

Book Notes:

Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

Retrospective: A Year of Book Notes

*"I cannot live without books."
– Thomas Jefferson*

Although I am a Scholar-in-Residence at the Jefferson Educational Society, Erie's think-tank for community progress, I have always been ambivalent about Thomas Jefferson, the conflicted framer who had a way with words and a tangled conscience, but I get what he meant when he said he could not live without books.

I, too, am a *book-a-holic*.

It's been books, family, and friends that have made this pandemic year tolerable. No, actually, more than tolerable because, thanks to the magic of Zoom, I've connected with both out-of-town and in-town friends more often than I might have done in what we used to call the normal face-to-face (f2f) world.

And books, which have been my constant companions for almost 70 years since I first curled up with a Little Golden Book in the Queen Anne chair in my parent's living room, have made the year in some sense, baroque as it might sound, not only tolerable but enjoyable.

This is *Book Notes* No. 53 – to me an incredible number. I thank you for having read, well, not all of them, but if only one, thank you. And for those who have read all or most of them and shared your responses with me, my sincere gratitude!

It was a bit more than a year ago when Dr. Ferki Ferati, President of the Jefferson Educational Society, asked me if I might write a short book "note" of some sort to help bridge the gap, which at the time we thought might be two or three, no more than four, weeks until we could resume f2f programming. Well, here we are a year, 52 "notes" and some 156,000 words later still functioning in a virtual world wondering when we will again be able to meet our public. I should quickly add that "going virtual," while not without its challenges, has been a bit of a pleasant s

urprise to the Jefferson, as we have provided more than 150 online programs with viewers ranging from 75 or so to 1500-plus with an average in the six-hundreds, and produced more than 140 publications, including David Frew, Jerry Skrypzak and their team's *Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle*.

Book Notes No. 1 appeared in your inboxes on Thursday, March 19, 2020 commenting on Joan Didion's *The White Album*, which I said then and still believe to be the best book written on that cultural phenomenon called "*The '60s*." At just under 1,700 words (many of them Didion's), it actually approached "note" status. Subsequent "notes" have morphed into 3,500- to 4,000-word essays replete with end notes. Regardless, it has been an excellent experience. I thank Ferki for asking me to do it.

It has enabled me to rediscover my roots revitalizing my love of literature and history. A long time ago, I decided I wanted to be a college professor. I knew that what I loved to do was to read and study. In some precocious, teenage way, I figured out that to earn a living writing and talking about one's reading and research, the clearest path led to being a college professor.

So, inspired in part by *Channing*, an ABC-TV program about life and politics at a small college, on one of those career days the guidance office sponsored, I asked to meet a professor. They sent me to the local college, where a professor of philosophy and I spent an awkward morning discussing I have absolutely no recollection what. However, when I arrived at his office, he was sitting in some sort of easy chair drinking coffee, smoking, reading a book, and listening to Mozart on a record player. (This was long before tapes and cassettes much less MP3 players or Pandora and Spotify). My lasting impression of the moment was "This guy's at work. Where do I sign up?"

Although I quit smoking almost 50 years ago, I, too, have sat in a faculty office drinking coffee, reading, and listening to music. But I am not quite that passive a person. I like to be where the action is. I like to be in the room where decisions are made. So, as some faculty members are wont to do, I became an administrator rationalizing that I would sustain the life of the mind by reading and teaching. Which I did, but being director of this, dean of that, Vice President of something else, and then President of two colleges meant there was never enough time to do the writing for which all that reading prepared me.

So, happily, as Jefferson Society Vice President Ben Spегgen will tell you, flunking retirement, I became a scholar-in-residence at the Jefferson Educational Society. I even have a business card attesting to that ambiguous status. When former colleagues ask me what that means, I reply, "It is a faculty member's fantasy gig. My only obligation is to read and study what I want to read and study, to prepare presentations, and to write essays based on my research." In addition to my work with the Society's *Raimy Fellows*, my *America in 1968*, *The American Tapestry Project*, which is now also a program on WQLN-NPR1 public broadcasting in northwestern Pennsylvania and can be found [here](#), and *American Holidays* presentation series, a significant portion of that writing turns out to be these *Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*.

In revisiting the 52 essays, I discover that my interests are catholic, in the sense of universal or wide-ranging, but it is also true that if one looks at everything one runs the risk of seeing nothing. Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald's narrator in *The Great*

Gatsby, says something to the effect that “life is better looked at through a single window.”

