

Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes we'll give you something interesting to think about. The topic for today is Great Books. In this episode the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Jeff Frederick, is joined by: faculty from the Department of English, Theatre, and Foreign Languages. With him are Melissa Schaub, Abigail Mann, Autumn Lauzon, and Charles Tita. Get ready for 30 Brave Minutes!

Publishing is a \$120 billion dollar per year global business and a complicated one at that. As many as one million different books are published in a good year yet the average book sells less than 250 copies per year and less than 3,000 over the life span of the work. Americans read digital and print books that they buy or borrow from the library, or from their friends, or by negotiating that paperback at the garage sale or church bazaar from a quarter all the way down to a dime. In fact about 72% of Americans read at least one book per year. On average, Americans read 12 books (that is the statistical mean) per year, but that number is artificially inflated by Bill Gates who reads 50 per year, or faculty members at UNC Pembroke who sometimes read even more than that, and certainly grad students in the humanities or social sciences who might read scholarly books by the dozens in a calendar year. In fact the typical American reads 4 books (that is the statistical mode) a year.

Americans buy Bibles, *Harry Potter* books, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* readers, political screeds from one extreme to the other, diet books, self-help-how-to books, novels for the beach or the mountains, mysteries, textbooks, biographies, the occasional pop history, cookbooks, Dr. Seuss, and, every once in a while, a few of the all-time classics. And about this time of year, Americans seem a bit more likely to buy one of the Great Books as lists proliferate each January encourage folks to read the classics. More than a few Americans will make New Year's Resolutions to exercise more, lose a couple of pounds, get more organized, and read some of the Great Books. It may come as no surprise that long before Valentine's Day, these resolutions fall by the wayside.

And the failure to keep the reading resolution might be more critical than some would think. Not surprisingly, in an information critical economy those with low literacy tend to be making less amounts of money and have disproportionate health issues. Not to put too fine a point on this but prison populations tend to include high percentages of people who did not finish high school and have low literacy rates. According to the Harvard School of Public Health, watching television for more than two hours each day (instead of reading) is linked to higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Something about having that television on creates an overwhelming desire for a heaping bowl of ice cream, or the need to grab a bag of chips, or given this time of year, a box or two of Girl Scout cookies. More than three hours of television consumption daily may lead to a greater risk of premature death. From the perspective of the glass of water that's half full, readers sleep better, readers have higher intelligence, and, by at least one study, readers are more empathetic, have less stress, and stronger imaginations.

So if you are going to read, and in fact it is good for you, why not read something great. Allowing for taste and genre, author's style, and period, there are still unequivocally great books that capture the reader, toss them into a world of conflict, love, or predicament, and resonate in their heads for days as each of us wrestle and re-wrestle with one plot twist or another. Great books are worth reading and re-reading because of a million reasons that readers inherently understand and non-readers don't ever seem to grasp. Readers might still like the movie, but nothing actually beats the book and the word pictures and mental images that fill your head and cause you to sit in an uncomfortable position for far too long simply because you cannot put down the book.

Our topic for today. . . Great Books and joining us are four excellent scholars of literature who are here to help us talk about what makes a book great, why and how we ought to read them, and some of the Great Books that we ought to be spending time with. Welcome Abby, Autumn, Charles, and Melissa.

What was the first Great Book you remember reading that you literally couldn't put down and what was it about that book that hooked you? Charles?

TITA: I was twelve years old when I first read Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. There was something about this novel that gripped and held my attention as a reader. I don't know why and that was because I did not yet have the full knowledge of literary fury to analyze my relation to that text. It was amazing that an American novel set in a town along the Mississippi River in Missouri would stir the imagination of a twelve year old halfway around the world in Cameroon. That kind of reader response is an important characteristic of a great book, I think. Great Books, even in their abridged versions, have such an impact on readers. In my case I believe Tom Sawyer reinforced in me the awe and wonder of original folk tales that my grandmother told me. Like in those folk tales, the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is replete with the mysteries of the river, the graveyard and so forth. It is full of local color and ordinary people. I was also intrigued by Tom's relationships with people and with his environment. I notice how he tricks his friends to do his chores as in white-washing the fence his aunt had assigned him.

FREDERICK: That is something you never did, by the way...tricked your friends into doing your chores.

TITA: Something I did all the time! Right? So, that is how I remember reading my first Great Book.

