



January 1999

## The Canon Debate: What Makes You Think That Book is So Great?

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### Recommended Citation

Bassett, Charles (1999) "The Canon Debate: What Makes You Think That Book is So Great?," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 88 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol88/iss1/7>

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# THE CANON DEBATE



**What Makes You Think That Book is So Great?**

**BY CHARLES BASSETT**





**F**irst of all, in a burst of uncharacteristic humility, let me confess that I did not aspire to share these words with the learned body of Colby alumni. The genesis of this article was a speech to some of the best and brightest students at Colby, the Dana and Bixler Scholars—an audience willing to show up on a Friday night in October to hear me do something besides read ghost stories.

My title for that speech was “The Literary Canon and How It Works”; it should have been “Literary Canons and How *They* Work.” In 1999, I think that most of us will agree that we have no unique literary canon that all readers in the world understand as absolute, transcendent and beyond debate. Thus, I should more accurately speak of canons, except that when I mentioned this plural title to one of my more literal students, he asked how I got interested in artillery.

The canons under scrutiny here have only one *n* and require no ammunition, though they are tended by a very expert yet jealously exclusive cadre of “operators.” These operators range from countless schoolteachers (“You have to read that or flunk!”); to the 19th-century English literary critic Matthew Arnold (“the best that was thought and said”); to the Book-of-the-Month Club; to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (*Great Books of the Western World*, circa 1952); to colleges named St. John’s in Annapolis and Santa Fe, the curricula of which are a canon of “great books”; to the Yale literary guru Harold Bloom (*The Western Canon*, 1994); to TV’s Oprah’s Book Club. Over and above all of these, the president of Colby College annually tells members of his baccalaureate audience in Lorimer Chapel to keep a good book with them on all journeys and to join the public library, where good books are readily available.

Like any group of literate Americans in 1999, readers of this article would applaud Bill Cotter's advice but disagree violently about what books would be considered "good." Even people who revile canons and canon-makers know that Harlequin romances and the authorized biography of Dennis Rodman aren't good books, let alone great books.

Nevertheless, reading anything at all—short of the Boise telephone directory—is increasingly rare in American culture. Let me be perfectly clear: I'd prefer that my students read almost any novel or novelist—John Grisham, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Danielle Steel—rather than be drugged by typical airline-fare movies. Last summer, between 2 and 4 a.m. on my way to Alaska to visit my daughter, I almost overdosed on a little number called *Paulie*, the saga of a lovesick parrot. I ended up lusting for the Boise telephone book. Still, I know sure as shootin' that someone out there loved *Paulie*, the epitome of G films—another canon, you will note, Hollywood style.

Somehow, readers, like diners and football fans and shoppers, seem to need validation for their choices. We want the Top 20 in every regard, the imprimatur of the "expert," the wheat sifted out of all that chaff. After all, no one has time to waste just reading a book. We could be watching *Paulie* or tapping away on our laptops or running marathons or curing the common cold.

What makes this whole issue so hot right now is the controversy surrounding the Modern Library's list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century, a roster that appeared in almost every conceivable medium last summer and is now called simply "The List." A distinguished advisory board—including William Styron (*Sophie's Choice*), Gore Vidal (gobs of novels like *Burr* and *1876*), the British novelist A. S. Byatt (the only woman) plus six eminent historians like Arthur Schlesinger and Edmund Morris—weighed in with their selections, and, predictably, fur flew all the way to Boise.

Almost no one liked the Modern Library list, which was led by the most fa-

mous unread novel of all time, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. As K. J. H. Dettmar characterized The List: "It's too white (no Toni Morrison?), too male (no Toni Morrison?), too dead (no Thomas Pynchon? no Don DeLillo? no Toni Morrison?); too Anglo-American (no Nadine Gordimer?); too middlebrow (*Brave New World* in the top 10?); too self-interested (over half the books are published by the Modern Library itself)." The Modern Library Advisory Board almost immediately backed off in print, lamely confessing that they'd been hoodwinked by The List's catalyst, Christopher Cerf. Styron eventually characterized The List as "stodgy," and Schlesinger complained in *The Wall Street Journal* that "the execution was not well thought out." Even Cerf admitted that The List was a scam, but a "good scam." After all, it did get the subject of books back on the op-ed page.

A graceful little essay by historian Morris on The List's glories and omissions in *The New York Times Book Review* in late August did little to soothe the disgruntled. Morris had never heard of Peter Carey, a contemporary British novelist of some reputation in the English literary establishment, engendering a snappish letter to the *Times* from my one famous friend (everyone has to have one famous friend), Joel Conarroe, president of the Guggenheim Foundation, who opined, "That Morris is one of a half-dozen historians on a panel of 10 may account for the 'fiction lite' quality of the Top 100 list—and for the astonishing absence of such writer's writers as John Updike, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Flann O'Brien. Were the century's 100 best history books to be selected and ranked by a group dominated by literary figures, the results would doubtless be no less inept than this bland pudding cooked up by a historian-laden panel." Conarroe is normally a very calm and easy-going man, but canons seem to bring out the Mike Tyson in all of us.

