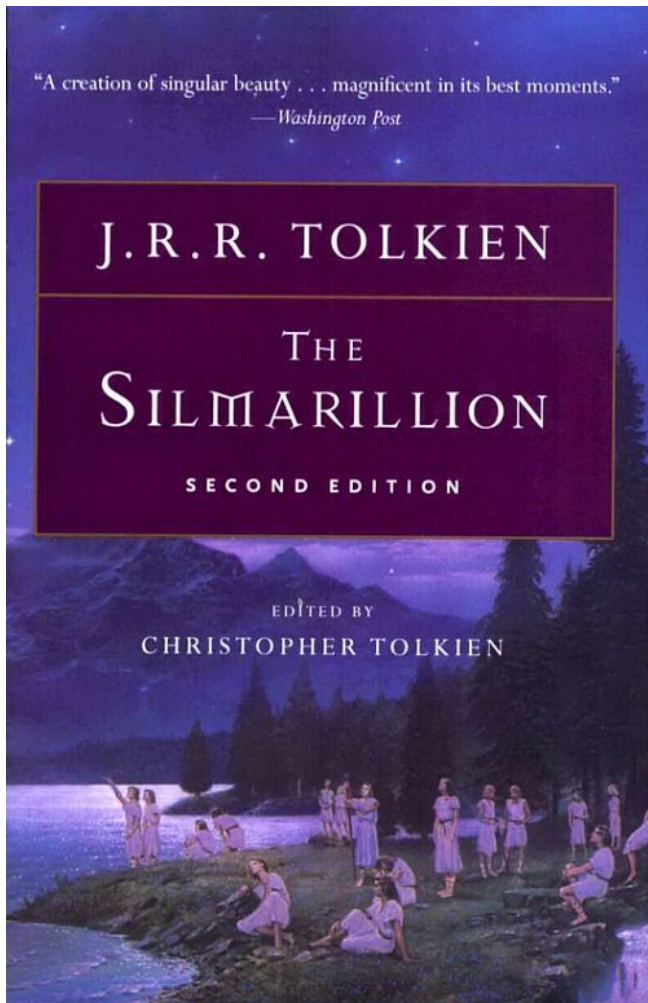


The Other Stories of J.R.R. Tolkien

Considered by many as one of the greatest authors of the 20th century, J.R.R. Tolkien is best known for his two masterpieces of the fantasy genre: *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Yet the good professor wrote so much more than just those two great books. With the recent announcement of a previously unpublished story by Tolkien that is to be released this August (*The Fall of Gondolin*), we felt this was a good time to shine the light on some of his lesser-known works. Ben Plunkett, Nathan Patton, and Phill Lytle discuss some of their favorite “other” stories by J.R.R. Tolkien. After you read their recommendations, stick around and tell us about the other Tolkien stories that you love in the comment section below.

***The Silmarillion* – Benjamin Plunkett**

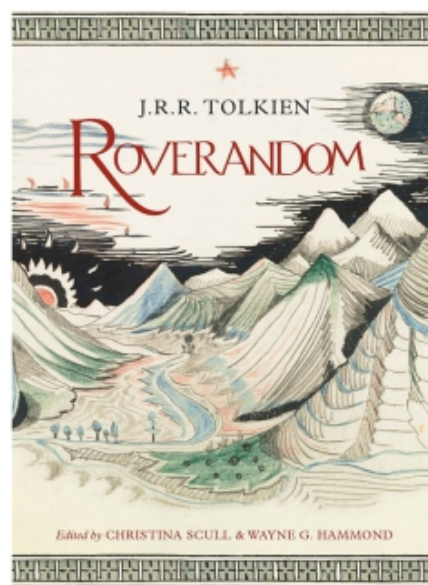
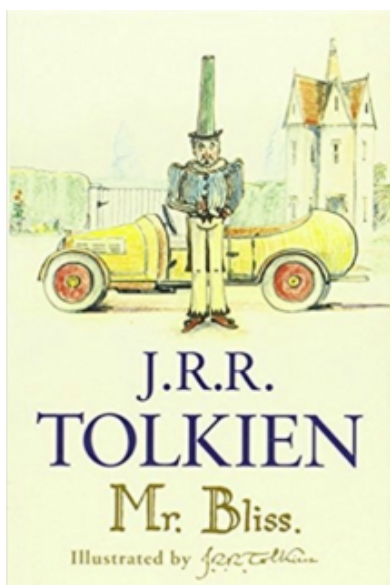


To make a huge understatement, J.R.R. Tolkien was a slow and very meticulous writer. It took him 14 years to write *The Lord of the Rings*. That right there is a very long time for an already published author to write a novel for an expectant editor. But that has got nothing on his writing of the text of what would become *The Silmarillion*. He began working on it in 1917 during World War I and kept on working on it until his death in 1973. His son, Christopher, took up the task of compiling the many texts that would ended up becoming what we now have. It was as a soldier in the trenches that Tolkien started composing the vast and rich mythology of the Middle Earth universe. *The Silmarillion* begins at the literal creation of Middle Earth. Much of the rest of it discusses the history of the elves, with the other races playing very key roles throughout time.

As you probably know, elves are immortal so although the book spans many thousands of years, there are elves most readers will be familiar with who were living at the time of *LOTR*, which chronicles a story that comes at the tail end of *The Silmarillion*.

Like the *LOTR* story, many of the stories herein are expounded upon more fully elsewhere. But don't think of *The Silmarillion* as just a book of summaries. It is a masterpiece. It is probably my second favorite Tolkien book after *LOTR*. There is so much more of rich complexity than I have mentioned here. There is so much more depth. There is the Ainur, Beleriand, Glaurand, Hurin, Morgoth, the rings of power, Gondolin—and these are only the tip of the iceberg. But if you are not familiar at all with *The Silmarillion*, be warned: It does not read like a regular novel. It is first and foremost a history of Middle Earth which gives Tolkien's vast mythological creation an incredible richness.

***Mr. Bliss, Roverandom, and Letters From Father Christmas* –
Nathan Patton**



Many of Tolkien's books began as stories that he told to his own children, inspired by events in the lives of their family.

Mr. Bliss

In 1932, Tolkien went out and bought himself a motorcar and, evidently, had a series of misadventures with it that inspired this tale.

This is a silly story about a man named Mr. Bliss who buys a motorcar on a whim and experiences rather ridiculous events as a result. It is a delightful and charming read. We also see our first glimpse of Sergeant Boffin and Gaffer Gamgee, whose names, at least, we will see again in Lord of the Rings.

Sadly, this book is out of print. Even the 2007 25th anniversary edition is no longer available. (However, the audiobook version, read by the excellent Sir Derek Jacobi, is quite affordable on [audible](#).) If you can manage to find a copy, though, you really should read the hardback edition, as it contains copies of the entire original manuscript including many original illustrations by Tolkien himself.