FREDERICK: What about the rest of you all?

MANN: I don't think any of us want to answer after such a good answer from Charles. I actually started thinking the other way. One answer was that I was a dork and I don't remember ever not

being completely engrossed in books. Like I spent long parts of my childhood pretending to be Laura Ingalls Wilder from the Little House books. Please do not look up my second and third grade class photos in which I am wearing Laura Ingalls Wilder's dresses. But I did want to say that I remember not being engrossed by books that I love now, that my father would be like, "You have to read something good!" and force me to read it. I remember hating *Jane Eyre* and I remember hating *David Copperfield*, which I love now. One of the things I want to say is that I think sometimes why you love a book is when you read it in your life. If there is a book that you remember being forced to read by your father, or by school, or something, that didn't work, because now I do remember just multiple times reading *Jane Eyre*, reading *David Copperfield*, and not being able to put it down. There are times in our life that we are ready for books and there are times when we are not.

SCHAUB: I'm going to add to that and say that I also am the kind of nerd, who truthfully... I can't answer your question truthfully because I don't know what the first book was. I know the one that first popped into my mind was a tie between two different fantasy novels that feature middle-school-aged girls, which is what I was when I read them. One was by Ann McCaffrey and one by Mercedes Lackey. They were in a fantasy world but the character was exactly like me, or at least I thought the character was exactly like me, went through problems that I thought I had, and yes, even though I do not have a dragon or a telepathic horse, the characters went through the same kinds of problems I thought that I had. That is certainly one way, or a very common way that people respond to books. You identify with the main character and you enjoy being immersed in that character's world because you think you are going to get something sort of directly to yourself out of it. I don't know that I was thinking about it that way while I was reading, even though I did fantasize the dragon coming from me. I did, but I was also an avid reader of non-fiction and I think that is something that gets neglected a lot when we talk about Great Books. I have heard a number of my son's teachers say that they think boys are more likely to be captured by non-fiction and I know that I loved books about ancient civilizations. I would just read about ancient Egypt. I wrote my own story and drew my own pictures to go with it in maybe second or third grade, about ancient Egypt and that was non-fiction.

FREDERICK: And as an historian I can say that in ancient Egypt... well, telepathic dragons and horses, I can say that they were all real. (Everyone laughs).

SCHAUB: The dragons were also telepathic. (More laughing).

FREDERICK: Autumn, what about you? How did you get hooked on reading?

LAUZON: Oh, goodness. My grandmother was a huge reader. So, I can't remember ever not reading. My mom was also an elementary school teacher and had a classroom full of books, so after class I would always go to her room, sit in the bean bag and pull out one of the books. One

that I do remember not being able to put down was... and this is a very academic book... “*Stand Back, Said The Elephant, “I’m Going To Sneeze..:* (Laughing).

SCHAUB: Now that was very practical. (More laughing).

LAUZON: Yes, it is. Right? You don't want to be anywhere near an elephant when he is going to sneeze, as all the animals knew, and it was very dramatic and just silly and fun to come from math class and read the silly story about animals. The actual first academic Great Book that I remember reading was *Great Expectations*. I was a child and I read it curled up in my room in the corner. I could not tell you anything that happened in that book right now. I don't know why I couldn't put it down, but I read it in two days.

FREDERICK: I think readers just get that and in fact, a small aside: I knew when I started dating my wife that this was going to be serious when very early in our relationship we went to a used book store and I was on the floor sitting in stacks, as you have described in your mom's classroom and I looked over and thought, oh my gosh, it's been like fifteen minutes... and she was doing the exact same thing two rows over so I knew this whole thing was going to work. How do impress your passion for reading on students or others who might not necessarily see why reading is so transformational?

SCHAUB: Well, I think that is actually the challenge that we are facing today. All of us told a story that basically turned on self-motivation. In some cases our parents helped us out. I know that I have done dramatic reading for my children, but some of this has to come from inside of us and schools face a challenge a lot of the time. You can avoid doing what happened to Abby in making people read books that you think are good for them except, how else are people going to be educated? Putting a passion into someone- all I think you can do is infect them. I don't think you can teach it. Some of this is internally motivated.

FREDERICK: What about the rest of you all? How do you get people as excited about reading as you are?

