

Three Things I Love About Audiobooks (And Three I Don't)

As a man who went from farm boy in Tookeydoo, SC to pastor in inner-city Chicago, I do not mind change. Not even in small things. Except when it comes to reading. I have never for one second read a book from a Kindle or any similar device and do not plan to. I just can't do it. Not having a physical paper book in my hands is about as comfortable as trying to write with my left hand.

Until recently, I had felt similarly about audiobooks. I've listened patiently as friends like Josh Crowe have informed me that listening to works like the *Harry Potter* series is an amazing experience. I nod politely but think, "Nope. Never gonna do it."

Yet one day this April I had an epiphany: a huge reason I hate driving in Chicago's bumper to bumper traffic is that I feel like I'm wasting time. If I'm going 70 MPH at least I feel like I'm doing something. When I'm going 0 MPH, I go from calm to irrationally angry in about six seconds. Music helps a lot of people, but not me. No, I needed something else. And so I purchased an Audible account on Amazon, a website I adore about like I adore Chick-fil-a.

In the last three months or so, I have listened to about 16 audiobooks. I've listened to everything from a two-hour long self-help book in Spanish to a 27-hour Steve Jobs biography. And I've listened enough to start forming opinions about this medium. Here are are a few things I consider advantages to audiobooks over actually reading a book:

1. The Voices

The very first audiobook I listened to was *As You Wish: Inconceivable Tales from the Making of The Princess Bride*, written and narrated by Carey Elwes. Elwes was already high up on my list of cool people, but his reading of this work was just enthralling. His accent is exquisite. He did impressions of people like Andre the Giant that were sublime. I would guess he made the book twice as entertaining with his voice than it would have been had I read it.

Later I listened to *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. The narrator's voice was rustic and pitch-perfect, especially when he read the dialogue of the father and the son. The writing is already packed with emotion but the reader really brought it to life.

Another notable one was Gabriel Wyner reading his work, *Fluent Forever: How to Learn Any Language Fast and Never Forget It*. Not only was the material incredible and effective but Wyner, who is an opera singer, conveys an enthusiasm through the reading that can be felt in his timbre and inflections. He reads with joy and I can even see him gesturing in my mind's eye several times in the book. Extremely well done.

2. The ability to "read" while walking and driving

I started this to have something to make me feel productive while driving, as I said above. But then I realized that I spend nearly an hour a day walking to and from work. And while I often use that time to listen to Polish, I could also use it to listen to books. Before 2017 I was about a 15-20 book a year guy. Last year I read 50 without a conscious effort to up the normal count. This year I decided to read every free second I can get and I've read a lot more. And it was

beginning to annoy me that I was losing precious time doing things where reading is impossible. Now that has been solved.

3. Zero shipping and storage issues

I love Amazon Prime in part because I can see a book I love and have it in my hands in two days. Now, with Audible, I don't have to wait but a few seconds. Also, occasionally, with physical books, I will get the wrong book or my order will be lost or late. Not an issue with audiobooks. And then there's the storage issue. I love bookshelves and having a reading room, but every time I've moved, the boxes of books have created extra work. And I don't have infinite space in my house. Now I have a way to add to my library without taking space from my home. Admittedly this is an advantage to a Kindle but this was never enough motivation in and of itself.

And here are three things I don't love:

1. It's easy to lose focus

If I'm driving and a car in front of me swerves then it will take me a few seconds to be able to refocus back to the book I'm listening to. Audible has a 30-second rewind feature, but it's unwise to manipulate while driving. Also, even when I'm walking sometimes a loud motorcycle will go by and I will miss some of the book and I'm too lazy to rewind. Plus, in general, I just have an easier time getting distracted and letting my mind wander when listening than when reading. Admittedly, this is a character flaw more than a book flaw. Audiobook from Amazon has thought of very easy ways to combat a lot of this.

2. I lose my place sometimes

This is a problem more with my phone than with the medium, but it happens sometimes that if my phone gets bumped then the place will skip and I won't be able to remember exactly where I was. And it takes a while to figure it out. That is frustrating but does not happen very often.

