

## Revisiting Golden Oldies

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Some years ago when I taught at Virginia Tech, I went on a crusade in that staid English Department: No dead writers. I wanted my students and my fellow faculty to be aware that good writing is happening right here, right now, and that there is a lot of it out there.

When I arrived in Fairbanks, I found a different circumstance. Creative writers seemed to be indifferent to the deep history of literature, that Scrooge McDuck money bin I've written about before, that vast pile of books that have made our lives what they are and our cultural history what it is.

To that end, my bedside is never without my well-worn copies of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. These are the Robert Fitzgerald translations, but I have the Robert Fagles translations on tapes I can play in my aged truck when I have to make a road trip—these along with *Beowulf* read by translator Seamus Heaney himself. Even in translation these classics read wonderfully well.

Why, a reader might wonder. After all, these are stories filled with wild improbabilities: Gods and goddesses intervening in our mortal lives? A hero who yanks a monster's arm right out of its socket? Not even World Wrestling Entertainment can top that. Yet all these epics celebrate the power of story itself to incite willing suspension of disbelief, the crucial element for all story telling for all time.

And of course, we've built our own stories on top of these. Think of German novelist Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* or Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*. Or John Gardner's *Grendel*, that take on *Beowulf* from the monster's point of view. Or drama from Classical Greece that built directly from the stories mined from these epics.

Recently, I pulled Goethe's *Faust* off my shelf to refresh myself on some details to make a point in a talk I was to give. That book, too, (Walter Kauffman translation) landed on my bedside table, and I began again to read it. I'd forgotten how Mephistopheles' cruel wit and vicious trickery drives the story and rescues it from the dowdy Faust. Like Milton's Satan, Mephistopheles steals the story.

So, then, what am I reading now? How about the Edith Grossman translation of *Don Quixote*? This newish translation (2003) is written in a more colloquial style to better contrast to the crazily archaic language of the chivalric novels that have so infected Don Quixote's thinking and his speech as well. And the novel is episodic almost in the fashion of classic Spanish picaresque novels like *Lazarillo de Tormes*, so it's easy to pick it up and put it down and return to it again and again, moving through the novel at a relaxed pace against reading all the more contemporary material that is stacked beside it on the bedside table.

Let's not forget that the picaresque itself became a useful model for novelists from Henry Fielding, to Dickens, to Jerzy Kosinski (*The Painted Bird*, a very dark use of this normally comic form).

Next? *Moby Dick*. After reading around in Dan Beachy-Quick's *A Whaler's Dictionary*, a book designed to be browsed, but also one that invites a return to Ishmael's original story through a series of brief meditations on the characters, events and even the props of *Moby Dick*. It's been over 40 years since my last go, so it's time. I only wish I had a copy with the wonderful Rockwell Kent illustrations to accompany the text.

And then? Back to the *Brothers Karamazov* in newish translation by Richard Pevear said to best capture the sound and sentence structure of Dostoyevsky's Russian. Then *Gilgamesh* translated by Stephen Mitchell. Or how about *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as translated by Simon Armitage? Or the *Canterbury Tales* in Chaucer's original Middle English? (Yes, we moderns can read Middle English once we get comfortable with it—but here's another chance to listen to a good reader bringing these stories to life and to get the sound of Middle English in your head. You can even read it aloud to yourself.)

If there is anything to be gained in my retirement, it's this ability to revisit these old friends, and this time read them with the slow care they deserve. There won't be a quiz.

Contemporary literature continues to thunder along, and it always will despite its chief enemy, indifference. But as you read the newest, the latest, it's also necessary to remember where we came from. Because where we are now is no accident.