

# WHAT ARE WE READING?

We've been fogged in here in Chicago for the last five days, after a week of brutally cold weather: perfect for reading. And a good time, too. My family's go-to Christmas gifts are books, and I have a bunch of new ones, so here's some of what I've been reading.

## Current and recent books

1. *The Tyranny of the Minority* by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt. This was the choice of a member of our book club, not a personal choice. It's a discussion of the counter-majoritarian provisions of the Constitution and the counter-majoritarian norms and institutions that it spawned. It's a depressing list, especially because the authors contrast it with the rules of other democracies.

The authors think the Republican Party is in the hands of people who oppose democracy because their policy views are anathema to the vast majority of Americans. They don't go into the question of why this is so, which means they don't emphasize the role of the filthy rich and their lunatic goals.

The last chapter of such books is supposed to be the hopeful part filled with solutions. But it's just as depressing as the rest of the book.

2. *The Secret Lives Of Colors* by Kassia St. Clair. This is a collection of 75 short essays on 75 different colors. St. Clair wrote them for British Elle Decoration. Each gives us some idea of the origin of the color, how it is made, it's uses and other things she thinks are interesting. Puce was named by Louis XVI. Marie Antoinette wore gowns of puce in the summer of 1775, and he supposedly said it was the color of "puce", the French word for flea. Scarlet isn't the color I think of either. Here's a link to the .pdf color chart.

The first time I went to the Pompidou I saw one of the works of the post-WWII artist Yves Klein: a flat canvas in the color he patented called International Klein Blue. It was entrancing. Also hilarious. Klein patented the color. Here's the Wikipedia entry, with a swatch of the color. It merits notice in St. Clair's book.

3. *Eve* by Cat Bohannon is an exploration of the evolution of the female human body. Bohannon is a terrific writer, as ready with a smart-ass quip as she is with a lucid description of recent research on oligosaccharides. I'm in the chapter on mother's milk, and can talk your ear off about the marvelous fluids that create babies and the interactions between mother and baby created by this feature of all mammals. But I won't.

Bohannon studies the evolution of cognition and narrative, about which she says "my field of research required I read regularly in at least three different disciplines (cognitive psychology, evolutionary theories of cognition, and computational linguistics)". It shows. The problem she saw is that science treats the male body as the norm, ignoring the important fact that it's women's bodies that make the babies. Bohannon has two offspring (as she puts it on her personal webpage), and tells us a little about her experiences. The result is a wholistic narrative that keeps me involved in what might otherwise be a technical explication.

4. *The Marquis Who Mustn't* by Courtney Milan. This is an entry in a series about a 19th C. English village populated by Asian immigrants. I really liked Milan's earlier books, especially the series *The Brothers Sinister*. This one uses a technique common in romance novels: of constant repetition of the problems of the main characters. It feels like padding when we are reminded for the 25th time that the woman thinks she's ugly and no one will love her. I did learn a bit about pottery-making, but I admit to skipping a number of pages that felt repetitive.

**Other books of interest**

1. *The Education of a Golfer* by Sam Snead and Scott Carter. I saw a tweet about books you read as a 12-year old more than once, and after a bit of thought I remembered this book. I was an avid golfer starting in 6th grade. I played with my dad and we often watched golf on TV, so I knew about Slammin' Sammy Snead, Arnold Palmer and the great Julius Boros, who had the most beautiful swing I ever saw. I don't remember how I found it, but I must have read it over and over, because when I saw that tweet I remembered the story about the chinchillas.

2. I'll be re-reading *Possession* by A. S. Byatt, a book I've read at least 10 times since seeing a review in the New York Times book section. This book is a mixture of action, romance, feminist theory, 19th C. Poetry, and much more, told in multiple voices and through many eyes. Each thread of the storyline feels real and each reading has revealed a new aspect.

The book was made into a 2008 movie starring Gweneth Paltrow, Aaron Eckhart, Jennifer Ehle and Jeremy Northam, not to be confused with the horror flick of the same name. It necessarily leaves out most of the stuff that makes the book so fascinating. Eckhart is too handsome and self-assured to be a good Roland, but the other three characters are very good. I'd forgotten that Paltrow could act.

3. Among the books I gave as gifts at Christmas was *Lessons In Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus. it's a delightful book, inspired by a galling event in Garmus' life. I think my spouse read it for a book club focused on fiction by women, and I found it in our shared Kindle library (my eyes are bad, and I can only read in e-formats.) It's a sort of feminist romance novel, but it's much more. I couldn't help but think a bit about my own mother, who did graduate courses in modern literature, focusing on Faulkner, while raising seven offspring.

4. I'll be re-reading chapter 9 of *The Origins Of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt for the next entries in my series on rights. It's titled "The

Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man", and can be read as a stand-alone essay on the subject. I didn't discuss this chapter in detail when I did my series on this book, but it's a good way of thinking about rights from a practical standpoint without focusing on current right-wing claims of rights like the right to force other people to give birth or the right of every gun shop to sell to every loon who walks in.

**So**, that's me. What are you reading? What do you have on your table waiting to be read?