

Introduction To The MIBYs

November 14, 2011 Category: The Most Important Books of the Year

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In 1600, English writer Barnaby Rich noted: “One of the great diseases of this [new printing] age is the multitude of books that doth so overcharge the world that it is not able to digest the abundance of idle matter that is every day hatched and brought into the world.” In other words, there’s so much chaff being churned out, many of us don’t end up eating any wheat.

Why is this? It’s not that people don’t care about the wheat; it’s that they don’t notice it. This unfortunate trend has continued for four centuries. Couple this with contemporary readership trends in periodicals (not to mention the caliber of TV and radio programming provided by MSM), and the explanation for the colossal degree of American ignorance becomes quite clear.

By 2005, there were over 170,000 books published in the U.S. alone each year. (In Britain, there are over 200,000 published each year.) This tally includes non-fiction and fiction. Much of the non-fiction published each year is self-help, inspiration (e.g. memoirs, human interest stories, personal commentaries), “business”, and “how to” books. Polemic by charlatans accounts for a large portion as well. Most of the non-fiction that sells falls within these sub-genres. These are the types of non-fiction with which the MIBYs is unconcerned.

Since 2000, the MIBYs has found roughly 40 non-fiction books (of the type relevant to the listing) worth mentioning each year. (In 2010, 72 were mentioned. This year, 60 are mentioned.) That means that—roughly speaking—perhaps one in a thousand books (of the relevant non-fiction type) are worth mentioning. The other 99.9% is largely comprised of garbage—some of it, *mega-selling* garbage. Moreover, most of the *best-selling* books each year come from that 99.9%. As far as “major” non-fiction publications go, there are—on average—two to three dozen per week. That’s about 1,500 per year. Thus, less than 5% of those are even worth considering.

Such stats don’t bode well for participatory, deliberative democracy. PDD depends on people devoting time and attention to a very small fraction of the total non-fiction churned out each year—which requires a degree of discernment on the part of the book-reader. Alas, it is difficult to FIND the books that fall within that small fraction. The MIBYs are compiled to help people do just that. (Carl Sagan once pointed out that there are millions of books; the point is, read the right ones.)

Autonomous people don’t need a website telling them what they should read. However, many people seeking edification welcome efforts to bring important things to their attention—so that they may then pass judgment on their own accord. The present listings are an

attempt to do much of the “leg work” for the independent thinker. It is not an attempt to transplant personal decisions.

As with the list for the most important non-fiction of the 20th Century, these lists don't deal with the “best” non-fiction books. That is to say, high quality writing and formidable poignancy—while relevant factors—are not the primary criteria for the purposes of the MIBY listings.

Instead, each year's **Top-10** list pertains to the books that are the *most important books to read*. The concern here is more about edification than about appreciating a great work of writing (though the two certainly aren't mutually exclusive). This distinction is key if one is to understand the criteria by which these lists were determined. These books are resources for learning about the world—independently of any merit as paragons of wonderful writing.

The Pulitzer, National Book Critics Circle, and National Book awards have generally already done the job of pointing out which are the “best” non-fiction books qua great works of exposition *overall*. By contrast, these lists are for people who seek to become well informed—with regard to general knowledge about the world. Some of the books here have, indeed, won (or been nominated for) the aforementioned awards. But whether they have or not is irrelevant to the present project. The criteria for such esteemed awards are different from the criteria being used here.

The MIBY lists don't seek to repeat what has already been done. Nor do they represent a “Mason Scott Personal Favorites” list. They are simply *important books that everyone should read*—regardless of “taste”.

The following lists provide a reference for intellectually curious autodidacts. Surprisingly, this service has never before been provided on the web. As far as I can find, this is the only place where a compilation of this kind has been posted anywhere on the internet. (The closest one can find are “personal favorites” lists and “editors picks” in various periodicals.) Perhaps this effort will encourage others to undertake a similar project, and improve on my attempt.

For those interested in garnering a better understanding of our world, these are some of the best resources from each year. I have not read every one of these books—though I have read many. What I have done—in the cases where I haven't personally read the book cover-to-cover—is read extensively about the book: reviews from reputable sources, reputation since initial publication, impact on the advancement of knowledge, esteem by peers and fellow scholars, citations in other esteemed works, etc.

After extensive research, the following lists are my best effort to accomplish this goal. The process was as meticulous, judicious and unbiased as possible. As will be quite evident, popularity (mass-market appeal and book sales) were completely irrelevant in making my assessments. Consequently, there may be several “surprises” in store for many people. (Hopefully, they will be well-received surprises.)

