

# A Reading List for a Curious Mind

by [G. Murphy Donovan](#) (April 2026)



Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (Caspar David Friedrich, 1818)

*If you don't like to read, you haven't found the right book. –JK Rowling*

*Not long ago I had a conversation with the son of a longtime friend about books—what to read, where to begin, and how someone builds a library. It is the sort of question that deserves more than an off-the-cuff answer, so afterward I promised him I would put together a short reading list.*

**Dear John:**

**The books listed** here are not arranged in order of importance, nor is the list exhaustive. Think of them simply as signposts—works that have rewarded rereading over the years and that may serve as good starting points for a curious reader.

Before offering the list, a brief caution.

If you are going to add good Greek, Roman, Russian, or other translated classics to your library, take a little time to find the right editions. A quick search—or two—will usually point you toward the translations readers and scholars consider the best. If you can find a version that is both reliable and well annotated, so much the better.

The average modern reader is not always accustomed to the alchemy of Middle English or the subtleties of Greek and Latin. Helpful footnotes explaining unfamiliar words, references, or cultural assumptions can make the difference between frustration and illumination.

What follows are simply books that have proven good companions over the years.

## ***The Odyssey*** – Homer

The original survival-and-adventure epic, full of cunning, monsters, gods, and a hero trying to get home against impossible odds before his clock runs out.

The poetry in *The Odyssey* deserves rereading. It reminds us that education and entertainment were once roommates. Much of what humanity remembers began with storytellers reciting their yarns rather than writing them down.

Memory is a terrible thing to waste.

## ***War and Peace*** – Leo Tolstoy

A massive, sprawling, philosophical, historical, romantic tour de force. It has everything: war, peace, love, death, and meaning. What's not to like?

“War” and “peace” –those two nouns alone summarize most of human history.

You could live inside this book for years.

## ***Moby-Dick*** – Herman Melville

Obsession, the sea, nature's indifference, metaphysics, and man's stubborn confrontation with forces larger than himself.

Everything in the book—like human history—is buffeted by cold, sometimes hostile oceans. Personally, I was rooting for the whales. Ahab has become shorthand for obsession—or perhaps madness.

The ultimate man-versus-nature yarn.

***One Hundred Years of Solitude*** – Gabriel García Márquez

Magical realism at its best.

A multi-generational world contained in a single novel. It keeps the imagination alive when reality grows monotonous.

***The Brothers Karamazov*** – Fyodor Dostoevsky

A deep dive into faith, doubt, morality, family, and the human soul.

Spend time alone with this one and it will give your mind a serious workout—or perhaps a migraine. Either way, it is worth the effort.

***The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson***

(or any substantial collected edition)

Compact bursts of New England insight and pathos.

Short poems that contain infinite meaning. Perfect for quiet evenings staring at the stars with someone you care about.

Reclusive perhaps, but never trivial.

***Meditations*** – Marcus Aurelius

A Stoic survival manual.

When political storms blow and the Guinness runs low, Marcus Aurelius helps keep your head straight by focusing on the one thing you truly control—your mind.

As a counterpoint, the Roman poet Catullus explores the opposite territory entirely: love, desire, and the flesh. Civilization has always contained both impulses.

***Dune*** – Frank Herbert

Epic world-building filled with ecology, politics, religion, and survival in harsh environments.

A kind of desert counterpart to the great ocean sagas—different setting, same themes of power, endurance, and madness.

***The Divine Comedy*** – Dante Alighieri

Hell, purgatory, paradise—an extraordinary journey through the architecture of the medieval imagination.

Dante can be heavy sledding, but if you want to understand the Renaissance mind, and the strange alchemy of theology, poetry, and love, he is unavoidable.

Every reader eventually finds his own Beatrice.

***Catch-22*** – Joseph Heller

A necessary antidote.

Absurd humor and satire reminding us that even in the most ridiculous circumstances people can still laugh at the madness.

*Catch-22* is to American literature what *MASH\** is to American cinema.

We always need a good laugh.

## Honorable Mentions

A few books that nearly made the list:

- *Little Women* – the great tear-jerker
- *Middlemarch* – unmatched richness of character
- *Pride and Prejudice* – wit and social insight
- *Robinson Crusoe* – a perfect metaphor for human isolation

I did not include the Bible, Chaucer, or the *Complete Works of Shakespeare* simply because they are the most obvious foundations of English literature.

## A Note on Russian Literature

You may notice that Russian literature appears more than once on this list. That may reflect your father's influence. He and I had more than a few conversations about Russian writers over the years, and though I no longer recall every detail, those discussions left their mark on my reading.

I remember we once argued about Bulgakov, who was Tatiana Malkina's favorite writer. His work remains one of the sharpest satirical treatments of bureaucracy ever written.

Foreign readers often seem to appreciate American literary figures more than Americans do. That seemed especially true of Hemingway.

Recall that Hemingway, during World War II, after being rejected as too old for service by the U.S. Army, bought his own patrol boat and equipped it with machine guns to hunt German submarines in the Caribbean.

Patriotism and tuna fishing—an unusual partnership.

Sometimes real life outdoes fiction.

## **On Fiction and Education**

You may notice that most of my choices are fiction.

That reflects a simple recognition: stories often reveal truths about human nature more clearly than textbooks do. Facts matter, but the emotional terrain of life—fear, ambition, loyalty, grief—is where we actually live.

No one ever truly buys an education from a schoolhouse.

Institutions can provide tools, but the real work happens privately—through curiosity, reading, questioning, and persistence. Many of the most influential minds in history educated themselves largely outside formal systems: Franklin, Thomas Paine, Washington, Lincoln—even Steve Jobs.

Nothing sharpens the mind like a little common sense.

If you want an education, find something that genuinely interests you and pursue it relentlessly. No school will do that work for you.

Reading widely helps, but curiosity matters more than any syllabus. A good book does not give you answers so much as it teaches you how to ask better questions.

Education is not a destination.

It is a voyage.

And every reader eventually has to chart his own course.

Fair winds and following seas.

Hope floats.

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