LAUZON: I think demonstrating excitement ourselves. That is how I got interested in being an English professor. I saw one of my own professors so passionate about a poem that I just was not getting and I could not figure out why she was so emotional about this. That kind of led me to looking more into it. I think that is important.

SCHAUB: I do think that is what I meant by infection.

LAUZON: Yeah, yeah, sure.

FREDERICK: Charles?

TITA: As you know I was not born in the reading culture. I was born in a raw environment where reading was not the thing. Storytelling was, as I said earlier. My grandmother told me stories; my father told me stories; my mom told me stories. So, in school is where I began reading. That is why I remember vividly how I was impressed or how I responded to my first book, my first Great Book. How I encourage students and others to see reading as a transformational activity. I always like to talk about the story of *Frederick Douglass*, who was born a slave, taught himself to read and was able to transform his life from being a slave to becoming a journalist, and abolitionist. It is this man and of course, an enlightened witness. So, I tell students that through reading they can construct for themselves a sense of agency for whatever they want to do.

FREDERICK: It really inspires confidence to help people sort of break out of their shell and trust some of their ideas as well. What is in a Great Book? What are the ingredients? What transforms a book from interesting reading to one of the classics?

MANN: I was thinking about this and I think the first answer all of us have is sort of what Melissa was talking about with that childhood experience, which is that you relate to it in some ways. But I also think that is actually entirely wrong. I think what makes a Great Book great is that it forces us into a viewpoint that we wouldn't have seen otherwise. Right? One of the things I tell my students is if it was really just about plot or theme, we could have stopped creating art 2000 or 2500 years ago. We've done all of those things already. What a great artist does is they somehow make us see the world or see some viewpoint in a way that we haven't before. So I think that really is part of what makes a Great Book great, or any piece of art great. I think I would probably hate Keats as a person because he seems really annoying and he is constantly telling me that as an artist he is so much better than me and he can show me what I don't see. But then, there are stanzas where I am like, "Oh, my gosh, I have never seen the world that way!" He somehow has the power to let me see it through his eyes for a second. It is the particularity, I think, rather than the universality, though I think our impulse is then to somehow universalize that or connect that. But it is really that transformative experience of somehow entering somebody else's vision.

FREDERICK: Wow! Drop the mic and walk off! Well done. (Everyone laughs).

MANN: It is hard to compete with Charles.

SCHAUB: It is also worth noting that almost any book can be great. You have to ask yourself, "Great for what?" and what time and in what context? So, we often think of classics as books that have either stood the test of time because they speak to many generations or many different societies, and in that case I don't know if my dragon and telepathic horse books are going to stand that test of time, but they probably did a lot to help adolescent girls of the seventies and eighties. That was achieving something, so greatness is definitely contextual. You might then

talk about something like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *Huck Finn*, which is to go back to Charles' first experience. Both Twain and Stowe are, you know, they accomplish something with their books. I'm sure as a historian, Jeff, you don't go along with the idea that Harriet Beecher Stowe created the Civil War, but even having somebody tell you that you did is quite a lot; is an index of the book's impact in the world. And we do still read it, but when we read it today it is very differently. Both of the two books, *Huck Finn* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are normally attacked and taken off of reading lists because the way the characters speak is not how we would speak today. And so I think it is important to have books that still create a stir as well. Doing the work to understand why things then are not what they are now is one of the more fundamental purposes and I guess that is exactly what Abby said, which is to put you into a different point of view but that you have to do some work and I think that goes against the idea of being immersed. When you are immersed you just are carried along and it does what it does to you. When you are reading critically you're to some extent resisting that impulse but both things can be great.

FREDERICK: I think you know you are reading something really interesting to you and really that may stand the test of time if you can't wait to make sure that someone else is reading it so you can talk about it and what you think it means and how you do relate or don't relate to certain things.

***We'll return to our panel in just a moment. UNC Pembroke and the College of Arts and Sciences are changing lives through education. To learn more about our 16 departments, college highlights and news, as well as to find past episodes of **30 Brave Minutes** and our digital journal **Bravery**, explore our website. You can also support our academic programs by clicking on the donate button. Additional news and events may be found by following us on Facebook at UNCP College of Arts and Sciences. Remember wherever you go, and whatever you plan to do, you can get there from here.

FREDERICK: So how should we read a book? Is there any right or wrong way? Do we just jump in and start swimming?