In the last few years alone, publishing has exploded. By 2009, over one million books were published in the U.S. alone (both fiction and non-fiction, though often the line between categories is quite blurry). The “catch” is that more than two thirds of these are either re-prints or self-published works (now that self-publishing via the internet has become convenient). The average non-fiction book sells less than 250 copies per year—especially now that electronic media has come to dominate readership.

Of the hundreds of thousands of *imprint*-published books, there are perhaps only a few dozen worth reading. YET...other than the MIBYs, there is no resource on the internet designed to help the discerning reader select those few gems. Instead, all he has at his disposal are “editors’ picks”, “best-sellers”, well-hyped releases, and referrals from a handful of trusted friends and esteemed acquaintances. Alas, unlike entertainment media, casual recommendations and word-of-mouth only get one so far when it comes to objectively important works of non-fiction.

Every best-seller list (and the media coverage attendant thereto) creates a *positive feedback loop*. In this scheme, a book often becomes ever-more-popular *because* it’s initially established as “popular” (i.e. it’s “what everyone’s talking about”) due to well-funded hype / promotion. Consequently, commercial marketing concerns (i.e. mass mania) drive blockbusters more than does objective merit. (We see the same phenomenon with blockbuster movies.)

Instead of inquiring into what the highest quality books are, people simply ask, “What’s everybody reading?” Typically, bookstores don’t promote the “best” books. Rather, they promote the books that will sell to the widest audience—which ends up being the books catering to the “lowest common denominator” of society. This only stands to reason: bookstores, after all, are retailers seeking to maximize revenue for the business, not serve as a public service. Profits, not edification of the citizenry, is their sine qua non. Just like any other commercial venture, they will tailor their operations accordingly.

The LCD, then, defines retailers’ sales priorities. This tends to correspond to the books that publication houses *pay* retailers to “push” (i.e. feature prominently on the front shelves). For the casual shopper, bookstore visibility is often construed as a barometer for merit: “If they’ve stocked stacks of it up front, and *everybody else* is buzzing about it, and there are signs advertising it everywhere, and my favorite magazine mentioned it, then it **MUST** be worth checking out!” Moreover, people often just end up reading whatever their peer group happens to “be into”.

The target audience for a typical book may well be tangentially aware of hundreds of interesting and useful books to read, but has little time to take note of them—let alone read them. Therefore people are reading only books that their communities tout as worthwhile. After all, there is no *general audience* for most nonfiction books. The problem is: this abets the positive feedback loop, as many same-interest / shared-values based communities become rather insular—and parochial.

People have come to live in self-validating echo-chambers—especially when it comes to reading.

The tendency for mass mania (i.e. group behavior that is driven by hype, not critical discernment) is exactly how pulp trash like the *Left Behind* series, *The Secret*, and *The Purpose Driven Life* sold like gangbusters. Groupthink dictates commercial success: People make purchasing decisions based on “buzz” amongst their peers. Alas, suckers are easy to herd. The masses are ripe for mass manipulation and exploitation, so large publishing houses exploit this in order to maximize revenue—unconcerned about the quality of the pulp being churned out.

The internet often makes this phenomenon even more severe, as it supercharges the positive feedback loops. (This is because the web makes *everything* more efficient, including the dysfunction.) As with website hits, “If it’s popular,” the thinking goes, “it must be good. If it’s not popular, it must not be worth checking out.” Search engines operate this way. As a result, much of the chaff gets the limelight, and much of the wheat goes un-noticed. James Evans, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, noted in a 2008 *Science* article that information-filtering tools like search engines tend to serve as amplifiers of popularity (establishing, then continually reinforcing, a consensus about what STUFF is “important”). The effect of this is that *actually* important stuff can become quickly marginalized.

That’s why we need the MIBYs.

As difficult as it was, I attempted to rank the **Top 10** of each year according to each work’s importance in contributing—in a praiseworthy way—to the public discourse. Obviously, perfect impartiality couldn’t be maintained—though I did my best. Even though some of my own biases may come through, I’ve made a concerted effort to emulate objectivity by vetting choices with disinterested parties: bona fide scholars, savvy devils advocates, as well as the most well-read, well-educated, intelligent people I can find. (As with the essays on MasonScott.org, feedback is welcome.)

For each year, two dozen books are selected as the nominees for the MIBYs (Most Important Books of the Year)...a task that may eventually lead to a tradition of “*The MIBY Awards*”.

Since there are always two dozen books “in the running”, I have also listed 14 **Honorable Mentions** for the year. These were the other “contenders” for each **Top 10** list: books that are very good—yet didn’t quite make the cut. (Depending on subjective assessments, many of these could well have made the **Top 10** list for its respective year.) The nominees are selected from a field of candidates. The remaining candidates are listed at the end, as “Other Notable Books”.