Tolkien had originally attempted to have Mr. Bliss published as a picture book, but his publishers deemed it too expensive at the time.

Roverandom

In 1925, the Tolkien family took a holiday to the Yorkshire coast where a five-year-old Michael Tolkien lost his favorite toy: a miniature lead toy dog.

Papa Tolkien, in order to console his heartbroken son, told him the tale of what happened to that toy dog afterward. That story became Roverandom.

It turns out that the toy used to be a real dog named Rover, who got on the bad side of a grumpy wizard and found himself turned into a toy as a punishment. That toy spent some time

with a nice young boy who unfortunately misplaced him on the beach. The toy dog then meets a “sand-sorcerer” who sends him on a series of adventures including a trip to the moon and a journey under the sea.

Unlike *Mr. Bliss*, *Roverandom* is still in print and widely available.

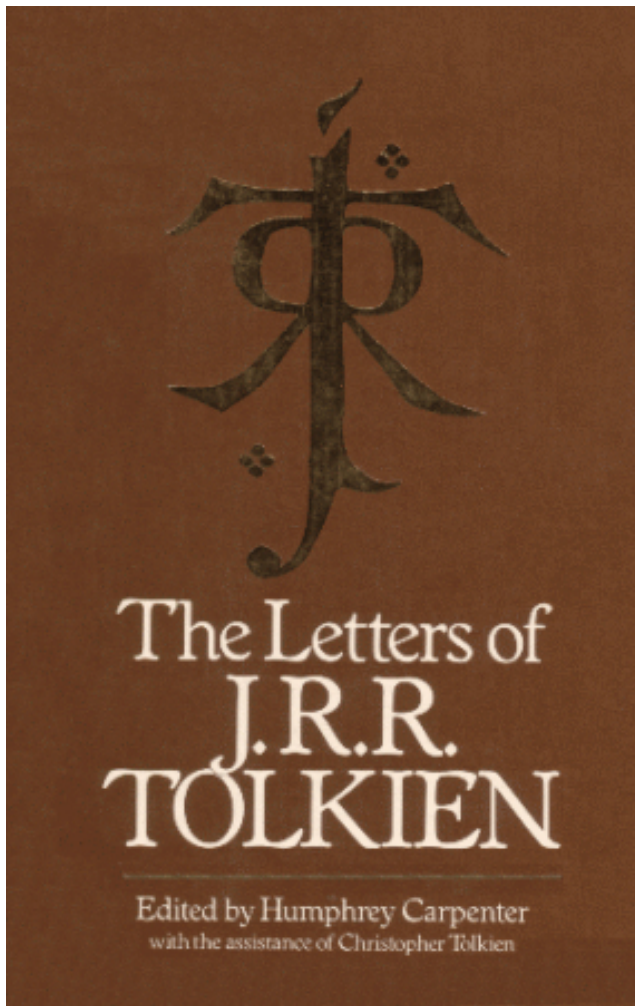
Letters From Father Christmas

Starting in 1920, when John Tolkien, the eldest child, was three, every Christmas the Tolkien children received a letter from Father Christmas detailing the happenings at the North Pole that year. His primary companion is the North Polar Bear who is continually getting into mischief. Later letters include Snow-elves, Red Gnomes, Snow-men, Cave-bears, and the North Polar Bear’s nephews. There’s even an attack by Goblins attempting to raid Father Christmas’ cellars.

This book contains the letters from 1925 through 1938 as well as the final letter and a short note from the North Polar Bear written in an invented alphabet based on Goblin drawings. Each letter is accompanied by illustrations by Tolkien himself.

We, as a family, traditionally read the letters, one per day, in the days leading up to Christmas.

Like *Mr. Bliss*, the hardcover version is the way to go with *Letters From Father Christmas* as it includes copies of the original letters and illustrations; however, it is also, like *Mr. Bliss*, seemingly out of print.



Professor Tolkien is my favorite author of all time, and much of that is due to his two most popular works *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. But my love for his writing goes well beyond those two. Tolkien was a prodigious letter writer, a skill-set that I fear is quickly becoming extinct. He wrote letters to friends, to family members, to fans, and to publishers. This book – *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* – selects some of the best correspondence to and from the great author. His wit is on full display throughout the book. His passion for language, faith, and family is evidenced as well. Tolkien was a man of strong beliefs and not so insignificant stubbornness. His back-and-forths with his publishers are a highlight of the book. Perhaps the best moments though, are when he engages with fans or his family and you can see the teacher, the father, and the deeply committed believer shining through. This book does a fabulous job of adding insight and

clarity to his other books once you see the man behind the words.

500WoL Reviews: “Tyndale, The Man Who Gave God An English Voice”

“And the Lyght shyneth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not.” (*John 4:5, William Tyndale New Testament*)

I’m coming up on 40 years of life this Summer and it has me all self-reflective and evaluative. One thing I absolutely need to change is that I need to read more biographies. As someone who has championed fantasy-fiction as reading that captures the imagination, I have woefully underestimated how real flesh and blood human beings with real lives can accomplish the same thing. And in some ways, in a deeper sense, since they are actual history.

Enter this book, written in 2012 by David Teems. It is cleverly written, packed with history down to the small players in Tyndale’s life and absolutely edifies the English-speaking Christian reader with a life worth dissecting.

I confess that Tyndale’s life is fascinating to me on the big story arcs because I am a pastor of a bilingual ministry, an ESL teacher and a subscriber to *Voice of the Martyrs*. Translation is my life’s work, though not nearly to the

significance that his was and to the cost that his gave. Persecution and martyrdom are horrific in a human sense, yet biblically we can see how God exalts it. William Tyndale literally gave his life to give people of my native tongue one of the most precious gifts there is, the readable Word of God.

Christian history is indebted to countless people for the Bibles we have today, many of them nameless and faceless, like the Masoretics of the Old Testament and the often maligned scribes and copyists of the New Testament. Tyndale thankfully is a name we can know and celebrate. He wasn't just a translator. He was a noble man, an educated yet humble man, and a great man. He is a hero. All of us who hold a KJV, or NASB, or NIV in our hands should know his name and his story.

Beyond the major and more well-known plot lines of his life, Teems gives other details that are equally as important. Like how much of the KJV was influenced by Tyndale and how many phrases we find in our Bible, and hence our popular culture, that can be traced back to Tyndale. Like "Am I my brother's keeper?". Tyndale used beautiful, easy-to-memorize, poetic English. And we owe our ability to recall many verses so easily to him.

