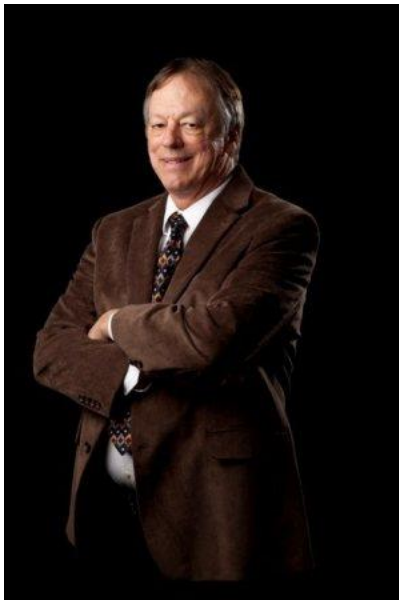

SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

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MARCH READ OF THE MONTH: “THE BOOKS THAT MATTERED,” BY FRYE GAILLARD

MARCH 27, 2013 BY [ALLEN MENDENHALL](#)



Reviewed by Allen Mendenhall

“My first encounters with books were disappointing.” That’s a curious opening line for a memoir about reading inspirational books, but an apt one, too, because Frye Gaillard anticipates right away how he will treat reading: not as an activity undertaken in isolation or as an exercise liberating readers from the quotidian operations of the everyday world. Reading, instead, plugs the mind into networks of human relations.

If a book doesn’t excite sensory data or recall lived experience, if it doesn’t empower us to organize the chaos around us into definitional structures and family resemblances, then it fails to meet expectations. It disappoints. In this, his latest, Gaillard writes about books that did not disappoint him, that colored his childhood and that marked him, as it were, as a man.

There are, I think, two levels of reading: one of enjoyment and one of edification. Gaillard, in relating his experiences (for that is what they are) with such writers as Mark Twain, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Lillian Smith, Richard Wright, Albert Murray, Tom Wolfe, Elie Wiesel, Kurt Vonnegut, Clyde Edgerton, Robert Penn Warren, John Steinbeck, Rick Bragg, Pat Conroy, Geraldine Brooks, and many others, seems to suggest that enjoyment is requisite for edification. One learns from what one likes. Appreciating a work of literature and relishing its words and phrases can cause one to revisit and reread it, to reconsider it and reflect on it. As the old adage goes, “To love is to learn.”

What makes a book good (at least what prevents it from being bad) are story and writing, not its message, political or otherwise, but its ability to engage with and captivate readers. Yet a well written story, by itself, is not necessarily significant; situational urgency (whether political or historical) both inside and outside stories add to their importance. To become a candidate for canonicity, stories must register with readers’ sensations and emotions, and to do *that*, they must interact with the ordinary and recognizable aspects of experience.

Feelings enable cognition; both of them together enable enjoyment. A consummation of reader and work, an experiential unity of mind and aesthetic, motivates the subsequent and rigorous pursuit of meaning. Pleasure is easy; digging beneath it isn’t.

One might, as Gaillard did, read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and delight in its heart-wrenching tales, spot on dialogue, and poignant prose. The emotional satisfaction generated by that experience can lead to a less immediately gratifying but ultimately more consequential stage of deliberation. In other words, one can adore *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and one can understand it. There’s a difference. Books that matter to Gaillard are those he both adores and understands.

Gaillard is a Southerner who grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. Because of his background—maybe in spite of it—he appreciates characters who are flawed and, therefore, believable, real, and relatable. That’s because they allowed him, first as a child and later as an adult, to make sense of the vexed issues, frenzied circumstances, and precarious institutions surrounding him.

The hero of *Johnny Tremain* introduced him to the exhilarating events of Revolutionary Era Boston, but also prepared him for the messy truth that the Founding Fathers were not mythical, perfect beings. Other truths followed. James Baldwin’s works taught him the fine line between rage and reconciliation as well as the harsh reality that some of us—probably all of us—are bound together in the reluctant pursuit of progress. And *The Great Santini* demonstrated how dangerously linked love and hate can be.

Reading was not just a coping mechanism for this thoughtful boy—that is, if we believe Gaillard’s favorable estimations of his boyhood acumen—but a vehicle for comprehending and sorting through matters of race and class, region and difference, universalities and particulars. Stories influenced him more than any hurried speech, prevailing ethos, or political mantra; he learned because great writers illuminated and clarified the profundities of observation and knowledge, not because semi-literate politicians pontificated and preached to him.

Part personal narrative, part freewheeling history, *The Books that Mattered* is not a Bloomian-styled promotion of works that others ought to read. It is an individualized account of books that affected one accomplished writer. Gaillard makes no promises or guarantees. He doesn't submit that his reading list will make you a better person or bless you in any way. Rather, he explores his own intellectual journey that texts set in motion. For that reason, it makes little sense to object to what is or isn't included in his list, which betrays a strong preference for American, and especially Southern, authors. It is, however, fair to criticize his treatment of his chosen subjects.

Yet there's not much to criticize besides the obvious: a book about reading good books will never be as interesting as the good books themselves. Would you rather read *Snow Falling on Cedars* (a topic of chapter seven) or have someone tell you how he felt when he read it?

Another difficulty of an undertaking such as this is in avoiding plot summary or the kind of simple authorial biography available on, say, Wikipedia. Gaillard takes pains to avoid these traps, but he does, it pains me to say, get stuck now and then. I'll pick one example at random: he spends five pages summarizing the life of Jacobo Timerman, a digression that doesn't add much to his otherwise subtle analyses about deriving meaning from texts.

Be that as it may, there is something charming about this book. Perhaps it's the sensitivity with which Gaillard recounts his gradual coming to terms with his home and impressions as with those of the fictional characters to whom he was, and remains, drawn. Or perhaps it's the dogged reassurance that books do matter, that they can instruct us if we endeavor, as we must, to put them into revealing contexts while expanding our own contexts. Or perhaps it's simply the joy that comes with getting to know someone, which is what you've done by the time you've finished *The Books That Mattered*: gotten to know Gaillard, his preferences and biases, his humor and logic, his suppositions and habits of thought.

If his book isn't one for the ages, it nevertheless imparts—not by what it states but by what it implies—wisdom about timeless things. He never comes right out and says it, but he suggests that enjoyment and reason are inexplicably tied and that their interrelation brings about knowledge. Knowledge depends on environment because it derives from embodied experience. If nothing else, reading helps us to acquaint ourselves with ourselves and our world. That's what matters. That's why we read, or ought to.

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