

# BOOKS OF THEIR LIVES

EIGHT EARLHAM FACULTY MEMBERS RECOMMEND BOOKS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO THEM



Did you know that more novels are currently published in a week than the great 18th century literary figure Samuel Johnson encountered in a decade? And that's just referring to works in English. Add in world literature, history, criticism, how-to, journalism, self-help, science, biography, social science, philosophy and whatever else looks interesting and the list of must-read books becomes dauntingly long.

Despite technological advances that have revolutionized the way people collect and use information, books can still present sustained arguments and sweeping narratives in a way that stands apart from other formats. Some readers use e-books instead of printed versions, choosing to read the text on a screen instead of paper, but this does not subtract from the usefulness of books themselves. There remain places in this world where there is no replacement for the depth and scope that a book-length text provides. Earlham is such a place.

New delivery systems for information have not altered one basic premise: reading a bunch of books and talking about them in class is what much of college is about. Curricular innovations come and go, but reading, writing and discussion will always be at the core of the Earlham experience. That means books — whether they take the form of paperbacks riddled with scribbles or electronic files read off the screen of a hand-held device — are very much alive.

While the world of publishing has made it difficult for lesser-known authors or mid-list titles to get the public's attention, there is still plenty of fanfare available for blockbuster titles. It's easy to hear about so many more interesting titles than one will ever manage to read. So books aren't just still with us, they are all around us.

They loom over us from the high shelves of libraries and bookstores. They are available by the millions from online vendors or catalogues. If you're anything like me, they watch over you while you sleep, piled in precarious stacks on the bedside table. And as the books proliferate, it can be daunting to choose which one to read next.

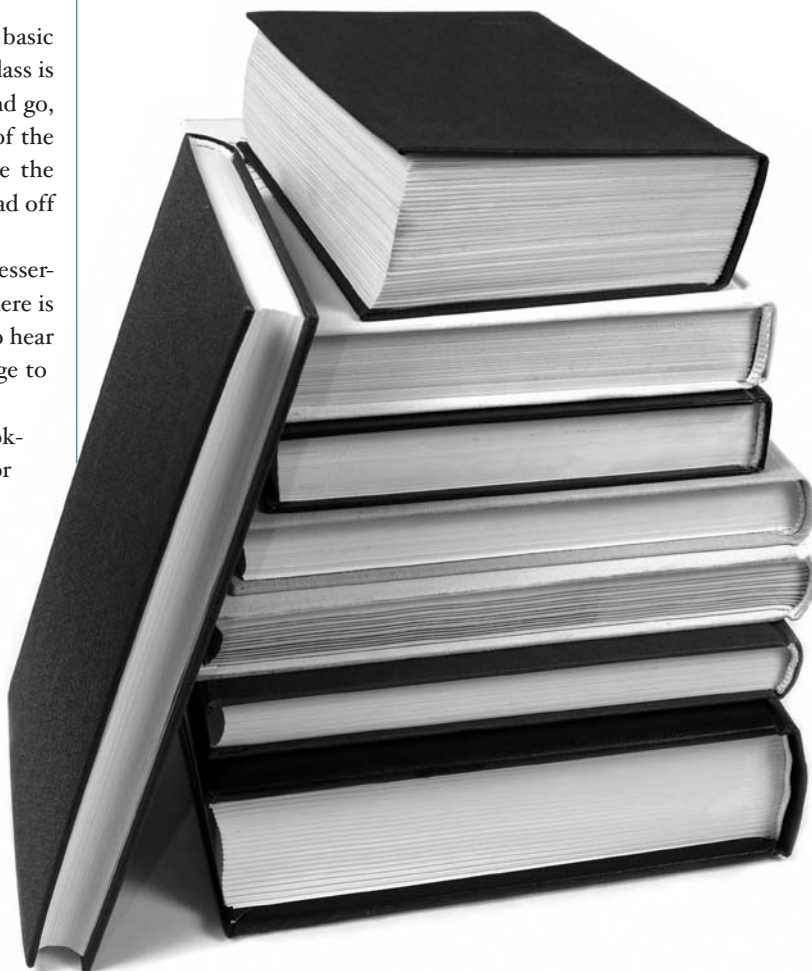
When the Earlhamite decided to devote an issue to the topic "Books that Change Lives," I asked my colleagues on the faculty to tell me about books they have found life-altering. As you might expect, they provided quite an eclectic list. Eight Earlham faculty members were kind enough to share their personal takes on books they recommended.