What is the lens, “the window” in these “notes” through which I have explored American culture? Without belaboring Carraway’s point, the specialist can know one tree in great and penetrating depth and miss the forest while the generalist admiring the landscape misses the details of which it is composed. If I accept Carraway’s metaphor, then my lens, my single window is a double-hung, one-over-one. It consists of two panes which, while separate, can, as the window is “worked,” overlap enabling one to see through both. For me, the two panes are literature and history, in particular their intersection and how each informs the other.

I suspect that I can be accused of approaching literature from a historicist position seeking to understand a text from the vantage point(s) of its time and place – its context and the culture from which it emerged. Which is not entirely accurate, for I did my graduate work in literature just before the triumph of post-modernism, to clump a number of threads into one knotted ball. My time was the waning days of what was then called the New Criticism, which was new in the 1920s and 1930s, but by the late 1960s had aged, if not grown stale. Apostles of the New Criticism, like F.R. Leavis, Yvor Winters, William Empson, et. al., taught that a text was to be respected and understood as an entity unto itself, as if it had sprung like Athena fully grown from the head of Zeus.

Of course, texts don’t. They are created. They are constructed. They do not construct themselves. So, from my perspective, one must approach a text in at least two ways. First, one must understand it as an artifact unto itself – what lawyers sometimes call the plain meaning of the words on the page. But the meaning of words, or, I should say, a word’s meanings are varied and contextual. Their meaning depends upon who says them where and when, to whom they are spoken, with what intent and, the term is not quite accurate but will suffice, with what intonation, with what nuance. All of these questions can only be answered historicistically by placing them in time and space, within the cultural and social context within which they arose.

Conversely, I approach history not as a social science, but as a narrative art. One might ask, where does history exist? It’s not out there, wherever out there might be. You can’t, at least not yet, go there. Time travel is a fantasy. Nor is history the antiquarian objects in a museum, as interesting as they might be to see and hold and hear.

No, history is a story. History exists between your ears. It is a mental construct. It exists in books and the stories they tell about the past. Like literature, a “history,” an account of the past, must be approached as a text. It must first be understood in its own right – what is the plain meaning of the thing. Which, in isolation, will be not much, for it must then be contextualized. Who constructed it? Where? When? To what end? What are its sources? Who created them? When? Where? To what end? It is a series of questions inside questions inside questions.

Like all stories that endure, history involves three questions but can only, and then only partially, answer one. It can provide glimpses of and point in the direction from which you came. It might shed light on how that path was traversed. Knowing how you got here, history can suggest but not prescribe how you might now live, but it cannot predict where you are going. The well-worn cliché has it right: history does not repeat but on occasion it rhymes.

Still, it is all we have and knowing our past can help us understand our present and, perhaps, help us shape our future. To know history, then, is to know our shared stories. How to make sense of it? Know the story it purports to tell. Place that story within its context measured against what else is known about that time and place. But know that it is the story you seek, for the story is the landscape the specialist misses.

The historian as social scientist is a lot like our specialist who knows a great deal about a particular tree, maybe a great deal about a number of trees, but, obsessing more and more about less and less, misses the landscape from which the trees emerge. For the social scientist, history comes perilously close to being what Toynbee is alleged to have called it – “just one damn thing after another” – because awash in facts they miss the story the facts tell.

So, as I work my double-hung, one-over-one window, I am interested in the history behind the story and the story (or stories) illuminating our history - our *inquiries* into how we got to now which woven together are all of the *past* we'll ever have, which, as Faulkner said, “is not dead. It's not even past.”

If one of the window's panes is literature, in these “notes” it is given over almost entirely to poetry. Of the 52 *Book Notes*, slightly more than a third either wholly or in part discuss poets and poetry. I count only one about a novel, *Catcher in the Rye*, which I'll come back to in a moment.

Why poetry? Two reasons: first, I love words and those who use them well and, second, as Shelley said in his *A Defense of Poetry*, “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” Eloquence, to say something well, is a virtue, because in so saying the poet helps another to see what she sees and, seeing it, remember it. In our year of social distancing who has better noted our ironic, Zoom-fed drawing closer than Hilton Obenzinger when he echoed Christopher Marlowe's “Come live with me and be my love/And we will all the pleasures prove,” saying:

from Our Social Distance

Stay away and be my love
We're so close together when we're so far apart ...
We're all alone with each other ...
... keep your distance and be close
Speak splendid poems and deeper wit
Stay away and be my love.

