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Fourth Floor Eustis

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The Good Book

Want to start an argument? Tell someone that his or her favorite book really isn't *that* good. Say it doesn't pass muster as great literature. Then watch as his or her cheeks begin to flush.

Whether the book in question is *Old Yeller* or *Ulysses*, devotees will put up a fight if you disrespect it. If we disregard the arrogant elitism or the Philistine antagonism that occupy the margins, our debate about books generally boils down to how they make us feel. We are outcome-oriented in this respect, as we are with most things. Judging a book to be good usually implies that we got something from it besides a headache.

The trouble begins when we try to define, beyond our individual tastes, what constitutes great literature. Criticism is ubiquitous—in newspapers, magazines, bookstore leaflets and around the water cooler—but what finally determines whether one book is “better” than another? The criteria are slippery.

Charles Bassett, a professional reader of books, has taken a stab in this issue of *Colby* at making sense of The Book Debate. He begins by deconstructing a controversial list compiled by The Modern Library last summer. Charlie, like any good South Dakotan, doesn't get all hyperventilated about the list or about its detractors. The point is, he says, there are a lot of great books out there: who cares which one is the “best”?

For some extra fun we've included, in addition to the Modern Library list, a competing list from *Library Journal* and Charlie's own irregularly shaped Top 13. Alas, a-boy-and-his-dog stories don't fare well.

All of this list making inspired us to do one of our own. If you have Web access, we invite you to weigh in with your favorite selections in our online poll (www.colby.edu/colby/mag/) Otherwise, write to us and let us know what books you would put in your own Top 10. We'll compile the results and report them in our next issue.

Happy reading

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