

What is a Great Book?

By Mortimer Adler

There is no end to the making of books. Nor does there seem to be any end to the making of lists of "great books." There have always been more books than anyone could read. And as they have multiplied through the centuries, more and more blue ribbon lists have had to be made.

No matter how long your life is, you will, at best, be able to read only a few books of all that have been written, and the few you do read should include the best. You can rejoice in the fact that the number of such books is relatively small.

The listing of the best books is as old as reading and writing. The teachers and librarians of ancient Alexandria did it. Quintilian did it for Roman education, selecting, as he said, both ancient and modern classics. In the Renaissance, such leaders of the revival of learning as Montaigne and Erasmus made lists of the books they read.

It is to be expected that the selections will change with times. Yet there is a surprising uniformity in the lists which represent the best choices of any period. In every age, the list makers include both ancient and modern books in their selections, and they always wonder whether the moderns are up to the great books of the past.

What are the signs by which we may recognise a great book? The signs I will mention may not be all there are, but they are the ones I've found most useful in explaining my choices over the years.

Great books are probably the most widely read. They are not best-sellers for a year or two. They are enduring best-sellers. *Gone with the Wind* has had relatively few readers compared to the plays of Shakespeare or *Don Quixote*. It would be reasonable to estimate that Homer's *Illiad* has been read by at least 25,000,000 people in the last 3,000 years.

A great book need not even be a best-seller in its own day. It may take time for it to accumulate its ultimate audience. The astronomer Kepler, whose work on the planetary motions is now a classic, is reported to have said of his book that "it may wait a century for a reader, as God has waited 6,000 years for an observer."

Great books are popular, not pedantic. They are not written by specialists about specialities for specialists. Whether they be philosophy or science, or history or poetry, they treat human, not academic problems. They are written for men, not professors. To read a textbook for advanced students, you have to read an elementary textbook first. But the great books can be considered elementary in the sense that they treat the elements of any subject matter. They are not related to one another as a series of textbooks, graded in difficulty or in the technicality of the problems with which they deal.

There is one kind of prior reading, however, which does help you to read a great book, and that is the other great books the author himself read. Let me illustrate this point by taking Euclid's *Elements of Geometry* and Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. Euclid requires no prior study of mathematics. His book is genuinely an introduction to geometry, and to basic arithmetic as well. The same cannot be said of Newton, because Newton uses mathematics in the solution of his physical problems. His style shows how deeply he was influenced by proportions. His book is, therefore, not readily intelligible even to scientists, unless Euclid has been read before.

I am not saying that great scientific books can be read without effort. I am saying that if they are read in a historical order, the effort is rewarded. Just as Euclid

illuminates Newton and Galileo, so they in turn help to make Einstein intelligible. The point also applies to philosophical books.

Great books are always contemporary. In contrast, the books we call "contemporary," because they are currently popular, last only for a year or two, or ten at the most. You probably cannot recall the names of many earlier best-sellers, and you probably would not be interested in reading them. But the great books are never outmoded by the movement of thought or the shifting winds of doctrine and opinion.

People regard the "classics" as the great has-beens, the great books of other times. "Our times are different," they say. On the contrary, the great books are not dusty remains for scholars to investigate. They are, rather, the most potent civilising forces in the world today.

The fundamental human problems remain the same in all ages. Anyone who reads the speeches of Demosthenes and the letters of Cicero, or the essays of Bacon and Montaigne, will find how constant is the preoccupation of men with happiness and justice, with virtue and truth and even with stability and change itself. We may accelerate the motions of life, but we cannot seem to change the routes that are available to its goals.

Great books are the most readable. They will not let you down if you try to read them well. They have more ideas per page than most books have in their entirety. That is why you can read a great book over and over again and never exhaust its contents.

They can be read at many different levels of understanding, as well as with a great diversity of interpretations. Obvious examples are *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Odyssey*. Children can read them with enjoyment, but fail to find therein all the beauty and significance which delight an adult mind.

Great books are the most instructive. This follows from the fact that they are original communications; they contain what cannot be found in other books. Whether you ultimately agree or disagree with what they say, these are the primary teachers of mankind; they have made the basic contributions to human thought.

It is almost unnecessary to add that great books are the most influential books. In the tradition of learning, they have been most discussed by readers who have also been writers. These are the books about which there are many other books—countless and, for the most part forgotten.

Great books deal with the persistently unsolved problems of human life. There are genuine mysteries in the world that mark the limits of human knowing and thinking. Enquiry not only begins with wonder, but usually ends with it also. Great minds acknowledge mysteries honestly. Wisdom is fortified, not destroyed, by understanding its limitations.

It is our privilege, as readers, to belong to the larger brotherhood of man which recognises no national boundaries. I do not know how to escape from the straitjacket of political nationalism. I do know how we become friends of the human spirit in all its manifestations, regardless of time and place. It is by reading the great books.