

NATIONAL REVIEW

A Year in Reading: Books in the Time of COVID

Tevi Troy

December 31, 2020

Well, dear reader, it's been a miserable year in lockdown, but at least there has been time for reading. I have read 80 books — and counting — during this COVID period, so I wanted to take this holiday opportunity to share some of my reading highlights with you.

The pandemic did cause me to change some reading habits. The difficulty of getting new physical books in the earliest days of the lockdown caused me to shift at least partially to e-books. While there was some adjustment there, I also came to appreciate some of the e-book advantages, including the abilities to email quotes to oneself and to search a book for any word, not just the ones the publisher was willing to index. The scarcity also made me value print books even more, and my efforts to exchange them with friends in the early days of the pandemic reminded me of stories of Abraham Lincoln walking for miles to borrow a new book.

Looking back, it is clear I concentrated my 2020 reading efforts in three general categories: history/biography; social commentary; and entertainment, be it sports or the visual arts.

On the history front, I highly recommend Craig Fehrman's *Author in Chief*, which is putatively about our presidents as writers but is really a history of the evolution of the written word in American life. Fehrman has a gift for the telling anecdote or quote, as with this example of Babe Ruth's being asked about his favorite authors in front of the batting cage. Ruth initially thinks the question is about his favorite people named "Arthur." After being told by a reporter, "Not Arthur's. Authors, writers." Ruth responds that Christy Walsh is his favorite writer. Who is Christy Walsh, the reader may ask? None other than the author of Ruth's syndicated column. Readers can see my full review of the book at the *Claremont Review of Books*, but suffice it to say that this is one of the rare books that I not only enjoyed, but also wish I had written.

Also highly recommended is Amity Shlaes's *Great Society*, about the miscalculations and misguided ideas that underlaid the War on Poverty in the 1960s. Shlaes also has a manifest talent for anecdote, and she gathers stories and vignettes that continually challenge conventional wisdom. For example, she explains that the famous picture of the Vietnamese man executed by a South Vietnamese officer in the aftermath of the Tet Offensive "seemed to demonstrate all that was wrong with the U.S. decision to ally with South Vietnam." She then points out something

that I didn't know, which is that "the Viet Cong man was alleged to have himself killed the wife and six children of a South Vietnamese officer."

Another book that gives us a different look at things is *America in the World*, Robert Zoellick's magisterial view of the history of American foreign policy. Zoellick is a former senior government official in multiple Republican administrations who has done the hard work and research necessary for this kind of comprehensive overview. But he also brings in the policy-maker's understanding of the importance of personal interactions in the making of foreign policy. He notes, for example, how much Harry Truman appreciated Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson coming to meet Truman's train at the station after Truman returned to Washington following the Democratic wipeout in the 1946 election. And Truman himself made the gesture of calling the Republican victors, Senate Foreign Relations chairman Arthur Vandenberg and incoming House Speaker Joe Martin. As Zoellick notes, "Truman was encouraged by the warmth and spirit of cooperation from both men," and they worked together fruitfully on foreign-policy issues.

The personal touch also really matters in Ryan Cole's *Light Horse Harry Lee*. As Cole writes, Lee "was a great, if greatly flawed, patriot and a man who deserves to be mentioned among the early heroes of the republic." While Lee does indeed deserve those mentions, you should read the book to see why he does not get them.

Ilya Shapiro's timely *Supreme Disorder* is an informative history of Supreme Court appointments and confirmation battles in American history. Shapiro points out that almost half of American presidents have experienced a failed confirmation, and that the No. 1 historical predictor of confirmation success is whether the president's party controls the Senate. If they are of the same party, the confirmation success rate is about 90 percent; if they are of different parties, the confirmation success rate is below 60 percent.

The year 2020 was a good one for social commentary, as there was certainly a lot to comment on. If you think everything you read seems to be focused on bad news, you are right, and John Tierney and Roy Baumeister explain why in their riveting book *The Power of Bad*. As Tierney and Baumeister explain, there is even a responsible party to blame, namely what they call the "availability entrepreneurs." Who, pray tell, are they? "They're the journalists, activists, academics, trial lawyers and politicians who capitalize on the human tendency to gauge a danger according to how many examples are readily available in our minds."

