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Annual List of Best and Worst Read Books

By Matt A. Mayer

Happy New Year! As many people are saying, “Good riddance to 2020.” Here is my annual list of the ten best and five worst books I read in 2020. With the pandemic, I managed to read thirty-seven books covering over 16,000 pages. Thankfully, most of the books I read were good so picking the five worst books proved a bit harder than usual. I’ll start with those books.

5. ***The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence of Jesus* by Lee Strobel**: a good friend gave me this book to further my exploration of religion. I dove in hoping it would achieve its title’s promise, but quickly found that book rested more on tautological arguments than detailed, methodical arguments in favor of Christ’s existence, his actions, and his place in the trinity.

4. ***The Case Against the Case for Christ: A New Testament Scholar Refutes the Reverend Lee Strobel* by Robert Price**: After reading *The Case for Christ*, I read this book to see what a critic would say. I wasn’t impressed. Other than pointing out the obvious weaknesses in the *Case for Christ*, this book was little more than a cliché riddled superficial attack on Strobel that missed the mark.

3. ***The Coming of NeoFeudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class* by Joel Kotkin**: As a big fan of Kotkin’s work and after several strong reviews, I had great hope for this book. Unfortunately, Kotkin didn’t deliver. He did a good job of laying out the status quo of the various issues facing the middle class, but utterly failed to provide a single solution to fix the problems. In many ways, it reminded me of J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy*—a good book about Vance’s fascinating life as a member of the forgotten men and women in middle America, but lacking any ideas on how Vance’s successful rise can be modeled broadly to help others.

2. ***Vietnam: A History* by Stanley Karnow**: I gave this book to my deceased dad as a kid given his service in Vietnam. At the time, I thought it was a book about the Vietnam War, but discovered four decades later it really is a detailed history of Vietnam as a country, which included a small section on the war. The problem with this book was that it was far too long and covered details that weren’t really critical to understanding Vietnam and its people.

1. ***My Word Is My Bond: Cool Cowboy Sayings from the Heart to Get You Through Life* by Cody Harris**: As an admirer of Harris due to watching the series, *The Cowboy Way*, on Amazon Prime, I bought this book after it was covered on the show. It turns out the book is little more than a very short book with wide margins containing anecdotes used by Harris.

Though some of the anecdotes are funny or interesting, you quickly realize he just threw together a bunch of stuff to get words on enough pages to call it a book and himself a published author.

Again, these books weren’t bad books. They just didn’t measure up to the other books I read in 2020. Here are my top ten best books for the year:

10 - 7. ***The Fateful Lightning, The Smoke at Dawn, A Chain of Thunder, and A Blaze of Glory* by Jeff Shaara**: These four books mostly cover the western theater of the Civil War. I’ve now read all nineteen of Shaara’s and his dad, Michael’s, historical fiction books. He has become one of my favorite authors. I loved these books because they cover aspects of the Civil War most Americans don’t learn about in school, as the focus is usually on the eastern theater of the war (i.e., Gettysburg). Shaara’s extensive research and careful creation of dialogue truly brings the characters to life. I learned a lot about the Civil War and gained a greater appreciation of how vital the successes in the western theater were to eventually winning the war at Appomattox. I’m now as committed to exploring the battlefields covered in the these books as I am to visiting the battlefields in Virginia, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and Maryland.

6. ***The Master’s Apprentice* by Oliver Potzsch**: Potzsch is a German author I really like. I’ve now read twelve of his books, including the excellent [Hangman’s Daughter](#) series. His books mostly take place in Germany in olden days. This book is a retelling of the Faust legend in which a man makes a deal with the devil for his soul. In this case, the book follows the story of Johann Faustus as he matures from a kid to adulthood and crosses path multiple times with a character that could be the devil. The story is a good one, with the constant tug of good versus evil occurring between and within the characters.