On the next few pages, you will find recommendations from faculty who have been here for decades and those who recently arrived, from professors as well as administrators, from an adjunct faculty member and the President of the

College. You'll read about books that Earlham professors have found particularly rewarding to teach and books that have been important in their lives outside the classroom. Some pieces tell of books that led professors to their chosen fields, while others report on books in their areas of expertise that they recommend to a more general audience.

If you would like to recommend a book to your fellow Earlhamites, write to me at [earlhamite@earlham.edu](mailto:earlhamite@earlham.edu), and I'll be delighted to post it on the Extended Engagements blog: [http://www.earlham.edu/earlhamiteextras/archives/cat\\_extended\\_engagements.php](http://www.earlham.edu/earlhamiteextras/archives/cat_extended_engagements.php). Go there today to read more recommendations from Earlham faculty, staff and students.

—Jonathan Graham, Editor



## BOOKS THAT KEEP ON TEACHING

*What is Found There:*

*Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*

by Adrienne Rich

W.W. Norton & Company, 2003

ISBN: 0393312461

When you hear the word “poetry,” politics probably isn’t the first thing that springs to mind. Certainly good poetry cannot be described in narrow political terms, as “Republican” or “Democratic.” Yet in Adrienne Rich’s provocative series of essays and reflections, poetry is political at its root, because it reawakens desires in us that lead us to pursue new ways of living and new patterns of relationships with one another.

In one two-page essay in the book, Rich claims that we must learn to “write, and read, as if your life depended on it.” I like to teach this essay at the start of first-year interpretive practices courses because it directly addresses the experience of education. Rich claims in the essay that “to read as if your life depended on it would mean to let



into your reading your beliefs, the swirl of your dreamlife, the physical sensations of your ordinary carnal life; and, simultaneously, to allow what you’re reading to pierce the routines, safe and impermeable, in which ordinary carnal life is tracked, charted, channeled” (32). What does it mean, I ask my students, to let reading — even reading poetry — enter the “swirl of your dreamlife” and pierce, not only your “daily routines,” but

your bodily (or “carnal”) life, including the habitual patterns of perception and assumptions with which you see the world? Reading in this way becomes deeply political, but it brings us into an imaginative politics profoundly different and more rich than what passes for politics on talk radio and C-Span today — a politics in which, Rich claims, there are no “right answers,” no pre-established talking points to repeat.

Reading and writing, seen in this way, become acts of commitment and courage, creativity and struggle, to integrate the personal and the social, the ideal and the practical. Which is exactly what I hope will happen every time my students and I take up a book or a pen, and every time we come into the classroom.

—Scott Hess, Assistant Professor of English

*Leviathan*

by Thomas Hobbes

(originally published in 1651)

Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994

ISBN: 0872201775

Since my junior year in college (now 40 years ago) I’ve been arguing with Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, and there’s no end in sight. I find it’s a little like wrestling with the Uncle Remus’s Tar Baby: the more I argue with Hobbes the more I find myself stuck in his ways of thinking about politics. And I’m far from alone in being stuck there.

It is Hobbes’s *Leviathan* that famously tells us that the condition of human beings, “by nature” is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” Hobbes argues syllogistically to that conclusion from a few powerful assumptions about human nature. He argues further, again with taut reasoning, that the only escape from this “war of all against all” is to cede absolute authority to a unitary sovereign.

I find Hobbes’s conclusions about authority to be loathsome and unacceptable. And I’ve never encountered anyone who agrees with his conclusions. But the argument is very powerful: you can’t accept his assumptions about human nature and easily refuse his conclusions about authority. It was Bertrand Russell, I believe, who once remarked that the good thing about Hobbes is that if he isn’t completely right, he’s completely wrong.