NOTE:

Not included are “curiosity” books like Levitt / Dubner’s *Freakonomics*, Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Laura Hillenbrand’s *Seabiscuit* and *Unbroken*, David Egger’s *Zeitoun*, Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Christopher McDougal’s *Born To Run*, Greg Grandin’s *Fordlandia*, Oliver Sacks’ *Musicophilia*, Daniel J. Levitin’s *This is Your Brain on Music*, *The Boy Who Harnessed The Wind* by William Kamkwamba, *Strength In What Remains* by Tracy Kidder, Michael Lewis’s *The Big Short*, Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Terry Teachout’s *Pops*, and Stacy Schiff’s *Cleopatra*. There are many very interesting, well-written books that are not appropriate for this project. Books like these are “personal interest” books more than books crucial for general edification.

For the same reason, wonderful memoirs like Kai Bird’s *Crossing Mendelbaum Gate*, Jeannette Walls’ *The Glass Castle*, Mark Twain’s *Autobiography*, Jay-Z’s *Decoded*, Tony Judt’s *The Memory Chalet*, Greg Mortensen’s books, and Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* are omitted. Though certainly pieces of amazing writing (as well as eminently poignant exposition), such esteem-able works are not the focus of the MIBY lists. Inspiring stories are important in their own right. Nevertheless, fantastic reads aren’t necessarily *important* books in the sense with which we’re concerned. (For such noble publications, one best refer to nominees for the aforementioned prizes.) Autobiographies tend to be disqualified as well, not because they are not worthwhile (they often are), but because they are—by definition—biased, and thus fall under the category, “curiosity books”.

(Also not included are the Routledge Guidebooks, Cambridge Companions, acclaimed textbooks, and other eminently valuable resources.)

As is the case with all other judgments, I am eminently fallible—and would therefore encourage that misjudgments and omissions be brought to my attention. (I may well have over-estimated a selection, or overlooked an eminently worthy book.) After all, this list is not compiled for me; it is a resource provided for the website’s readers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Currently, the U.S. has a horribly ill-informed citizenry. This sad condition can be attributed to many things—our inadequate public education system, the degeneracy of our MSM, our dysfunctional culture, our defective political system, etc. Needless to say, this condition has caused grave dysfunction—and thus undermined our ability to foster a genuinely democratic society. The condition seems to arise from a distortion—or even perversion—of what is considered “education” (i.e. to be “educated” in the profound sense).

So much emphasis has been placed on (often specious) formalities (e.g. getting a degree in college for the sake of *having gone to college*) that much focus has been lost on *actually learning important things*. People are graduating with bachelor degrees, yet have never actually read many (or any) important books...or written many (or any) high-quality pieces of serious exposition.

They are “schooled”—yet nothing even remotely close to erudite. In other words, they know how to get through a formal academic program, yet have not even cultivated for themselves the most elementary critical / analytical thinking skills. Such people find ways to “get through” a curriculum, yet remain unaware of the great minds of history and their insights. Moreover, they remain oblivious to even the most basic principles of science, morality, economics, philosophy, etc.

To think that someone can graduate from high school—let alone college—without being well versed in, say, Kant and Paine, Marx and Keynes, Spinoza and Galbraith, Hofstadter and Chomsky, C. Right Mills and Rawls, is nothing short of absurd. Most civilians here in America can’t discern a work of bona fide scholarship from a piece of glaringly fatuous propaganda.

Passing classes with “good” grades has trumped actual edification. People wouldn’t know—let alone be able to compose—a sound argument unless it was labeled with a flashing, neon sign. These days, people are often deemed “educated” for many of the wrong reasons. Meanwhile, many who are esteemed as “educated” (simply because they jumped through all the appropriate hoops) are—in reality—quite UN-educated (in the more profound sense of the term).

That is to say: Even as these denizens of the more lofty echelons of social status have managed to frame an exorbitantly-priced sheepskin on their wall—replete with mahogany frame and exorbitant salary—such people don’t really know much about many important things (and have not read much of note).

Such people have little if any genuine motivation to actually edify themselves *in any way other than those defined by sheer opportunism* (i.e. careerism, immediate utility)...especially after the sheepskin has been framed, and enticing salary secured. Thus, we have an ill-educated citizenry.

Here in America, many of us are conditioned to esteem a person as “educated” insofar as he has adeptly suited himself to serve as a cog in the Machine.

We need to work proactively to foster a new culture here in the U.S. Specifically, we need to foster a culture where people actually care about, desire to, and see the crucial importance of *reading great non-fiction*. Part of this process is, of course, knowing *what* to read. The MIBYs hope to contribute to the effort of engendering a more intellectually active culture...and thus a more erudite citizenry.