LAUZON: I think Abby and I have already answered. No, there is no right or wrong way.

FREDERICK: When your students are struggling to find key elements of the work that you really want them to, how do you go back and say, "How did you miss this? Were you reading for just plot? Were you missing character changes?" How do you help them to see those kinds of things that sometimes get overlooked in a book?

LAUZON: Well, if you are reading something because you have to be able to write a paper about it or take a test on it, I have a study guide. I'm sure we all do, of how to read for that purpose and I actually tell students to do both: read it the first time without taking notes and let yourself be

immersed. The second time go back and read it analytically. Of course that means doubling your reading.

MANN: Actually I think to go back to your last question, the answer as to how to read something is to read it more than once. Right? And that is already hard to do. So one thing I tell my students and I would tell anyone who is sort of struggling to get into a Great Book, you know, go to the *Cliff Notes*, go to *shmoop*. You don't have to spend all that time struggling to follow the plot and to know who the characters are because that's again not really where the pleasure and value of great literature is. So, that is fine and is not cheating because that is not actually why you are reading. Give yourself some help. If it helps to, you know, watch the movie first and then read the book afterward, so that you can have that immersive, pleasurable rereading experience even if you find ways to skip the first read basically.

FREDERICK: Let's think about what you are reading now and do you read things only work related or only in your field? How do you mix reading something just because and something that you might have to read, to stay current in your field?

SCHAUB: This is where I envy my kids the most because they can still just read stuff because they want to and my time is so much more limited. But yes, I do still read because I want to, but typically it is not Victorian literature. I know you are very sad to hear that. If I am reading something I am going back to that same fantasy and sci-fi genre that gave me the hit in the first place.

FREDERICK: What about you Charles? What are you reading right now?

TITA: I am reading *The Life of Napoleon and Josephine*; his letters to Josephine.

FREDERICK: It doesn't end well. (Everyone laughs).

TITA: I have loved biographies and as you said great literature has this sense of universality and value to it that is universal and I see in great persons those archetypes that connect us all, whether it is by love or about a struggle, and going back to how we encourage students to read, I encourage them to see reading as a form of conversation. For them to immerse themselves into the reading act, strike a conversation with the author because the author is seeking to converse with you, to interact with you.

FREDERICK: It is an interactive exercise, isn't it? You are responding in your own mind, either in your head or out loud to the author. You are talking to other people about what they think or examining other viewpoints of it. It really is an interactive experience. What are you reading now, Autumn?

LAUZON: Well, this one is interesting. I just got married, so on my honeymoon I was in the airport trying to find a book. You know that is a little difficult, based on some of the selections. Not a lot of Great Books in those stores, but I came across one by Roxanne Gay called *Difficult Women*, so, I thought this would be perfect for my honeymoon. It is a series of short stories about, not necessarily difficult women, but the difficulties that women go through. It was an interesting read. I do like to read things in my field, read things for fun and sometimes reading things in your field can be fun when you kind of take yourself out of the English Professor position and just kind of let yourself get lost in that for just a second.

FREDERICK: Okay, so time to weigh in. Favorite books, or favorite authors would probably work as well. Who would you put in your top three of either books or authors?

LAUZON: I'll go ahead. Since Charles mentioned *Frederick Douglass*, he is actually on my list. I think every American should read *the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* for the reasons that Charles talked about. The education and the emphasis on how important that is and it is an amazing story, right? Just incredible. I would also add *The New Jim Crow*, which was just unbanned from North Carolina prisons last week. An amazing book that really makes you think about things you wouldn't normally think about. I will leave it at that.

FREDERICK: Incarceration rates, atrophy, and just....

LAUZON: Yeah. Just amazing. And my favorite author from my period is George Lippard.

TITA: Just to add to that theme, Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* is a book everybody should read because it's an exploration into the heart of man, every man, every woman. How we as humans harbor virtue and also the capacity for evil. It is good and conjures psychological exploration of humanity's potential.

FREDERICK: I had a class in high school called World Literature and all we did was read and then talk about it, which is like the greatest class for me to think about. And I can't remember what we were reading, whether it was Herman Hesse, or somebody a little bit out there for a high school kid, and I remember telling my teacher, "I don't really...I'm not sure what the theme is here. I'm not sure what he is trying to accomplish." She said, "When in doubt, because you will be reading the rest of your life, answer, 'the theme is man's inhumanity to man.'" (Everyone laughs). How about you Melissa and Abby? What would you put?

