Books that changed our lives

Various Authors

2006

When we put out the calls for this issue, we sought lists and commentaries on books that changed people's lives. Apparently, many were too busy with summer reading to respond. Others may be too busy with life to read–or to write about what they might be reading if they're reading. For me, I've decided to name writers more than books, and the shortlist is rather long, heavily populated by poets. Allen Ginsberg's influence on me might always overshadow other writers, and to learn more about that, please see my article on him in a few pages. My world view has been so widely shaped by all of these visionaries that I would feel remiss not giving them their due in this issue.

So much follows from Whitman, Rumi, and Blake. Then, in that mystically anarchic and erotic style, there are ferociously gentle and underappreciated writers like Kenneth Patchen, James Broughton, and Julian Beck. The lusty, anarchic voice of Antler certainly follows in that Ginsberg Broughton tradition. In feminist fantasy and SciFi, Margaret Atwood, Marge Piercy, and Joanna Russ are worth mentioning. Without the indestructible impact of James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, how well would we understand the problem of race in America?

While remembering how I got my mind blown in college by Barthes, Baudrillard, and Bataille, I recall two Detroit teachers who were instrumental and influential, and they're amazing poets, writers, and partners themselves: Chris and George Tysh. A term paper for Chris more than fifteen years ago turned into one of the first in-depth essays I ever published in FE. With all these names, I am just skimming the cream from the top shelf of the library, and I hope readers will investigate some people mentioned here–especially the ones you may have never heard of.

–Anu Bonobo

Thoreau, Castenada, Krishnamurti, Nisargadatta, & Zerzan

Books that changed my life? The year I was 12, I read 100 books. Sixty-four years later, I'm still reading steadily. In my teens, Thoreau's *Walden* set me towards a rural setting. In the '60s, I came across the many books of J. Krishnamurti that caused a break with the Western world culture. The '80s brought Nisargadatta's *I Am That: Dialogues With Seekers* to my attention; I'm reading it for the sixth time.

Finally, I must mention Castaneda's dozen books concerning Mexican Indian Juan Matus and his teachings to become an impeccable sorcerer. All of these taught the folly of the Western lifestyle and how to get beyond the mind itself. Most of these will not be necessary "after the revolution" against capitalism, imperialism, and global technology–which may take evolution to higher species.

Literature should educate or entertain, but after the revolution and enlightenment, our minds will be purified, and we will be unconditioned from our present brainwashed state.

Whether reading is radical or not depends on what is read. If it leads to the mutation of total revolution, it is radical. Most of the present literary community does not contribute to the small radical community. If only we had more literature like the *Tao Te Ching* or John Zerzan's *Against Civilization*.

–Savi Clough

Always Coming Home

Ursula LeGuin's *Always Coming Home* (1985) is one of the most magical books I have ever encountered. In an entirely incomparable way it creates a world. It is a distant world that becomes intimately present to us as we read, as it stirs the deepest longings of our being. With this work LeGuin creates an entirely new literary genre, which she calls "the archaeology of the future, and in the process gives us the greatest work of utopian fiction ever written.

Always Coming Home tells the story of the gentle, cooperative Kesh, a peaceful valley culture, and the ruthless, aggressive Condor people of the mountains. Only one person, Stone Telling (later called "Woman Coming Home"), has lived in both worlds, thereby gaining the ability to reveal the true nature of each. The central story of the book is hers, but it constitutes only a small portion of this highly diverse work, which amounts to an anthropological source-book of a future society, containing the songs, myths, legends, tales, life stories, poems, and dramatic works of the Kesh LeGuin collaborated with an artist to create the art, architecture, and symbolism of the Kesh. She invented their language, and supplies a glossary to help with the numerous esoteric references. And finally, she worked with a composer to create their music, which is presented on a cassette.

But the appeal of this book goes far beyond this extraordinary creative ingenuity. The artistic whole vastly transcends its parts, and conveys a powerful sense of the place, the people, and the ethos. LeGuin gives us a moving and inspired account of a beautiful, loving, creative, and joyful community. As we discover it, our spirit begins the journey.

In our increasingly cynical age, Always Coming Home is invaluable for reawakening the utopian imagination, and reminding us of the extraordinary human potential for mutual aid creative self-expression, spiritual growth, and communion with nature. Ironically, in a fragmented and homogenized world that seems more and more like nowhere, we need utopia (literally "no place") to help us find out where we really are.

The Daodejing

The Daodejing (circa 500 B.C.) was written by the legendary Laozi, the "Old Sage" who tells us not to listen to sages. He is certainly one of the greatest philosophers who may or may not have existed. Literally, it is the classic (jing) of the way (dao) and its power (de). It has taken the world well over two thousand years to begin to catch up with its spiritual and ecological wisdom.

Though this work is sometimes called "mystical," it does not fit into the popular misconception of mysticism. Its goal is not to escape from reality, a process that it ruthlessly attacks, but rather to bring us more intensely into contact with the realities of nature and our own experience. In fact, by questioning the validity of our objectifying words, concepts and categories, ("The Dao that can be told is not the eternal Dao") it warns us of how easy it is to create a conceptual or logical dream world to protect us from the real one.