Matt Ridley's celebration of ingenuity, *How Innovation Works*, is complementary to Tierney and Baumeister's book. Ridley shows that the availability entrepreneurs are pushing on an open door. According to Ridley, "Despite the abundant evidence that [innovation] has transformed everybody's lives for the better and in innumerable ways, the knee-jerk reaction of most people to something new is often worry, sometimes even disgust."

In Ben Shapiro's compelling *How to Destroy America in Three Easy Steps*, he explains the three key elements that define America: "America's philosophy of reason, equality, liberty, and limited government; America's culture of individual rights and social duties; and America's shared history." Unfortunately, Shapiro points out, a three-legged stool wobbles if one of the legs

goes: “One missing element leaves America in dire straits. Without America’s philosophy, reason collapses into tribalism; without America’s culture, individual rights collapse into collectivist tyranny or duties collapse into libertinism; without American history, the symbols that unite us divide us.” Yuval Levin’s *A Time to Build* acknowledges the reasons for pessimism out there, but also gives some advice for how to move forward. Levin proposes “a modest change in our stance toward our country and the social crisis it confronts.” The change he seeks? “Just a greater awareness of how integrity, trust, confidence, belonging, and meaning are established in our lives.” It seems like a good place to start.

One other way I sought to get past 2020’s negativity was by looking for laughs. I found them in a number of biographies of those who have entertained us. In Judd Apatow’s very funny *It’s Garry Shandling’s Book*, Apatow not only tells the origin story of the legendary, hysterical, and uber-meta theme song to Shandling’s sitcom, but also captures this gem from Shandling: “I love the *Sopranos*. Here’s what flipped me out: In the first episode, Tony’s mother is literally planning to kill him. That’s why I admire Italian women. Jewish moms drag it out a whole lifetime.”

Stan Lee: A Life in Comics, by Liel Leibovitz, is another good read in the entertainment space. Leibovitz gives readers a brisk overview of Lee’s life, highlighting that he was more of a synthesizer and organizer than a creator. He also makes a good case that Lee’s influence was broader than on just the comics. As Leibovitz writes, “Marvel was no longer the counterculture. It was now the culture itself.”

One beloved figure who had cultural influence extending well beyond his chosen profession was Yogi Berra, who interacted with every president from Truman to Trump. Jon Pessah’s *Yogi: A Life Behind the Mask* tells the great and funny Yogi stories that baseball fans know and love, but it also has broader insights into the internal workings of baseball teams. About the World Series–winning Yankees of the 1940s and early 1950s, Pessah points out that Joe DiMaggio was the acknowledged leader of the team: “Win or lose, DiMaggio spends each postgame tucked into his locker, sipping his cup of coffee, dragging on his cigarette, slowly unwinding from the self-imposed pressure. No one celebrates unless Joe does, and that doesn’t happen often.” The George Steinbrenner–owned Yankees of the 1970s were also World Series winners, but less frequently and more tumultuously. Pessah quotes Steinbrenner’s observation that “a sailing ship with no wind goes nowhere. Sometimes you have to have a little turmoil.”

Finally, one other category of unique interest to me is books written by members of the Troy family. My brother Gil Troy’s excellent *Never Alone*, written with some guy named Sharansky, tells Sharansky’s story in three stages: his time in Russia, his time in Israeli politics, and his time as head of the Jewish Agency in Israel. Sharansky is not a professional entertainer, but he certainly is funny. Readers will love the stories of him telling Soviet Union jokes to his KGB interrogators to see if he can get them to laugh, as well as the slogan of his political party of Russian emigres to Israel: “We are a different type of party, we go to prison first.” Finally, it would not be cricket of me to praise my latest book, *Fight House*, but I will thank NR for the kind words written about it here and here, as well as for NR’s willingness to let me share my book thoughts with you, dear reader, once again, and for the eighth straight year.