Teems also speaks over several pages to how much Erasmus and Luther affected Tyndale and how much he affected them. These men were not friends, yet God used them all in their own way to greatly affect how we do church and bible study today. It is a testimony to how no one can do anything on their own. Not just without God's grace, but without Christian community. Even from a distance.

I recommend this book to all Christian teenagers and adults. It's not just an inspiring story, but an illuminating one. In 500 years, this story will still matter. Yet let us read it today.

500 Words or Less Reviews: Ready Player One

Time warps our memories of things we once loved in various ways, and when enough time goes by, the exact memories we had begin to slip away from us like sand through an hourglass. When we finally are able to come back to the thing itself, whether a good book or a Nintendo game played with a trusty NES controller, some pieces of time come shooting back up to us through the hourglass. For a moment, we are reconnected to those past memories and versions of ourselves. And yet, we have changed in that time span. Our perception of what we are able to experience again is colored by eyes that have since matured and have felt more of the weight of the world.

I read the book version of "Ready Player One" almost two years ago, so it's fitting that enough time has gone by for me to forget key scenes or details from the plot. It's like my memory of what happened has since dissolved into fragments. During the early screening for the film, I was sitting between a close friend and a random stranger, and all three of us had read the book. We discussed a few scenes, and the plot progression started to come back to me. My anticipation started to build. Would the film deliver, or would it let me down?

When I first heard that the *Ready Player One* movie was in production, I wasn't too thrilled. The book was an ambitious and expansive imaginary romp through 80's nostalgia. "They'll never pull a movie like this off convincingly," I told myself. The trailers left a lot to be desired because it looked like they were going to change the plot significantly. And they did.

But you know what? Somehow it worked.

After the movie, the three of us sat and reflected on what we had just watched. The movie had the overall feel of an 80s adventure flick, Spielberg style. It felt like what author Ernest Cline (who was part of the creative process on the film) might have done with the plot in a parallel universe. My biggest fear going into the movie would be that it would turn out to be a heartless, piecemeal version of what I had experienced and loved while reading the book, but I was quite happy to be wrong. Yes, parts of the movie felt a bit rushed or contrived, and I was still miffed at a few parts of the book that didn't make it into the movie, but overall I was very glad to have seen it.

The movie left me feeling a bit bizarre because it was like what I had once experienced, yet it was different altogether. It's akin to playing a favorite game from your childhood that is now radically different in form, yet still retains the original essence of what you had enjoyed in the past.

8/10

(Parental content advisory: There are a few strong curse words throughout the PG-13 rated film.)

Happy Birthday Dr. Seuss!

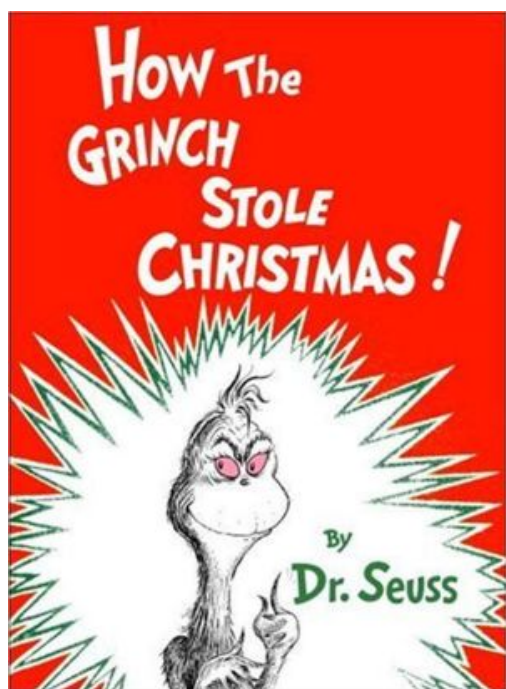
Introduction by Gowdy Cannon

He left a mark on American Culture which is as unique and inimitable as could be. A few years ago, in a Facebook tournament I did on people who influenced your love for fantasy, I included him alongside names like Tolkien and

Disney. Because he deserved it. Very few children in the U.S for the last several decades have escaped his influence. And considering how he took something as crucial to development as learning to read and crafted words and pictures to make us long for more books and to reread the same ones over and over, I would say his legacy in this arena is unrivaled.

So to honor what would have been the 114th birthday of Theodore Seuss Geisel, we pay tribute to five Dr. Seuss books that were formative to our childhoods and that have even impacted our adulthoods.

How The Grinch Stole Christmas – by D.A. Speer



As with (I assume) most other people in America, almost every childhood holiday season the animated Grinch movie would somehow end up on our TV. It usually wasn't deliberate on my family's part. The television would be on, and one of the major networks would be airing it. Thus, my memory of the story was piecemeal at best. And my most recent memory of it involved Jim Carrey, but we won't speak of "that one."

This past year while we were in Japan, my daughter suffered greatly from bacterial meningitis and made a miraculous recovery from both that *and* a mass/tumor that they discovered behind her eyes. After we moved back the States and she was given a clean bill of health, we were in shock. I think we might still be. Thus, I wanted to make this past Christmas extra special, because I was celebrating with my special daughter.

I hyped up the movie for her one day, and we sat down on the couch that evening to watch it, my arm around hers. I'm sure it was the first time I have seen it through as an adult.

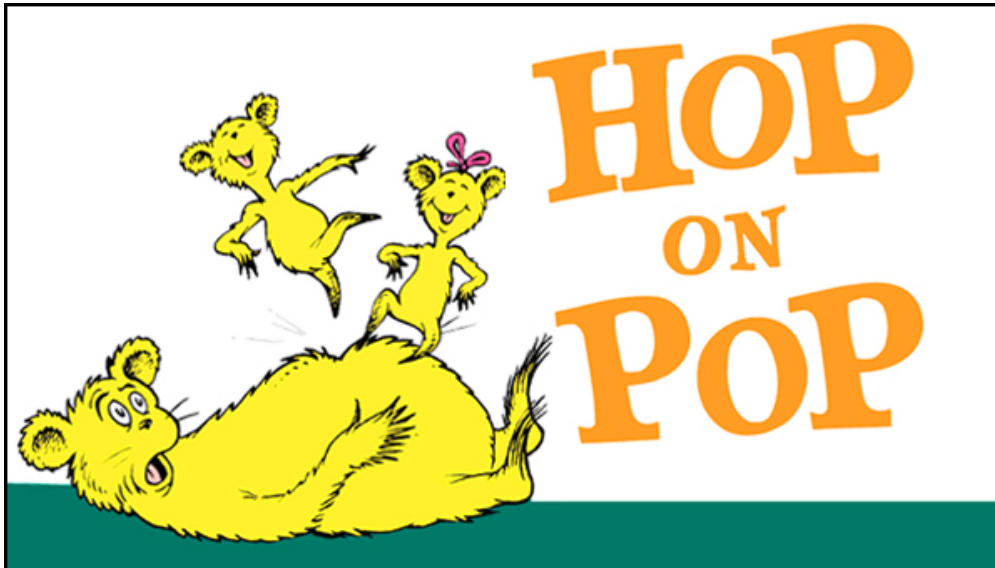
I soon realized while I was watching just what it was that kept Dr. Seuss's works alive and relevant after all these years. It wasn't the nostalgia. It wasn't the artwork. It wasn't that it was kitschy or had meme value. It was simply the heart.