The Daodejing is one of the primal sources of the yin/yang philosophy, which teaches unity-in-diversity and the identity of opposites. It is applied to everyday life in the concept of wuwei, or doing without doing. Laozi relates it especially to the nature of the true sage or ruler. This ruler does not dominate or coerce, and, in fact does not even rule, but rather influences through quiet example. Such a ruler rejects the "rare treasures" of the wealthy and powerful, which merely drive us insane and set us against one another. Instead, he or she values what Laozi sees as the three authentic treasures: deep love or compassion; simplicity or frugality; and humility or non-domination.

Laozi's most profound teaching is that if we find these three treasures, then our many paths and the great path of nature can be one.

The Age of Desire

I have never encountered a work of social theory that is as beautifully written, as absorbing, and so successful in exploring the personal dimension of the political as Joel Kovel's *The Age of Desire* (1981). In it, Kovel achieves a remarkable and unprecedented synthesis of a psychoanalytic view of the psyche, a Marxian class analysis, an anarchist critique of the state and bureaucracy, an existentialist analysis of alienation, and the beginnings of a Blakean mystical critique of civilization.

The work is extraordinary for alternating the most acute and sophisticated theoretical analysis with engrossing and beautifully written composite case studies. The latter give us a vivid sense of lived experience in a capitalist, statist, bureaucratic, technological, patriarchal society, conveyed through some truly memorable and revelatory characters. Curtis, in "Love and Money," is the obsessively driven, alienated over-achiever, suffering from a "neurosis of production." Sarah, in "Rich Girl," is the narcissistic TV addict, escaping from parental expectations through helplessness and passivity, and suffering from a "neurosis of consumption." Hector, "The Vigilante," a victim of family violence, poverty, and war, is obsessed with paranoid visions of liberating his Puerto Rican people, and is condemned to the dreary world of state bureaucratic psychiatry.

The Age of Desire succeeds like no other work in posing economic, political and social problems as problems of both social institutions and of subjectivity. Kovel offers an acute diagnosis of why our society fails to confront its contradictions and instead sinks more deeply into the abyss of privatism, narcissism and irrationalism. He shows that if we are ever to escape from these dead ends, we will need two things: much deeper self-exploration and much more serious efforts at social transformation.

While the nation-state has its "poets laureate," the laurels, the other living things, and, in fact, our whole continent (Turtle Island) have for decades had their poetic voice in Gary Snyder. Snyder has long been our foremost poet of nature and culture, but in The Practice of the Wild (1990) he writes as one of our preeminent theorists of bioregionlism. In this work, Snyder speaks for the land, not as some abstraction or generality to which we owe allegiance, but as the place that we and all our fellow members of community of life inhabit.

The Practice of the Wild

One of the most powerful aspects of Snyder's writing is his ability to convey a sense that what is most familiar, simplest, and nearest to us is the most sacred and wondrous. "The truly experienced person, the refined person, delights in the ordinary." Snyder urges us to become reacquainted with our home regions and locales, and to experience more deeply the way that we ourselves and our cultures are an integral self-expression of these specific places. His work has been of great importance to me in the awakening of my own regional consciousness. While I grew up on the banks of the Mississippi and spent many days in the marshes, bayous and lakes of our region as a child, my awareness of the spiritual significance of the great river, and my consciousness of the magnificence of our swampland bioregion grew slowly. No words have resonated more for me than have those of Gary Snyder.

For Snyder, to be "wild" means to be both spontaneous and orderly. Wildness is a quality of whatever is free, whether it be the wild nature of wilderness, the wild culture of free peoples, or the wild mind of all poets and creators. The Practice of the Wild is the most eloquent defense of these realms of freedom, and a powerful expression of wild mind at work.

If we listen to the wisdom of Gary Snyder and keep practicing the wild, maybe we'll get good at it–before it's too late.

–John Clark

The Machine Stops

One reader suggested we reprint "The Machine Stops" by EM Forster. Appreciating the excellent suggestion–but lacking the space to reprint the whole story–we offer these short sections from towards the end of this highly recommended piece.

> And at last the final horror approached–light began to ebb, and she knew that civilization's long day was closing.
>
> She whirled around, praying to be saved from this, at any rate, kissing the Book, pressing button after button. The uproar outside was increasing, and even penetrated the wall. Slowly the brilliancy of her cell was dimmed, the reflections faded from the metal switches…
>
> It was thus that she opened her prison and escaped–escaped in the spirit: at least so it seems to me, ere my meditation closes. That she escapes in the body–I cannot perceive that…
>
> She burst into tears.
>
> Tears answered her.
>
> They wept for humanity, those two, not for themselves. They could not bear that this should be the end… Man, the flower of all flesh, the noblest of all creatures visible, man who had once made god in his image, and had mirrored his strength on the constellations, beautiful naked man was dying, strangled in the garments that he had woven. Century after century had he toiled, and here was his reward.

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