So why not just reject his assumptions about human nature? Because his assump-



tions are widely ascendant both in popular culture and in intellectual argument. (They are the assumptions we use, for example, to justify and explain market economies.) At base, Hobbes argues we are hard-wired as selfish creatures. For Hobbes, what is ‘good’ is simply and only what is ‘good for me.’ And what is ‘good for me’ is simply and only what gives me pleasure or avoids pain. Daily I recognize that if I accept those assumptions about human nature, I’m risking accepting the abysmal conclusions of *Leviathan*.

Meanwhile, Hobbes basic conceptual terminology about politics completely dominates our ways of thinking. The terms “authority,” “representation” and “rights” all were first used in their modern English-language sense in *Leviathan*.

For twenty-five years I taught *Leviathan* every semester to college students, urging them to understand his power and resist his conclusions. Today, the book is still keeping me company.

—Doug Bennett, President

## BOOKS THAT HOOKED THEM

*Abraham Lincoln: A Biography*

by Lord Charnwood

Madison Books, 1998

ISBN: 1568330677

Charnwood in many ways follows the conventional course of a one-volume biography: he examines Lincoln’s obscure origins, his

tardy and unlikely rise to political prominence, and of course in detail his conduct of the presidency during the Civil War. Charnwood grasps Lincoln's political life by focusing upon his "character." Many of the benchmarks of Lincoln's character are laid out in the book: his honesty and rock-ribbed integrity, his homespun humor, his melancholy, his gentleness, his determination, his embrace of principle combined with a keen sense of prudence, his "fatalistic confidence in the ultimate victory of reason" — as well as his own capacity to pursue it.



Charnwood suggests that the greatest of his powers was "his rare capacity for solitary thought." His character emerges best in his writings, for Lincoln, whose formal education was of less than twelve months' duration, was a master of English prose, grounded in such models as the King James Bible, John Milton and William Shakespeare. Charnwood writes, "One special merit of his graceful language was that grave difficulties were handled in a style which could arouse all the interest of a boy and penetrate the understanding of a case-hardened party man." Take this concise statement of his political philosophy: "As I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master. This expresses my idea of democracy. Whatever differs from this, to the extent of the difference, is no democracy."

Lincoln felt the wrenching horrors of war and the terrible responsibilities of leadership in it. One can see it in his face, through those photographs as the war visibly aged him. His

gifts as a war leader, though self-taught and rather late in coming, were prodigious, aided as they were by a firm sense of his own limitations and those of others. Above all he was able to combine a steely determination to prevail with an abiding humility and humanity, such that in his beautiful Second Inaugural Address he could write of his nearly vanquished foe: "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other.... The prayers of both could not be answered — that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes." And then this wonderful passage: "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations."

— *Bob Johnstone, Professor of Politics*

*Teaching with books:  
a study of college libraries*

by Bennett Harvie Branscomb  
American Library Association, 1940  
reprinted by Shoe Spring Press in 1964

This is one of the earliest statements about how libraries might be central to the academic program. Branscomb, library director and professor of Christian Literature at Duke University was director of the project, which began in 1937 and concluded with this publication. The professional origins of the project, plus much of the content make the volume appear as just another professional piece focused on the operation of academic libraries. However in two chapters entitled "The Problem of the College Library," and the title chapter "Teaching with Books," Branscomb lays out the under utilization of the academic library and the resultant gap in undergraduate education that results. He puts the problem front and center when he writes of the need for "a closer integration of the college library with the other educational forces on the campus." The book both stimulated discussion of the issue as well as forecast what has been one of the two or three major issues of academic librarianship in the second half of the 20th century and into the 21st century.



Amidst the many suggestions for technical improvement of library operations and the importance of various professional concerns such as library budgets, the development of a library's collections, and making books more accessible, Branscomb focuses in the title chapter not on the library per se but on the nature of the academic program and its instructional modes. Branscomb is one of the first to link teaching methodology to the use, or lack of use, of academic libraries. In so doing he combines a utilitarian view of the value of the resource which colleges have created with the pedagogical view of the library as central to effective teaching and learning.