When the townspeople gather together after all of their stuff is taken and happily sing their song anyway, I was completely overwhelmed. Tears started flowing.

"Christmas Day will always be just as long as we have we. Welcome Christmas while we stand, heart to heart, and hand in hand."

I hugged my daughter that much closer.

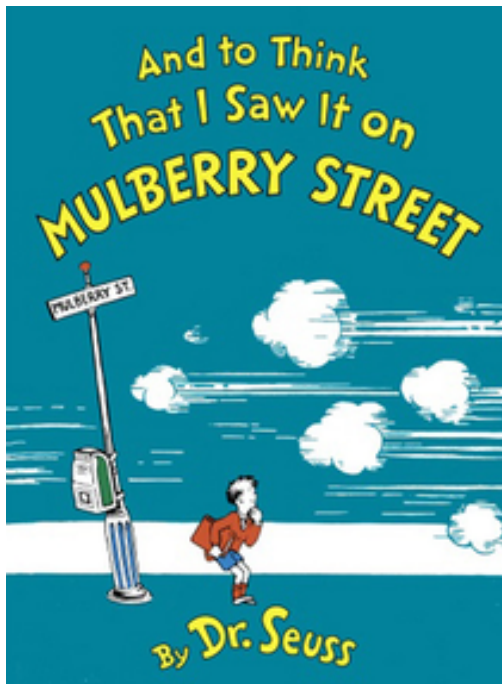
Hop On Pop – by Gowdy Cannon



A huge draw to Dr. Seuss has always been how he combines simplicity with zaniness to produce education and *Hop on Pop* is a premier example. This book is a riot to read and as a kid you probably do not realize how much you are learning about English sounds. As I've written recently, English is extremely inconsistent with pronunciation yet the good Doctor found some very common patterns and put them to at times nonsensical, other times pointed and yet always delightful phrases. I could live to be 100 and never forget the fish in the tree. Yet the quick wit of Dr. Seuss responds "How can that be?" And I will always associate this book with wanting to hop on my dad and him letting us (though not quite like in the book). Put this together with Seuss's hilarious illustrations and you have a timeless classic of a book.

This book to me is more entertaining than half of the TV episodes I have watched. At nearly 40 years old, it still tickles my brain.

And to Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street – by Benjamin Plunkett

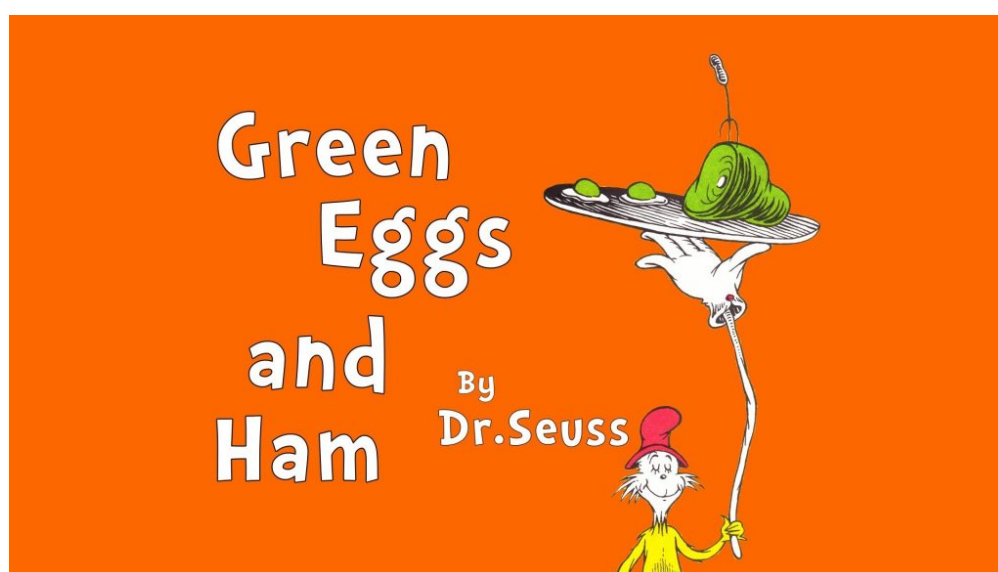


As a child, I read and owned around 20 books by Dr. Seuss (Theodor Geisel). No other books, juvenile or adult, have done more to inspire my imagination through both writing and imagery. The most imagination-inspiring and thus my favorite Seuss book of all is *And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*. Upon researching this book for REO I was surprised to discover that this was the very first children's book that he wrote in 1937. The story goes that he wrote the story to alleviate the immense boredom while traveling on a ship. And presto changeo, his first of a long and legendary line of children's books that inspired imagination in millions of kids for decades.

If you are not familiar with the story, you should be. Look it up now. The entire text of the book is online for free. Wow. Marco's imagination really grows on Mulberry Street. First it is just a horse and cart, then the horse turns into a zebra, then the cart turns into a chariot, and on and on it goes until finally there is a squad of policemen on motorcycles guiding two giraffes and an elephant pulling a wagon with a big brass band pulling another wagon with an old man watching them in awe. And that's not all. Marco's imagination has spawned more stuff than you can, well, imagine. But Seuss

could and he did. It is not an overestimation to say that Seuss probably had more of an impact on generations of children through his unforgettably imaginative writing, incredibly clever storylines, and the unfailing beauty of his signature illustrations than history's many pop culture personalities. Happy birthday, Dr. Seuss, may your works continue to impact children for many more years.

