

# Letters: Recommended reading

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

My interest in books leads to odd behavior sometimes: checking out the content of the bookshelves when I am visiting someone's home or a colleague's study, sneaking a look at whatever my airplane seatmate is reading, poring over the list of ingredients on a cereal box when there is nothing else at hand to read.

A friend once handed me a gem of a little book: *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*, by Anne Fadiman. Now I give it as a gift and quote it in wedding homilies. The first chapter is a marvelous account of a couple who, after five years of married life, decide to face the responsibility of "marrying libraries." Fadiman confesses to resorting to reading catalogs and instructions on the side of a Waterpik box, and she tells about how her family proofread a restaurant menu and sent corrections back to the dismayed maître d'.

Fadiman loves the language and comments on the tension that sometimes arises between the desire to be gender-inclusive and the desire to be graceful. She is uneasy with the gender exclusiveness of hymns like "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind" but not satisfied with the remedy she finds in the United Church of Christ hymnal: "Dear God, Embracing Humankind": "The end is estimable; it's the means that chafe. I'm not sure I want to be embraced by an Almighty with so little feeling for poetry."

Part of my purpose in reading is not only to keep up with theology, biblical scholarship and social commentary, but also to find some help for the weekly project of preparing a sermon. And over the years I have found that I need to read books other than those obviously related to my profession. Novels, biographies and works of history all contribute to the preacher's spirit and worldview.

In that vein, here are a few books I have enjoyed recently and recommend:

*The Year of Magical Thinking*, by Joan Didion, tells of her grief after the sudden death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne. Didion writes clearly, strongly and honestly out of the basic human experience of profound grief.

[\*The March\*](#), by E. L. Doctorow, is a historical novel about General Sherman's march to the sea. Doctorow creates unforgettable characters as 60,000 Union troops tramp from Atlanta east through Georgia to the sea and up into the Carolinas in 1864. Near the end of the book Sherman, whose own son William died of illness at home while Sherman was at war, learns that a Confederate general's son has died in battle. Sherman weeps and writes a letter: "And now, General, we have both lost a son. . . . I look forward to the day this nation is united again and the natural order is restored and our generations die once again appropriate to their God-given ranks. At that time, my dear General, I hope we may meet and commiserate as fellow soldiers." I don't know whether that actually happened, but Doctorow catches and conveys the pathos of war and the human nobility that can arise out of it.

*Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*, by Harvey J. Kaye, helps us understand one of the most important colonial thinkers, the author of *Common Sense* and of phrases that still inspire, such as "These are the times that try men's souls." Theodore Roosevelt called Paine a "filthy little atheist." He was not, but he did criticize convention, as in "Any religion that shocks the mind of a child cannot be true." And he wondered why only the poor are executed—a pointed observation in any age.

Speaking of Theodore Roosevelt, the most engaging page turner of the season for me is Candice Millard's *The River of Doubt*, an account of Roosevelt's exploration of an uncharted river in the Amazon basin in 1912. It is an adventure story, an engaging description of the primal rain forest and its inhabitants, and a portrait of a fascinating figure.