And, of course, the press services loved comparing the Modern Library List to another Top 100 compiled at about the same time by the (predominately female and young) students at the Radcliffe Publishing Course. These canoneers didn't forget Toni Morrison (or Alice Walker, or some others), but they brought scorn on their list by including *The Wizard of Oz* and *Charlotte's Web* and *The Wind in the Willows*, all of them lovely reads but almost never considered "great."

So, you see, even as we seek validation of our reading choices by "experts," we will spit fire if somehow our favorite novel is left out. I share my friend Conarroe's indignation especially that Updike and O'Connor didn't make The List. But I also love a novel that Morris, the historian, failed to get included: James Gould Cozzens's *Guard of Honor* (Conarroe thinks Cozzens "pedestrian"). Angry as we get, we continue to attach labels to books—"good," "great," "clas-





sic"—probably because we think that reading "masterpieces" will demonstrate cultural status. Hey, if you waded through *Ulysses* (or, God forbid, *Finnegan's Wake*), you're a certified intellectual who walks among the favored few. Look how much of the Modern Library's fiction you've read, you superior creature, you. We should strike you a medal or something, in gold, Shakespeare rampant.

For all that, the identity of elitist literature varies panoramically. The historian Lawrence Levine, in his delightful *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, notes that Shakespeare was for many years the most popular author in America. For example, Ulysses S. Grant played Desdemona in the Fourth Infantry Regiment's production of *Othello* in 1845. Levine isn't keen on elitism in any society, preferring "those who, possessing no map and little liking for fixes and unmovable fences and boundaries, believe that worthy, enduring culture is

not the possession of any single group or genre or period, who conceive of culture as neither finite or fixed but dynamic and expansive, and who remain unconvinced that the moment an expressive form becomes accessible to large numbers of people it loses the intellectual criteria necessary to classify it as culture."

Levine's radical inclusiveness is based on his belief that the ambitious and snobbish plutocrats who dominate American economic life seek to extend their power into culture. "That panoply of cultural creations, attitudes, and rituals that we have learned to call high culture [e.g., 'The 100 Best English-language Novels of the 20th Century']," writes Levine, "was not the imperishable product of the ages but the result of a specific group of men and women acting at a particular moment in history." If this assertion seems culturally relative, accenting the attitudes of the audience more than the intrinsic achievements of the work of art, Levine also emerges as a cultural populist who believes that art is constantly evolving and can blossom anywhere, anytime, to anyone. We exclude at our peril.

Levine has little time for the "intrinsic merit" school of literary canonizers, for years best represented by Cleanth Brooks in his once-indispensable literary analysis, *The Well-Wrought Urn*, and even more forcefully argued by the earlier mentioned high-culture maven, Harold Bloom. In *The Western Canon*, Bloom asserts that intrinsic aesthetic merit does exist, the test of literary greatness being the power of an author's work to influence other writers over the ages. Bloom's is a self-referential canon, determined not by school teachers or book reviewers or television personalities but by writers speaking to writers. The best writers are those who "provoke immense ambivalence in those who come after them," a

## BASSETT'S TOP THIRTEEN

My "canon" is limited to  
20th-century American fiction,  
arranged alphabetically by  
author (satisfaction guaranteed).

Saul Bellow,  
*Herzog*

Ralph Ellison,  
*Invisible Man*

William Faulkner,  
*The Sound and the Fury* or  
*Go Down, Moses*

F. Scott Fitzgerald,  
*The Great Gatsby*

Ernest Hemingway,  
*The Sun Also Rises* or *The Complete Short Stories*

Toni Morrison,  
*Song of Solomon*

Flannery O'Connor,  
*The Complete Stories*

John O'Hara,  
*Appointment in Samarra*

J. D. Salinger,  
*Nine Stories*

John Steinbeck,  
*Tortilla Flat*

John Updike,  
*Rabbit, Run*



Canonization is a dicey business. Just ask the folks at Random House, whose Modern Library 100 last summer inflamed the passions of readers who disliked many of its choices and wondered at the temerity of even attempting to select a "best" book. Undeterred by the controversy, or perhaps emboldened by it, the *Library Journal* recently developed a list of its own by asking librarians across the country to weigh in with their selections. The result was a top 100 dramatically different from the Modern Library compilation.

Only 38 books appear on both lists. The highest-rated book from the combined lists is *The Great Gatsby*. Four of the top five and 11 of the top 20 in the *Library Journal* list do not appear on the Modern Library list. Six of the Modern Library's top 20 failed to make the LJ 100.