Green Eggs and Ham – by Phill Lytle



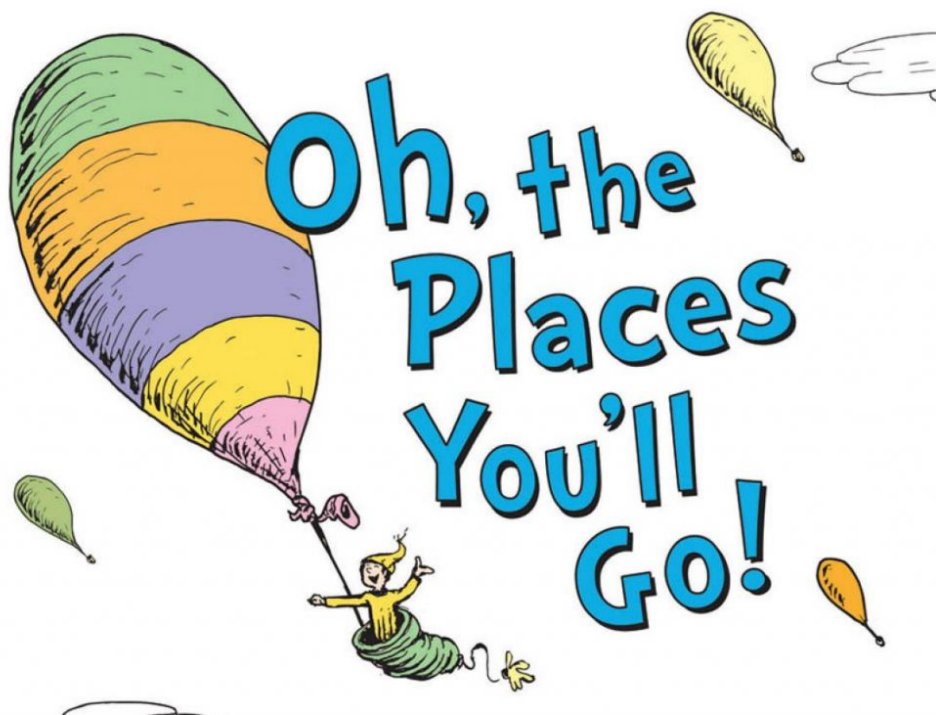
Sam (aka: Sam-I-am) is persistent. He is a bit pesky. It's no wonder the unnamed curmudgeon at the center of *Green Eggs and Ham* is so curmudgeonly. Sam just will not leave him alone. Sam-I-am makes his appearance riding the back of a happy-go-lucky creature while holding a sign announcing who he is...because, who wouldn't want to know who Sam is? Our humorless curmudgeon makes it clear at the outset that he does not care for Sam-I-am. So Sam does the most logical thing: he offers the grump some green eggs and ham. It's a hard pass on the green eggs and ham for Mr. Curmudgeon but Sam does not give up because he knows that if he can get his new "friend" to try this delicious meal, everything will change.

Sam is a genius. A happy, creative, crazy genius. His new

friend – the curmudgeon – does not really dislike green eggs and ham. He dislikes Sam. We don't know why, but page 9 makes that perfectly clear. So Sam decides to wear him down. He presents one absurd option after another. Each more ridiculous than the one before. There are goats, boxes, and trains involved. By the end, Sam triumphs. The curmudgeon eats the green eggs and ham. He loves the green eggs and ham. He smiles. He puts his hand on Sam's back. He thanks Sam-I-am. They are friends indeed.

Only 50 words. That was all it took. The entire story, all 62 pages, used only 50 different words. That was the genius of Dr. Seuss. In this book, arguably his most popular, he used silly characters, crazy antics, and inventive rhymes to teach us how to try new things, how to deal with grumpy people, and how to admit when we are wrong and make amends.

Oh, the Places You'll Go! – by Amy Lytle



“You can go anywhere and be anything!”

Except when you can't.

“You are so amazing, everyone will love you!”

Except when they don't.

And that little word “except” is what makes me, a person who isn't very emotional, choke up nearly every time I read *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* In addition to Seuss' typical style of rhyme and imaginative word usage, he tackles the truth that life is hard and doesn't always go as planned, even for the brainiest and the footsy-est.

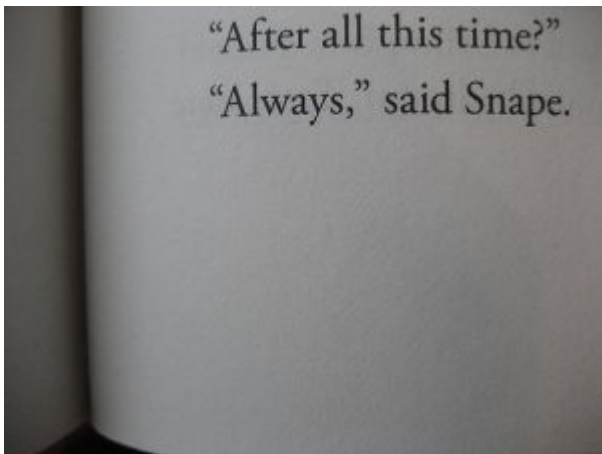
It's a book about grit.

As a teacher and a mother, I've read and studied and researched the concept of instilling resilience in children. We now have the research that shows the tell-everyone-they-are-great concept of building self-esteem does not work. Kids are too smart for empty words. Dr. Seuss was ahead of the research, publishing *Places* in 1990. He tells kids they have some choices in life, and even with brilliance and a sense of adventure, things don't always work out. But they should keep moving.

He tells them the truth.

That's five. There are so many more stories to talk about. We would love to hear about your favorites in the comment section below.

Debating Snape



Recently, in an undisclosed location, the REO staff had a meeting. Present were Phill, Ben, Mike, Dave, Nathan, Mark and me. We ordered pizza and as the doorbell rang signifying its arrival, Phill rolled a die to see who would have to get it, counting off each of us seated at a round table as a number. I informed Phill that by casting the die he was then creating a world with six alternate timelines. One where each of us has to get the pizza when the die lands and seals our numerical fate.

In one of the timelines—let's call it **The Darkest Timeline**—things go berserk thanks to some terrible luck, a Norwegian troll doll and an Indiana Jones diorama. People get hurt. Things catch on fire. Apocalyptic chaos ensues.

Thankfully we don't live in that timeline, unless you get on Twitter where apparently everybody is in a perpetual state of cataclysm. But due to a Dreamatorium created and shared by Mike and me, Darkest Timeline Gowdy has a chance on occasion to interact with our timeline. Today, I, Regular Gowdy (RG) invite **Darkest Timeline Gowdy (DTG)** to my house to have a debate over one of the most controversial and complex figures in recent fantasy literature: Severus Snape.

RG: Thank you for joining me today. Nice goatee. Very Spock-like in the Star Trek Original Series Season 2, Episode 4, "Mirror, Mirror".

DTG: Nerd.

RG: We're basically the same person.

DTG: I don't have a plush Dobby doll...

RG: It's a collectible!

DTG: It's a nerd doll. I bet you also own a wand from Universal.

RG: It chose me!

DTG [*Giving RG the same look Hermione gave Ron when he concluded that no one could feel all that Cho was feeling or "They'd explode"*]: I'm sure it did.

RG: It was made with a Phoenix feather! Give me a break. You're just as big a nerd as I am.