5. ***“There Is No Alternative”: Why Margaret Thatcher Matters* by Claire Berlinski**: Another good friend sent me this book years ago, but it sat on a bookshelf until *The Crown* series on Netflix spurred me to learn more about Margaret Thatcher. Berlinski’s approach is to follow Thatcher’s rise and fall by way of conversations with former allies and enemies, as well as from documents in the then-newly opened Thatcher archives. The book provides an excellent perspective on Thatcher and her role in reshaping the United Kingdom, especially relevant at the end of the U.K.’s involvement in the European Union. There is no way the U.K. could have exited the E.U. without having made the

hard reforms instituted by Thatcher in the 1980s. It is easy to forget with the American obsession with breaking glass ceilings, but Thatcher shattered the glass ceiling over forty years ago in a much harder environment when she became the first female leader of a major Democratic government. There is a reason she did it well before anyone else.

4. ***Ivanhoe* by Walter Scott:** long considered one of Scott's best works, *Ivanhoe* is a fantastic story about the return of Richard of Lionheart from the Crusades and the story of Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe. Many people don't realize it, but the characters of Robin Hood and his merry men and the Sheriff of Nottingham trace their origins to *Ivanhoe*. The story is about redemption, love, and chivalry and Scott tells it well. Many classics fail to live up to their status, but this book does.

3. ***Lights Out: Pride, Delusion, and the Fall of General Electric* by Thomas Gryta and Ted Mann:** This gripping investigative story about the fall of General Electric is fantastic. The authors do a great job on the rise of GE under the legendary Jack Welch followed by the fall under his hand-picked successor Jeff Immelt. The story dives deeply into the many pitfalls GE fell into as the economy transitioned from a brick and mortar economy to a technology-based economy. As interesting, it details how through the arrogance of its leaders GE got involved in the mortgage-backed security and insurance failures that first served as a cash-cow for the company, but then left it, its employees, and its shareholders holding a debt-laden bag. A must-read for business leaders.

2. ***Grant* by Ron Chernow:** A few years, I got interested in the Civil War Era so identified a dozen or more books that occupy most of the spots in the various top ten lists covering the Civil War. I finished the last book, David Herbert Donald's *Lincoln*, in 2020. Chernow's 2017 book on General/President Ulysses S. Grant unequivocally belongs alongside Stephen W. Sears' [Gettysburg](#) and Grant's [Autobiography](#) as one of the best books of this era. I've come to more fully appreciate the importance of Grant not only on the Federal victory over the Confederacy, but also on the success of Reconstruction after the war. While Grant was a failure in most areas of his life, his success in the military was stunning. As Abraham Lincoln noted, "He fights!" Without Grant, the Federals don't defeat the Confederacy. Equally important, after Lincoln's tragic death, Grant used the power of the federal government to defeat the Ku Klux Klan and to ensure equality and voting rights to the former slaves, which resulted in the first African-Americans being elected to office including the U.S. Senate (as Republicans;-) Once Grant left the presidency, the Old South came roaring back to then dominate the American South for the next 100 years.

1. ***Caesar: Life of a Colossus* by Adrian Goldsworthy:** Amazon's 2006 Book of the Year, Goldsworthy's biography of Julius Caesar really is a must read for anyone interested in Caesar, the Roman Empire, and history. As a lifelong history buff and four-year Latin student, I thought I had a firm grasp on Caesar, his life, and his downfall. I couldn't have been more wrong. Goldsworthy does an amazing job describing how Caesar rose in politics and in war, especially covering the key military campaigns in Gaul and Germania that made Caesar,

well, Caesar. Maybe due to my short attention span in school, but I always thought Caesar won the wars up north and then descended on Rome after crossing the Rubicon River uttering the now famous phrase, "The die is cast." As it turns out, Caesar pursued his rival Pompey down the Italian coastline and over to Greece where he pulled off another amazing victory. Then, he went to Egypt where he had a child with Cleopatra and stayed for two years. Only then did he finally return to Rome to become the Dictator for Life. Even his dictatorship was far milder and less controlling than popular history has led people to believe. Without a doubt, this book was the best book I read in 2020 (and the first one).

Have a good, prosperous, and well-read 2021!!!

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