of her delivery is beautiful art.

For jazz, everything by Duke Ellington, Stan Getz and Miles Davis. And any jazz sung by Billie Holiday and Shirley Horn. For light jazz I like the early Diana Krall. For rock, the Strokes are the best in the past ten years.