DTG: I love Harry Potter and Star Trek but nerds cite episodes and buy toys.

RG: Regardless, you know these works as well as I do.

DTG: I know more than you. Nerd.

RG: We will see about that. Our topic here today: Is Severus Snape more hero or villain? J.K. Rowling herself has said that Snape is all grey. You can't make him a saint or a devil. So our aim is not binary. We want to discuss what he was *more* of. I'll fire the opening salvo: Professor Snape is an extraordinarily written, gut-wrenching plot twist of a character. For 4000 pages, Rowling makes you hate him, before pulling the rug out from under us to reveal a remarkably

intricate yet no doubt good-soul of a man who gave his life to help bring down the Dark Lord. His love for Lily is one of fiction's great tragedies, and yet he did not let it go to waste, using it as inspiration the rest of his life to truly repent and join the anti-Voldemort movement. He is absolutely more hero.

DTG: In my opinion, Snape...

RG: *Professor* Snape....

DTG: Calm down, nerd. Snape [pauses, gives RG the same condescending look as before] is a petulant child who happens to have adult responsibilities. He tortures innocent children because of grudges and house affiliation, plays mind games with them, and is the model of someone who abuses power with no sense of justice. Additionally, his love for Lily is vastly – VASTLY – overrated...

RG: Oh come on! You're telling me that you don't think "After all this time?" "Always" is one of the most beautifully sad exchanges ever? The way Snape felt about Lily was something completely relatable and hits you like a stomach punch. Everyone gets unrequited love.

DTG: He was in love with another man's wife and never moved on. That's not romantic; that's pathetic.

RG: But it was his motivation for doing good in the world!

DTG: I can separate actions and motivation. Some of his actions were admirable; the motivation was creepy and reeked of an adult living in his mom's basement scrolling Facebook pictures all day.

RG: He truly loved her. The movie interpretation of him crying over Lily's death, holding her body and losing it, that was tear-jerking to me.

DTG: That's not a hero, though. It's a sap to be pitied. He

loved her but was a complete jerk to her son and most everyone else. He once tore a Potter family picture in half to keep Lily's half and left the other half with James and Harry. What twisted narcissist does that to a happy family? That's selfish. What a loser!

RG: Well it's not like he ever tried to really break up the marriage.

DTG: As if he could. James was a stud and once Snape called Lily "mudblood" he had no chance. So he pined like a sniveling, unthinking beast.

RG: James wasn't innocent. If hadn't been so antagonizing to Snape at Hogwarts, maybe Snape would not have been so cruel to Harry.

DTG: I don't take that as an excuse for one second. I won't defend James completely, but Snape had decades to move on from that. And Harry, no matter how much he looked or acted like his dad, did not deserve such a vindictive spirit thrust at him, especially his first day in class.

RG: You don't buy that Snape wasn't apologizing to Harry for Lily's death with the first questions he asked him in the first book? You know, all that about asphodel and wormwood and bitterness and sorrow?

DTG: If that was Rowling's intention then I admit that is very cool. But you can apologize without being a bully at the same time. Which Snape was that whole scene, taunting Harry as a "celebrity" even though Harry had done literally nothing to earn that scorn besides be his father's son. And besides, way beyond the first day Snape is terrible to Harry and his friends. Remember when he gave Harry a zero for a simple misread of the instructions for the Draught of Peace while he ignored the poor work of several other students? That's petty and immature.

RG: But lest we forget, he also saved Harry's life his first year when Quirrell tried to kill him during his first Quidditch match. That's noble and heroic.

DTG: Barely. He did so at no risk to his own life or safety and with a small effort for a wizard of his pedigree. It was a good thing, but the insults and boorish behavior towards Harry far outweigh it.

RG: I don't think saving a person's life can be devalued quite that easily. He saved Harry's life out of a deal he made with Dumbledore, which proved he was truly a good guy and no longer a Death Eater. And much of what he did in this role as a spy, as a result, was at risk to his own safety and life. A true hero absolutely would use his skill at occlumency to deceive Voldemort, the greatest Legilimens of his time. You had to figure Snape knew at any moment Voldemort could figure him out. But he stayed exactly where Dumbledore put him. Perhaps that was part of why he played his role as a villain to Harry so believably.

DTG: The point about dealing with Voldemort may have some value but he still went overboard in his treatment of Harry and it was obvious that he did it because he hated James 10 to 20 years later. When he gave Harry detention for using *Sectumsempra* on Draco (which Harry deserved), he forced him to read James and Sirius's old detention notices. That was spiteful.

RG: *Sectumsempra* is a good example of how Harry was far from innocent. Much of Snape's disdain for Harry was for being out of bounds at night and breaking school rules.

DTG: Yes, but you are comparing teenage Harry trying to accomplish noble and reasonable things in secret and under darkness with Snape, a grown man and a teacher, exacting revenge on a child shamelessly and in public.

RG: I hate to sound like Lupin talking to Harry, but it sounds

like you are determined to hate Snape. You keep going back to his treatment of Harry when Snape was far more than that. You didn't even respond to my point about his use of occlumency on You-Know-Who.

DTG: Only nerds say "You-Know-Who". Actually, Ron-type nerds say it. You're not cool enough to be a Hermione nerd. I said his sacrifice to risk Voldemort discovering him had value. But I'm not going to classify him a hero based on how skilled he is. There is zero doubt that Snape was one of the three most adroit wizards in the series, behind Voldemort and Dumbledore. But abilities do not make for a hero. Actions do.

RG: No argument there. I just happen to see his actions as a double-agent far more crucial to his character than his actions as Harry's teacher.

DTG: Snape as Harry's teacher is like 80% of Snape in the series. I bet the majority of Snape's spoken lines before the very end of Book 7 are insults to Potter or his friends.

RG: But that's the genius of the plot twist; she had to make us believe Snape was evil and the true heroism of Snape, in large part, goes unsaid in the series. Doesn't Jesus teach that it is right to do good without getting credit? Also, if everything we discover in "The Prince's Tale" chapter at the end of *The Deathly Hallows* was known ahead of time, it would destroy how incredible that chapter is. That chapter ravaged millions of fans in the profound and shocking way possible.

DTG: I don't know that I agree. I think spoiler type moments can be overvalued and that she could have told just as good a story, or perhaps better, with us knowing ahead of time what Snape really was. We sort of knew anyway. She just sacrificed hundreds of pages of character development for a "A-ha!!" moment. I'm not sure it could not work the other way.

RG: I completely disagree.

DTG: Exceptional counterargument.

RG: Well, I have Harry in my corner, calling Snape probably the bravest man he ever knew.

DTG: From the *epilogue*. Barf.