The book is of personal interest because it was one of the first pieces I read that articulated my own sense of the role of the academic library and the failure to fulfill that role effectively. I have returned to it frequently as a reminder of how the challenge should be framed. The issue is not exclusively a "library problem" but is rather an issue that an entire institution must address.

It is remarkable that 66 years later academic libraries continue to work with the rest of the academic community to realize Branscomb's vision of the library "as an integral part of the educational process for which the college exists."

— *Tom Kirk, Library Director*

## PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

### *Kitchen Table Wisdom*

Rachel Naomi Remen

Riverhead Trade, 10th Anniversary Edition, 2006

ISBN: 1594482098

My cancer diagnosis came a few days after returning from sabbatical — right at the start of the 2005 school year. You may know this experience personally; you may know it because someone you love has spent intimate time with an oncologist. Even if you do not yet claim this knowledge, you can certainly empathize. The response to the diagnosis is not one of gratitude.

The forced rest brought on by chemotherapy, surgery and radiation provides plenty of time for reading. I read a lot (and not just for grading or trying to understand the biology of cancer). Looking back, I should not have been surprised that the book that changed the way I thought about my cancer came from a former student.

Everything about Earlham prepares you for this — the personal connections, the openness of mind and spirit, believing that everyone holds a piece of the truth. *Kitchen Table Wisdom* arrived in the mail from Leah Welsh '04 sometime that fall. The enclosed note was a heart-felt wish for my health and spirit. I only had to open the book Leah was loaning to have my health and spirit incrementally restored: her mother had lovingly inscribed it to the daughter, a student taking a senior seminar exploring the intersection of mind, spirit and body in medicine.



The stories told in the book helped change my thought patterns from what cancer was taking (energy, time, independence, health) to what it was bringing (love, friendship, grace, honesty, a clarity about priorities.). Story after story provided strength, perspective, and a deep internal peace of heart and of mind. Over time, I could be grateful for the gifts that the big 'C' was bringing me — one of the most beautiful was a book loaned after being given. The chain continued by whoever pointed Leah's mom to the book has not been broken; I have passed the wisdom, and hopefully the gifts, to several. My own gifts keep arriving.

—Amy Mulnix, Professor of Biology

### *On Liberty,*

John Stuart Mill

(originally published in 1859)

Penguin Classics, new edition edited by

Gertrude Himmelfarb, 1982

ISBN: 0140432078

Four years ago, I taught a class for first-year students about living and learning in community, and we had a wonderful time reading *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill. Most of the time in our democratic society, we talk about majority rule, but Mill talks about the need to listen to the voice of the minority, and that really speaks to me. The book helped us talk about what happens when individuality comes into conflict with the needs of the community.

Earlham students are very much individualists, so they responded to Mill's philosophy of individual rights. They were able to take his arguments and apply them to any political issue, so we ended up talking about all sorts of things in that class. But the premise of the class was to take the idea of individualism and look at it in the context of Earlham's principles and practices of living in community.

Students want to believe that they can do virtually anything in residence, and they usually can if they do so at the right time, in the right place and in the right manner. The difficulty comes when one's individual choice butts up against anybody else. At that point, the majority does rule.

By reading *On Liberty*, the students really began to understand how to live in community. Students come in with the sense that the individual is the priority, but Mill helped them see the importance of the community.

They came to understand more fully that not hurting one another has a lot to do with the time, place and manner in which they exercise their individual freedom. That's really the essence of life in the residence halls. Students were actually making decisions about life in their hall during that class. It was terrific to see that a book written in 1859 could have such a practical impact on students' lives.

—Deb McNish, Dean of Student Development



## RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FIELD

### *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect*

By Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel

Crown Publishers, 2001

ISBN 0609607839

Tired of "news" about Brad and Angelina? Britney's babies? "Reality" TV?