There was at least one book about which the list-makers agreed. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* is number 45 on both lists.

The Modern Library Top 100 is printed below. Bold-faced titles are those that also appear in the *Library Journal* list. The corresponding ratings from the LJ list are in parentheses.

1. *Ulysses*, James Joyce (44)
2. *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald (13)
3. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce (53)
4. *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov (17)
5. *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley (41)
6. *The Sound and the Fury*, William Faulkner (47)
7. *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller (10)
8. *Darkness at Noon*, Arthur Koestler
9. *Sons and Lovers*, D.H. Lawrence
10. *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck (20)
11. *Under the Volcano*, Malcolm Lowry
12. *The Way of All Flesh*, Samuel Butler
13. *1984*, George Orwell (7)
14. *I, Claudius*, Robert Graves (70)
15. *To the Lighthouse*, Virginia Woolf (60)
16. *An American Tragedy*, Theodore Dreiser
17. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson McCullers
18. *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Kurt Vonnegut (14)
19. *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison (28)
20. *Native Son*, Richard Wright (31)
21. *Henderson the Rain King*, Saul Bellow
22. *Appointment in Samarra*, John O'Hara
23. *U.S.A. (trilogy)*, John Dos Passos (97)

24. *Winesburg, Ohio*, Sherwood Anderson (59)
25. *A Passage to India*, E.M. Forster (75)
26. *The Wings of the Dove*, Henry James
27. *The Ambassadors*, Henry James
28. *Tender Is the Night*, F. Scott Fitzgerald
29. *The Studs Lonigan Trilogy*, James T. Farrell
30. *The Good Soldier*, Ford Madox Ford (77)
31. *Animal Farm*, George Orwell (8)
32. *The Golden Bowl*, Henry James
33. *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser (86)
34. *A Handful of Dust*, Evelyn Waugh
35. *As I Lay Dying*, William Faulkner
36. *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren (94)
37. *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Thornton Wilder
38. *Howard's End*, E.M. Forster
39. *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, James Baldwin
40. *The Heart of the Matter*, Graham Greene
41. *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding (9)
42. *Deliverance*, James Dickey
43. *A Dance to the Music of Time (series)*, Anthony Powell
44. *Point Counter Point*, Aldous Huxley
45. *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway (45)
46. *The Secret Agent*, Joseph Conrad

phenomenon that Bloom calls the "anxiety of influence." Bloom's canon of great books doesn't exist to free readers from anxiety; a canon is an achieved anxiety, just as any strong literary work is its author's achieved anxiety. The literary canon does not baptize us into cultures; it does not make us free of cultural anxiety. Rather, it "confirms" our cultural anxieties, yet helps give them form and coherence.

Given this intramural definition of the great as anxiety producers, Bloom's choice as the most important author in the Western canon is—hold on to your hats, now—**Shakespeare**. And after the Bard, the writers of the Bible. The most influential American writer is Walt Whitman, with a nod to Emily Dickinson. Moreover, Bloom reviles those scholars he calls "the extra-literary 'School of Resentment'"—the Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians,

who care nothing for literature per se; these resentful theorists, Bloom says, are using literature as a chip in a game of social engineering or as a signifier in a nihilistic and meaningless dance of words.

In fact, Bloom himself expressly abjures any social "worth" for literature. "Reading the very best writers . . . is [not] going to make us better citizens." Bloom claims that "the study of literature . . . will not save any individual any more than it will improve any society." So much for those who believe that Lincoln was right when he identified Harriet Beecher Stowe as "the little woman who started this big war" or that Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* got us The Pure Food & Drug Act. Bloom won't even grant that reading good books is fun: "The text is there not to give pleasure but the high unpleasure or more difficult pleasure that a lesser text will not provide." I'll bet that all of you who

read Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* or the "who begot whom" chapters of the Bible experienced some "difficult pleasure"; you just didn't recognize it as pleasure of any sort. Reading Bloom's best books "can bring one to the proper use of one's own solitude, that solitude whose final form is one's confrontation with one's own mortality."

*Charlotte's Web* probably won't do that. Neither will Dorothy's conclusion that "There's no place like home." But I frankly do not demand a confrontation with my mortality in every good book I read. And I certainly can't expect my students to face up to the Grim Reaper in every daily assignment. One wonders if Bloom could bring himself to appreciate Mark Twain's satire or James Thurber's essays. Or even the Miami newspaper columnist Dave Barry, who convulses me once a Sunday. Can a "great" book be funny? Somehow I don't