RG: Well, can we at least agree that Alan Rickman's portrayal of Snape in the movies is immaculate and on the short list for greatest film interpretation of a character ever?

DTG: Yes, we can. Which reminds me, you realize *Die Hard* is a Christmas movie, right?

RG: Get out.



J.K. Rowling 
@jk_rowling

Been wondering how to mark
Snape's birthday without starting
an argument. Here's to him, the big
hero/bully. He really was the best/
worst.

09/01/2016, 13:07

A Book Review: Free Will Revisited

I tend to talk about Dr. Robert Picirilli in sycophantic tones. I suppose it is hard not to come across that way even

though I am sincere in my praise of him and his influence in my life. I actually had him as a professor at a small school with intimate classes. Beyond that, he has been humble enough to answer my emails about Greek long after I graduated. And then there's his published works, which have a special place on my bookshelves.

I've read all of his works at least once, and *Grace, Faith, Free Will* at least 20 times—mostly because it takes many, many readings for a man like me to absorb the fire hydrant of material. And even then I do not think I understand it all. Anytime I feel like I'm getting a little too proud of my intelligence, one chapter of that book will bring me down a notch.

So it was with great joy my Senior Pastor told me not to buy Dr. Picirilli's new book, *Free Will Revisited*, because he already had a copy for me. And despite it being a slim 135 pages, it still took me days to get through it. Because this treatment of a crucial difference between two major branches of orthodox Christianity cannot be discussed simplistically. The reasoning gets into deep waters at times. I will be rereading.

I want to say up front that yet again, just as with *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, Picirilli goes to admirable lengths to make sure he presents his opponents views accurately and fairly. Like a champ, he takes on three of the heaviest weights of the last 500 years of church history in Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. And he spends probably 35-40% of the book trying to express their views in their own words. There are no straw men being batted down. In stark contrast to the Social Media Debate Generation, Picirilli reads to understand, articulates the other position, and does not jump quickly to his responses. And by all means note the subtitle of this book is a "respectful" response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. I implore all of us to take a note from Picirilli's format and approach. Listen or read carefully. Do not

misrepresent your opponent's views. Be humble and respectful.

As far as the content itself, there are times where Picirilli makes a more simple and straightforward argument against the writings of these three men opposing human free will. As when he notes that it is very difficult to get around teaching that God coerces us if we believe our will is completely against God prior to salvation and that God by his grace changes our will to His. Yet there are other times Picirilli shows how complex the debate can get, as on pages 86-87 when he talks about how things that are certain are not "necessary" and how God's knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the past. He dealt with this in the early part of *Grace, Faith, Free Will* but I believe Picirilli to be a very self-aware man, knowing that many of his readers would have read that volume and in my opinion avoids rehashing that part of his previous book but instead explains it with a fresh perspective.

[In the past I have written for REO on Arminius's own words and how much overlap there is to Calvinism and Arminianism.](#) I did so based on what my professors, like Picirilli, have taught me. Here again, he accomplishes the same goal. He does not cite Arminius yet he still makes the point plainly and necessarily that Arminians believe that man is totally depraved, that God draws us to Himself by grace, that man does zero to contribute to his salvation in a way that could be called "works" and that God is completely sovereign over all creation, including human will. The difference lies, in large part, on the focus of the book. Do Christians accept salvation like a drowning man who realizes he cannot swim and chooses to take a rope to save him or are they saved completely void of any free, self-determined choice?

Tribalism can be dangerous in politics and Christianity. I consider myself an Arminian because I think the doctrines are important. Yet I attended a Calvinist seminary, have close Calvinist friends and will gladly lock arms with them in worship and ministry any day. But I consider this topic

important enough to read and write about a couple of times a year. And I am thankful yet again to Dr. Picirilli for the impetus to think about, react to and create in the sphere of theology. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to have their mind stretched, even if it is by Jonathan Edwards more so than Robert Picirilli. Because the point of the book is to debate, not pontificate. I only wish the other three men were alive to respond.

500WoL Reviews: 12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You

There are two types of information that cause me realize where my weaknesses lie and convict me into wanting to change: well-researched statistics and well-reasoned arguments from the Bible.

So, being a confessed smartphone addict (which I have written about [here](#)) Tony Reinke's new book *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* really impacted me through the use of both.

I had seen it recommended on Twitter several times by people I consider to be wise. And I read it quickly yet carefully. I will probably read it regularly. That is how badly I need the material.

The book is written clearly and unashamedly from a Christian worldview. And as such is able to tie numerical data and Bible together. Reinke doesn't just tell you that people check their smartphones every 4.3 minutes of their waking lives, but also that 73% of smartphone users do so before they do their spiritual disciplines. As someone who believes time with God is important yet still feels deep temptation to check my phone

constantly, this speaks to me. The author weaves dozens of Scripture references throughout his profound points about how smartphones affect behavior and thinking. I do not want to think through this issue without theology because I am convinced Christians cannot truly compartmentalize their lives. Reinke makes sure Truth is the main goal and not secular thought on how we change and control our habits through goodness and effort.

The smartphone phenomenon is so new (about 10 years old now) that this book is groundbreaking to me. The smartphone addiction snuck up on me so quickly and subtly. I was not ready for it. As with all major cultural changes, Christian leaders need to be on the front lines, thinking and researching and communicating their findings. This is definitely that.

This book is peer reviewed; the foreword is by John Piper and has endorsements by people like Russell Moore and Jackie Hill Perry. So you can be assured that even if you do not agree with it all, people who get the Bible and are on the front lines of technology and social media have expressed their appreciation for what Reinke has written.

I have made conscious decisions about how to deal with my addiction as a result of this book and you can read them in the article I linked above. I am very thankful for the inspiration to repent.

If you have a smartphone, and especially if you check it constantly, I strongly recommend this book. Every culture has their sinful vices that are so common that we basically ignore them and I am convinced that time-wasting and narcissism are legitimate threats of the social media and smartphone movements. Yet they are so common they can become invisible, much like the "gossip" prayer request.

Thanks to Tony Reinke for causing people like me to see this

issue for the first time.

500 + 63 Words or Less Reviews: The Deathly Hallows

It took me almost a year, but I have finally finished my first reading of the 7-book Harry Potter series and it has been quite the ride, one of the best literary adventures of my life. Over the course of my journey I have met wizards, witches, goblins, ghouls, werewolves, house elves, talking portraits, merpeople, centaurs, giants, dragons, and dementors. And this is only a portion of the beings Harry Potter has introduced me to.