Bothered by report after report of nothing but violence in Iraq? Darfur? Downtown?

Sick of sound bites and simplifications and stereotypes passing as news?

A growing number of reporters and editors are, and the book *The Elements of Journalism: What News People Should Know and the Public Should Expect* is one of the tools they are using to raise consciousness and spark change.

The co-authors come from the mainstream media. Bill Kovach is a veteran *New York Times* staffer who led the *Atlanta*

*Journal-Constitution* to two Pulitzer prizes and who also served as curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard. Tom Rosenstiel is an Oberlin graduate who started his career working with legendary investigative columnist Jack Anderson and who has covered national media and politics for the *Los Angeles Times*.

These two news veterans are now media critics working for change, and they focus on why journalism is important. Their answer: to provide citizens with the information they need to be self-governing.

To reach that goal, they believe journalists must focus on core values. Among the “elements” they distilled from interviews with more than 3,000 citizens and news people are truth and verification, and loyalty to citizens and to conscience. They call on journalists to work as independent monitors of power, to make the significant interesting and relevant, and to keep the news comprehensive and proportional.

In 2001, the year the book came out, *Publisher's Weekly* ended a positive review of it by saying: “However, the authors offer no specific suggestions as to how to enact these principles in a wide-reaching or systematic manner.”



That suits my purposes as a teacher because the book also makes the point that “every generation creates its own journalism.” I believe this generation of students must revitalize news and recapture journalism’s central civic mission. Here in Richmond, students work at the Earlham *Word* and as part

of the news staff for radio station WECI. Numerous others blog or work on the Web, serving niche audiences that include gamers and animé enthusiasts. They all are gaining the skills and knowledge that may help turn around the news business.

But their efforts are not enough. Those of us who depend on the news must demand better. If we simply stop our subscriptions or change the channel, the problems remain and we all remain less informed.

—Judi Hetrick,  
*Adjunct Assistant Professor of Journalism*

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*The Nature of Design, Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention*

by David W. Orr  
Oxford University Press, 2002  
ISBN: 0195173686

In the summer of 1987, I participated in a School for Field Studies program studying tropical rain forest ecology at the Rara Avis research station in Costa Rica. One day, as we were measuring tree diameters on a slope overlooking a small river valley I noticed three bulldozers clear-cutting several hectares of forest on the other side of the dirt road leading into the station. As I looked at the tree I was measuring in front of me and the deforestation happening before my eyes across the road I had something of an epiphany. I recall saying to myself at the time, “I want to know what causes that,” gesturing over to the newly created pastureland.

Ever since, I have been interested in the intersections between nature and culture. Between the meanings we produce in how we read the natural world and how those contribute to our actions and behaviors. I began to see that environmental problems were, at their core, human problems. But it was not until I read David Orr that I realized the crucial role that education plays in these relationships. Orr’s most cited work in this regard is his 1994 classic, *The Earth in Mind: On Education and the Human Prospect*, where he makes the claim that all education should be, in essence, environmental education. But what I most appreciate about his more recent work, *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention* (2002), is the way he consciously and deliberately tangles education, culture and environment in both explaining our current environmental crises

and in imagining potential solutions. To Orr, we cannot begin to understand our ecological problems until we understand how the processes of schooling contribute to a funda-



mentally unsustainable way of life. But this is more than just another dark and dreary environmental tale.

Orr infuses his arguments with hope and with a new progressive language that begins to move beyond some of the negativism implicit in the current environmental movement while being careful not to romanticize progress or nature (his distinction between “fast” and “slow” knowledge is particularly poignant in this regard). He writes, “the problem is not how to produce ecologically benign products for the consumer economy, but how to make decent communities in which people grow to be responsible citizens and whole people” (12). This, of course, is at the heart of an Earlham education. Our challenge now in this new and difficult age is, in the words of Maxine Greene, to imagine how things might be otherwise. *The Nature of Design* offers a glimpse into that hopeful future.

—Jay Roberts, *Director of Wilderness Programs*