47. *Nostromo*, Joseph Conrad
48. *The Rainbow*, D.H. Lawrence
49. *Women in Love*, D.H. Lawrence (95)
50. *Tropic of Cancer*, Henry Miller
51. *The Naked and the Dead*, Norman Mailer
52. *Portnoy's Complaint*, Philip Roth (80)
53. *Pale Fire*, Vladimir Nabokov
54. *Light in August*, William Faulkner
55. *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac (39)
56. *The Maltese Falcon*, Dashiell Hammett
57. *Parade's End*, Ford Madox Ford
58. *The Age of Innocence*, Edith Wharton (37)
59. *Zuleika Dobson*, Max Beerbohm
60. *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy
61. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Willa Cather
62. *From Here to Eternity*, James Jones (71)
63. *The Wapshot Chronicle*, John Cheever
64. *The Catcher in the Rye*, J.D. Salinger (2)
65. *A Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess (58)
66. *Of Human Bondage*, W. Somerset Maugham (91)
67. *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad (92)
68. *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis
69. *The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton
70. *The Alexandria Quartet*, Lawrence Durrell
71. *A High Wind in Jamaica*, Richard Hughes
72. *A House for Mr. Biswas*, V.S. Naipaul
73. *The Day of the Locust*, Nathanael West
74. *A Farewell to Arms*, Ernest Hemingway (33)
75. *Scoop*, Evelyn Waugh
76. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Muriel Spark (24)
77. *Finnegan's Wake*, James Joyce
78. *Kim*, Rudyard Kipling
79. *A Room With a View*, E.M. Forster
80. *Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh

81. *The Adventures of Augie March*, Saul Bellow
82. *Angle of Repose*, Wallace Stegner (42)
83. *A Bend in the River*, V.S. Naipaul
84. *The Death of the Heart*, Elizabeth Bowen
85. *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad
86. *Ragtime*, E.L. Doctorow (86)
87. *The Old Wives' Tale*, Arnold Bennett
88. *The Call of the Wild*, Jack London (67)
89. *Loving*, Henry Green
90. *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie
91. *Tobacco Road*, Erskine Caldwell
92. *Ironweed*, William Kennedy
93. *The Magus*, John Fowles
94. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys
95. *Under the Net*, Iris Murdoch
96. *Sophie's Choice*, William Styron (30)
97. *The Sheltering Sky*, Paul Bowles
98. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, James M. Cain
99. *The Ginger Man*, J.P. Donleavy
100. *The Magnificent Ambersons*, Booth Tarkington

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10 top *Library Journal* books that didn't make Modern Library's list

1. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee
  3. *Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien
  4. *Gone With the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell
  5. *Beloved*, Toni Morrison
  6. *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker
  11. *The Good Earth*, Pearl Buck
  12. *Charlotte's Web*, E.B. White
  15. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Márquez
  16. *Lonesome Dove*, Larry McMurtry
  18. *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury
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think a confrontation with mortality in every book would wring a smile from even the most necrophiliac Common Reader.

So where are we? Whom can we trust? What *should* we read? I depend primarily on my friends to expand my own canon. Cedric Bryant, my friend and colleague in English here, forces me to read his discoveries—Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain* is the latest. John Edgar Wideman's stories were another Bryant addition. My physicist buddy, Shelby Nelson, introduced me to a little gem of a novel, *The All of It* by Jeannette Haien, a pleasure I had been missing since its publication in 1986. And I have my own idiosyncratic favorite, John O'Hara—who is on some canons (Bloom's, the Modern Library's), off others (Radcliffe's). I leap to admit that Bassett's Canon—like all those other canons, individual or committee-generated—reflects Bassett's

own gender, race, class, sexual orientation, occupation, religion, etc. But then, so does everyone else's list.

Several years ago, someone diagnosed my fascination with O'Hara as pure identification: O'Hara and I were middle-class Irish Catholics struggling to enchant the country club set in socially rigid small cities. Now, both of us, having read *The Great Gatsby* and recognizing the anxiety of its influence, should have realized that our pitiful struggles were doomed and faced up to our mortality. But O'Hara went on to publish 406 short stories, 13 novels, eight plays (remember *Pal Joey*?), several books of novellas and two collections of essays. He died many times a millionaire in a self-designed manor house on Pretty Brook Road near Princeton.

And here I am writing in *Colby*.

Not too bad for non-canonical grouches. But read every chance you get. Read

your way through the Modern Library list and make Christopher Cerfrich. Re-read *The Wizard of Oz* and come to appreciate Kansas. Read *Oscar & Lucinda* by Peter Carey and please my friend Conarro. Read newspapers, read magazines, read journals. Reading needn't be confined to print media: read movies, sit-coms, paintings, advertising. Interpret, "deconstruct," speculate, discuss. Don't sit mindlessly staring at *Paulie*, whose silly parrot may have a deep cultural significance that escaped me. Seek the great. You'll never find it until you read. Settle for the interesting if you have to. No matter what Bloom claims—you'll have one heck of a good time in the process. And you never know what you might learn. I happen to know that there are two Charles Bassetts in the Boise telephone directory.

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