While I still consider *The Half Blood Prince* the best book in the series for a variety of reasons, the *Deathly Hallows* is not far behind. It came across to me as the most realistic of the entire lot with its depiction of what a storybook "adventure" would probably be like. There would likely be a lot of wandering about and being unsure as to what to do. People would get irritated with each other, they would get bored with all the wandering around looking for something, and everyone involved would get disillusioned with the whole shebang in varying degrees and forms. Much like the adventure of life itself.

It was also a much different animal in that most of it did not take place in Hogwarts but on the aforementioned climactic adventure. In my opinion, the personal drama that goes on between the three adventurers while the adventure slowly got going is not remotely detracting. In fact, this personal drama made up some of the best parts of the book. There was a

heaping helping of meaty characterization to be had there by all three of them.

And there is the other big character of the book who wasn't even around for the vast majority of it. Although he died in *The Half Blood Prince*, Dumbledore's presence is huge in the *Deathly Hallows*. In much of the book it is as though he were symbolic of the God of Scripture with Harry constantly questioning him and why he didn't explain this or that while he was alive. Whether or not Rowling really meant for this to be the case when she wrote it, I don't know, but the likeness is strong.

We also learn a lot about Dumbledore's personal backstory and that he wasn't perfect after all. Like everyone else, he had baggage, baggage that for him directed the course of the rest of his life. It is brilliant characterization of a character that had already left the world of our story.

The Deathly Hallows is a fitting culmination of all the preceding acts. And we take many a sad farewell (for the present) of Hermione, Ron, the other Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, Mad Dog Moody, Luna, Neville, Hagrid, McGonagall, and many other unforgettable characters that have left on us a lasting impact. Oddly, though, the departure the most emotional to me, was the farewell of the Dursleys. Those Muggliest of all Muggles who treated Harry like so much trash for so long somehow managed to worm their way into my heart. I'll miss them.

That is the end of my 500WoL. Here is my personal ranking of the seven books:

1. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*
2. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*
3. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
4. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

5. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*
 6. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
 7. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*
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500 Words or Less Reviews: Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

It has been almost three weeks since I have finished [Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince](#). I have actually been nervous about this one and wanted to approach it with a respectable amount of honor as the most literarily well-rounded of the lot.

[Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince](#) clocks in at 652 pages, immediately setting the stage for the plot of the rest of the book during a cryptic meeting between Severus Snape and the Black sisters. It is during this encounter that Snape makes an unbreakable vow with Narcissa Malfoy in which he will be obligated to help her son, young Draco Malfoy, with a Voldemort-ordained task. The plot of the rest of the work flows from this Malfoy/Snape mission.

In essence, the book is really about Snape himself. This fact makes the mysterious naming of the book itself especially ingenious. If you have read this far into the article, you are passionate enough about the franchise to already be familiar with the story. Assuming that is the case, it is in no way a SPOILER to say that Malfoy and Snape accomplish their mission, with Snape ending Dumbledore's life in the lightning-struck tower.

One of the very best and most fascinating characterizations in the entire franchise has been embodied in the person of the relatively rarely seen Dumbledore. But Rowling makes up for that rarity here and with much magnificence. There are too many amazing Dumbledore scenes to name. And then he goes out in high style with one of the best funerals of all time with even the merpeople and the centaurs showing up to pay him homage.

The central theme of this work was very clear and extremely well exemplified: love. Love is everywhere: Tonks and Lupin, Bill and Fleur, Ron and Hermione, Harry and Ginny, and, um, Ron's passing "thing" with Lavender Brown. Ron also has an unfortunate encounter with some love potion. To cap it all off, Dumbledore talks more deeply in *Half-Blood Prince* than in previous books concerning Voldemort's one true weakness, which is his inability to love, a "fault" that would be his undoing.

Although they have been present in every book, I have found that Rowling is getting better at the long stretches of "information relation." At this point, they feel like very natural points of the dialogue instead of contrived and stilted manifestos. It worked better than ever in *HBP*. In fact, I would say that the dialogue as a whole was one of the book's most winning points. The humor was especially strong. I don't think Rowling has given me as many belly laughs in any previous work. Although the examples are legion, the best humor, in my opinion, probably came by way of the person of Luna Lovegood.

The dialogue, the honed prose, the final glories of Dumbledore, the humor, the love, etc., etc., etc, and so forth. For these reasons, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* has taken first place in the HP house of my heart.

500WoL: The Immortal Irishman by Timothy Egan

Timothy Egan's *The Immortal Irishman*, a 2016 biography of Thomas Meagher, is a gripping narrative that reads more like a novel than traditional history or biography. It's clear that Egan did meticulous research, but unlike many historians, he is able to convey his findings in a way that compels his readers to keep turning pages. If you are looking to read up on Irish, Australian and American history, you can do it all by reading this book.

Who was Thomas Francis Meagher? That depends in what part of the world the question is asked.

In Ireland, he was a leader of the failed Rising of 1848 and creator of their tricolor flag. When thousands of Irish were starving during the time of the potato famine and British indifference, the Young Ireland movement sought freedom from British oppression. The patriot-poet Meagher was a key voice for home rule.

In Australia, Meagher was a convict, but so was nearly everyone else. Arrested by the British for his involvement in the uprising of 1848, Meagher was banished from his beloved homeland, a sentence worse than death. After his adventures in the British penal colony, Meagher dramatically escaped to a new life in America.

In America, Meagher was an immigrant. Instantly, he was a leader of the maligned Irish-catholic immigrants of New York City. They came over to escape starvation. These huddled masses overwhelmed the bottom rung of the social ladder. Through speeches in lyrical Gallic and elevated English (with

sprinkles of Latin or Greek) Meagher's poetic prose spoke to the soul of his exiled compatriots.

But for what cause? Would Ireland ever be free? What about the cause of freedom in their newly adopted land? Meagher's opportunity for historic greatness (a calling he always put above wealth) came in the American Civil War. Meagher became the Brigadier General of the Union's Irish Brigade, a group recruited by Meagher from the tenements of New York. They fought bravely in such well-known battles as Bull Run, Antietam, and Fredericksburg. In so doing, they liberated African-American Slaves and preserved the integrity of the nation they could now call theirs.

Meagher's life ended in the Wild West, as the appointed governor of the Montana Territory. Here he clashed with vigilantes and Natives alike. Here he died, according to Egan, murdered by a political enemy. While he was indeed flawed, he was, more importantly, a man of high ideals. He squandered his health and wealth for the cause of freedom and the pursuit of greatness, goals which he certainly achieved.

Egan's ability to tell this story, to connect the dots of a life over three continents, is a marvelous feat. While Egan struggles at times to capture the personality of his subject, he masterfully connects Meagher's life experiences to the larger historical situations. In so doing, the reader not only learns about the life of a man, but the times that continue to shape our time. Only 320 pages long, *The Immortal Irishman*, should be at the top of your summer reading list.