MANN: On that tip of man's inhumanity to man, I think, and this is not in my field, but the one book if you had to choose one novel it would be Tony Morrison's *Beloved*. I think it is just, as a novel, one of the most perfectly structured pieces of work I have read. It talks about man's inhumanity to man, and particularly about what it means to be American, whether that is a black American or a white American in dealing with the legacy of slavery. But it does it in just the

most beautiful and stunning way. I try to fit it into as many classes I teach as possible. To make a plug for Victorianists, I think the works of Dickens, just because of everything, you know.

Through those you have just chances to cry massively, to laugh, to see characters that you can just still imagine. There is a couple of Dickens novels that I have not read yet, that I am saving deliberately for retirement, to just have that pleasure ahead of me.

FREDERICK: "It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." (Everyone laughs.)

MANN: And then I'm going to make a plug for Jane Austin and just be...I can't tell you how many times I have read all of her books over and over, and just the pure pleasure of that. And again, I think with that theme, just her power of words and the way she moves you to laughter and to see the world in new ways.

SCHAUB: Austin is a great example of one of those authors who gets named and many people who love her teach her frequently. I am the same. I would have named Dickens and Austin if Abby hadn't taken that off of me, but I'm going to say that people need to read at least one thing that they don't think that they are going to relate to, that they will learn from, and get something out of, in a utilitarian, not utilitarian, but a values way. That's what most of our answers have been. They also should find something that they can be immersed in, that can speak to them, and that can simply help them process their own life, even if it's got to involve telepathic dragons. I can't tell you what that will be. It will be different for every person. I guess, on a positive note, although I have mixed feelings about this, one thing that K-12 schools in America are trying to do is incentivize reading in kids with a program called Accelerated Reader, where they read books and take quizzes on the computer, and get points towards rewards, usually at school. That can turn books into just an assembly line, but on the up side of that, AR makes a point of coming up with a quiz for any book you can think of. So, my telepathic dragons are in there.

FREDERICK: Is it a family tradition now?

SCHAUB: No, not yet, actually. I haven't gotten the boys interested in Ann McCaffrey or Mercedes Lackey yet. Maybe someday. They don't try to pick and choose. They do realize that books about ancient Egypt or non-fiction are on there, books about dinosaurs. And I think maybe just doing it, just doing it more makes it easier to do.

FREDERICK: Yeah. I agree. You know there is books for different reasons and a lot of you have said that. And to capture a different side of who you are. A biography may be a way to relate to someone. Before I am getting ready to write a journal article or something I will always read two or three period pieces of fiction from the period of time in southern history that I am writing about to just, sort of, more fully situate myself, in one sense, in the lives of the ordinary people that I tend to write about. That always seems to be inspiring to me in some way. Alright, final question. The proverbial desert island question. What is the one book that you would need to

have on you that is worth reading and re-reading dozens of times while you are waiting to be rescued at sea?

MANN: I'm crazy, so I have already planned this in my head and I have a compendium of all the works of Jane Austin, so cheating, but that is what I'm taking.

FREDERICK: Charles?

TITA: I am taking *The Complete works of Laurence Sterne*. In Sterne you have everything. You see Sterne as a minister, you see Sterne as a statesman, you see him as a writer, and he is an entertainer, you know, calling himself Yorick, the famous Shakespeare jester. So, I am taking Laurence Sterne's complete works.

FREDERICK: Autumn?

LAUZON: I hate to piggyback, but yeah, *Pride and Prejudice* is a good one and one that I have read multiple times before and would be happy to read multiple times in the future.

FREDERICK: Melissa?

SCHAUB: I'm not going to play your little game... (Everyone laughs). I truly can't choose, and maybe, although I don't use electronic readers, I don't like them, I would say that is one advantage of the modern world is that it is possible to carry around so many books that you don't have to make that choice any more.

FREDERICK: Wonderful way to end and I think all of us would say if we had to be on a desert island we would have to have something to read, whether it is the dream book or not. Well, thanks to all of you for helping to make this a really fun discussion and for all of you listening, thanks again. Pick up a good book and take a listen to all of what your heart is telling you about what you are reading.

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