Or who has more incisively and succinctly, as death approached, identified what it means to have lived well than Mary Oliver:

from When Death Comes

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
When it's over, I don't want to wonder
If I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world

The truth of Shelley's famous assertion is so obvious that it bears repeating, because being so obvious it is, like the forest, often missed for the trees. Culture is created by storytellers and not the other way around. Storytellers – poets, novelists, historians, musicians, artists in all mediums – create culture by weaving together a people's stories and sense of themselves into coherent patterns. And they challenge a culture to grow out of itself, to be true to itself by constantly reminding a people who they are, from whence they came and what they might become.

In these “notes” we've experienced that in Yeats describing the center that is not holding, in Whitman's “I hear America singing,” in Ferlinghetti's amazed by unreality, in Lydia Maria Child's evocation of Thanksgiving “going across the river to grandfather's house,” in Robert Burns' song of friendship *Auld Lang Syne*, and many more. Perhaps, because I assume it is uncontroversial, the power of a poet, of artists to create culture, is best illustrated in American culture by Washington Irving's *Old Christmas* and Clement Clarke Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, which created the American experience of Christmas.

Less positively, the artist, the poet, can show where certain threads of thought might lead, as William Golding does in *Lord of the Flies*, subject of a future *Book Notes*. We touched on it in the “note” on J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, which we discovered when re-read from an adult perspective is not a tale of teenage rebellion, but a sensitive study of a boy unhinged by grief grieving his brother's death. That was in a *Book Notes* on high school classics revisited, in response to which numerous readers sent me suggestions about school day books they were required to read which might merit a second or a third look. *Lord of the Flies* received multiple mentions as several readers opined that it is not about rebellious boys, but about what happens when all of a culture's guardrails disintegrate. What results is not some libertarian fantasy of sitting round a campfire singing “Kumbaya,” but, rather, a neo-Hobbesian descent into thugocracy in which it is everyone for themselves and God against all.

Fragmenting culture, in particular the fraying of American culture since the 1960s amidst those culture wars Pat Buchanan declared in 1992, was the focus of many of the *Book Notes* exploring American history. From Joan Didion's *The White Album's* firsthand report of 1960s era psycho-social turmoil to Bruce Cannon Gibney's blaming the Boomers for America's social ills in *Generation of Sociopaths* to Robert Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett's *Upswing's* reworking of the last 125 years of American history, it's clear reweaving the many stories of America's story into a coherent narrative uniting Americans around the common objects of their love remains the defining task of our time.

A very early *Book Note* discussing Jill Lepore's *The Case for the Nation* provides an excellent starting point for that task. In a short book, really an extended essay, Lepore defines the American dilemma as resulting from the fact that America was a political state before it was a cultural nation. Almost all of our turmoil results from that reversal of the more usual pattern in which a people – a cultural nation – come together to create a government to protect their interests. Uniting, if not defining, that cultural nation – weaving the stories of America's many peoples into a tapestry of the American story will continue to be a major topic in future *Book Notes*.

Along the way we've explored leadership, its constant necessity in a society in which it is in short supply; we've explored *Heroic Centrism* which seeks to pull all Americans back to that center Yeats said was not holding; we've begun an

exploration of American holidays, which might be both the clue to and the glue which holds us all together; we've explored a miscellany of other topics; and we've explored baseball, baseball and women, and baseball and poetry.

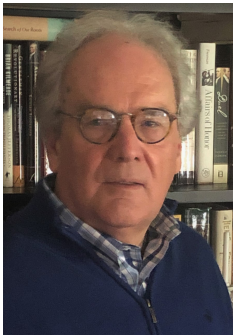
Baseball season is almost upon us and, although there is madness in March – another sport – March means spring training and spring training means hope. Freshman Orientation always reminded me of Spring Training. It is the season of hope. No one has started throwing curve balls or handing out tests. Like the first day of class, the season starts when orientation and spring training ends. Until then, everyone is a winner!

But start the season does and the tests that come with it. Next Thursday, April 1, is not only *Fools Day* but *Opening Day*. Let's end on a happy "note":

from Tomorrow

Hoorah, hooray!
Be glad, be gay-
The best of reasons
Is Opening Day.
And *cheering the players*
And *counting the gate*
And *running the bases*
And *touching the plate.*
And *tossing the ball out*
And *yelling Play Ball!*
... Let nothing sour
This sweetest hour;
The baseball season's
Back in flower!

Milton Bracker at https://www.baseball-almanac.com/poetry/po_tomo.shtml



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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In Case You Missed It

[Alone Together Part Two](#) written by Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence Dr. Andrew Roth

[Straight Arrow Cards: Bay Rats and Shredded Wheat](#) written by prolific author, historian, and Jefferson presenter, Dr. David Frew.

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