

"Good Books vs. Great Books" by Mortimer Adler, Ph.D.

This controversy focuses on the books that should be a part of one's general education. It is a dispute about the traditionally recognized canon of the monuments of Western literature in all fields--works of mathematics and science as well as works of poetry, drama, and fiction, and also works of biography, history, philosophy, and theology. Here we are confronted with current attacks upon the canonical list of great books and the responses that those attacks have elicited.

I am involved in this controversy--as associate editor of the first edition of the Great Books of the Western World, published in 1952, and as editor in chief of the second, much expanded edition, published in 1990. The second edition differed from the first in many respects: new translations, a revised Syntopicon, and six volumes of twentieth-century authors that did not appear in the first edition, as well as fifteen authors added in the period from Homer to Freud. As in the case of the first edition, so in the case of the second, our Editorial Board and the large group of advisers whom we consulted did not agree unanimously about the authors to be included; but in both cases there was ninety percent agreement. That, in my judgment, is all one can expect in a matter of this kind.

I would like to call your attention to two things about the second edition. In writing an introductory essay, which appeared in a volume that accompanied the set, entitled *The Great Conversation*, I anticipated the controversy that the second edition of the Great Books of the Western World would arouse. This did not arise before. In the 1940s, when we were engaged in producing the first edition, "Eurocentric" was not current as a disapprobative term. There was no hue and cry about the absence of female authors; nor had blacks cried out for representation in the canon. In those earlier decades of this century, students and teachers in our colleges and educators in general were not concerned with multiculturalism in our educational offerings.

The second edition contains female authors, some in the nineteenth and some in the twentieth century, but no black authors; and it is still exclusively Western (i.e., European or American authors) with none from the four or five cultural traditions of the Far East.

The controversy over the desirability of multiculturalism having arisen in the late 1980s, I took account of it in my introductory essay, pointing out carefully the criteria in terms of which the authors were selected for inclusion, explaining the difference between the five hundred or so great works included in the set and the thousands of good books listed in the Recommended Readings at the end of each of the 102 chapters in *The Syntopicon*. These lists included many female and many black authors, but none still from the Far East.

These exclusions were not, and are not, invidious. The difference between great and good books is one of kind, not of degree. Good books are not "almost great" or "less than great" books. Great books are relevant to human problems in every century, not just germane to current twentieth-century problems. A great book requires to be read over and over, and has many meanings; a good book needs to have no more than one meaning, and it need be read no more than once.

I also explained but did not apologize for the so-called Euro centrism of the Great Books of the Western World by pointing out why no authors or works from the four or five distinct cultural traditions in the Far East were included or should be included. The Western authors are engaged in a great conversation across the centuries about great ideas and issues. In the multicultural traditions of the Far East, there are, perhaps, as many as four or five great conversations about different sets of ideas, but the authors and books in these different cultural traditions do not combine these ideas in one Far Eastern tradition, nor do they participate in the great conversation that has occurred over the last twenty-five centuries in the West. There are undoubtedly great, as distinguished from good, books in all of these Far Eastern traditions.

I did not anticipate that those who responded to the publication of the second edition by challenging its Eurocentrism or complaining about the fact that its authors were still for the most part dead white males, with few females and no blacks, would do so entirely in terms of announcements in the press of the list of included authors, and without reading my introductory essay and without knowing that a large number of female and black authors were included in the 102 lists in *The Syntopicon* of good books cited as readings recommended in addition to the great books included in the set, along with many other books by white males, none of them regarded as great.

READING AND JOURNALS ARE DUE THE DAY YOU ARRIVE IN CLASS

Required Reading: *And Still We Rise: The Trials and Triumphs of Twelve Gifted Inner-City Students* (Miles Corwin)

Recommended Reading (pick one of the following):

- *Pigs in Heaven* (Barbara Kingsolver)
- *The Bell Jar* (Sylvia Plath)
- *The Kite Runner* (Khaled Hosseini)
- *Palace Walk* (Naguib Mahfouz)
- *DiGrace* (J. M. Coetzee)
- *Atonement* (Ian McEwan)
- *The Awakening* (Kate Chopin)
- *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (Anne Tyler)
- *Snow Falling on Cedar* (David Guterson)
- *Ella Minnow Pea* (Mark Dunn)
- *Paradise of the Blind* (Thu Huong Duong)
- *Kindred* (Octavia Butler)
- *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (Mark Haddon)
- *Bee Season* (Myla Goldberg)
- *Everything is Illuminated* (Jonathan Safran Foer)
- *The Things They Carried* (Tim O'Brien)
- *Interpreter of Maladies* (Jhumpa Lahiri)
- *The Life of Pi* (Yann Martel)
- *The Home and the World* (Rabindranath Tagore)
- *The Alchemist* (Paul Coelho)

Re-reading (pick one of the following):

- *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Erich Maria Remarque)
- *The Great Gatsby* (F. Scott Fitzgerald)
- *The Scarlet Letter* (Nathaniel Hawthorne)
- *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Steinbeck)
- *The Lord of the Flies* (William Golding)
- *Beloved* (Toni Morrison)
- *The Catcher in the Rye* (J. D. Sallinger)
- *The Adventures of Huck Finn* (Mark Twain)
- *The Crucible* (Arthur Miller)
- *The Sun Also Rises* (Ernest Hemingway)

READING JOURNAL: You are required to independently read three books this summer in preparation for AP Literature. All books are available at the public library, as well as through bookstores. Begin by designing a reading schedule and deadlines. Write it down on page one of your journal. While reading each of the summer requirements, note quotes that follow a theme, then list in a double entry reading log format, as reviewed below:

1. Fold several loose-leaf pages in half vertically to make two equally long columns. Label the left hand column "Quotations" and the right hand column "Notes" (or "Why do I find this quotation of importance").

Quotation	Page	Why do I find this quotation interesting or important?

2. As you read, choose 10 quotes that you feel are significant (in terms of a key ideas, a recurring/important theme)
3. On the right column, reflect on what ties the quotes to one theme or idea. Do not merely summarize what you're reading or say whether or not you like the quote. Discuss its importance relative to the theme of the novel. Think "so what?" and "less what, more why" to help you focus on analysis
4. If possible, join with others through reading meetings, email conversations or chat lines to discuss:
 - _ points you are pondering as you read. This is an excellent means of keeping your reading schedules,
 - _ expanding your understanding of the books, and finding more enjoyment in the literature you read.
 - _ keep records of these discussions. If a film is available compare the film and note what is left out of the film compared to the reading.
5. To submit your reading journals on your return to school in August, bind them in a spiral notebook with your name and date clearly identified on the front of the folder. Include any email or chat transcriptions with your journals. Neatness counts. I must be able to read it.

Email: Danielle@esuhsd.org SanchezJan@esuhsd.org or BeebeJ@esuhsd.org with any concerns.
Keep in mind this is summer vacation, so we will not be able to respond to email immediately