3. Selection is limited

The selection is not terrible, but I can find just about anything on Amazon books. On Audible, this is not the case. That's just the nature of it. Not every book has been recorded to hear or will be recorded. But to be honest, Audible is a supplement to my regular reading, not the main source. So this is a minor complaint as well.

One final thought on price...I didn't include this as a positive or a negative because it depends. I have found books on Audible for \$5.95 often but I also can't find books I want for under \$25 sometimes. Audible does run sales though where you can get 3 "credits" for \$35 and then buy any three books you want (one a month for three months), which is often cheaper than the physical copy of books. So Amazon is still finding ways to eliminate potential complaints.

Overall I am quite pleased with Audible and I plan to use it until I die. Some may think audiobooks don't count as real reading and that is fine. But my soul needs them to keep myself sane at times.

Questions or comments? Please tell us below.

Reform the Line: Finding Purpose in Failure

Whether it's due to upbringing, past influences, or sensibilities developed over the years, I do my best to keep my eyes and ears open to truth that can help shape me into something better. That is not meant to be a pat on the back. From an early age, I have been blessed to learn from much wiser people the importance of examining everything I consume – whether literature, music, or movies. I was taught that everything I take into my mind needs to be filtered through the light of God's truth and grace.

It is that context that sets the stage for so many of my most valuable lessons. I've written about a few of them for *Rambling Ever On* already which you can read [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). And while this particular moment of revelation was once again provided by Tolkien and his magnum opus, *The Lord of the Rings*, this time it was delivered through the film adaptation by Peter Jackson. To make any sense of this story, I must beg your indulgence for a few minutes as I do my best to provide context, and that will require a bit of storytelling and ground laying on my part. I promise it has to be done for any of this to make sense.

At the outset of *The Return of the King*, the third movie in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the people of Rohan are going to war against Mordor, the great evil of the world. Their spirits are high after a hard-fought battle at Helm's Deep. They had won the day through courage, determination, and the perfect timing of a wizard. The sun

rose in the east and brought with it new life, new hope, and a complete routing of their enemy. Now, Gondor, their great ally to the southeast, has called for aid, and Rohan answers. The Rohirrim – the great cavalry of the Rohan people – rides to fight in the great war of their time. With them ride Aragorn, the heir to the throne of Gondor and hero of Helm's Deep, along with Legolas Greenleaf and Gimli son of Gloin, elf and dwarf warriors of renown. The odds are not good but with these mighty warriors at their side and a little luck, perhaps they will win the day again.

That is the scene that Peter Jackson's epic conclusion to *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy presents to the audience. *The Return of the King* further stacks the deck against our heroes. On the eve of battle, Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli make the difficult decision to seek another road to Gondor, leaving the Rohirrim to ride to battle alone. It is a huge blow to the morale of the soldiers. Aragorn had given them hope. His presence inspired renewed courage. Just like that, he was gone and with him, their courage. They lose hope and they openly question the wisdom of riding to war.

Théoden, King of Rohan, has lived a long and mostly unfulfilled life. For too long, he was an ineffective leader. For too long, he sat by as his country and his people suffered. After Aragorn departs, one of Théoden's soldiers speaks aloud that which all others are thinking, "He (Aragorn) leaves because there is no hope...We cannot defeat the armies of Mordor." They know they cannot win this fight. It is at this moment of despair, that Théoden truly becomes the king he has always desired to be. He responds with such resolve that it calms the hearts of his soldiers and prepares them for what they must do. "No we cannot. But we will meet them in battle nonetheless." Théoden recognized the hopelessness of their situation, but he recognized something even more important: the absolute rightness of their task. The righteousness of it all. They would ride to war and die in war because it was the

right thing to do.

In what is possibly the crowning cinematic achievement of the film, the Rohirrim arrive at the Fields of Pelennor, outside the walls of Gondor's capital city, Minas Tirith, to find a host of enemy warriors swarming as far as the eye can see. It is a veritable ocean of orcs, trolls, and other creatures of darkness and evil. Théoden calls to his troops. He rallies them with his chant of "Death!" They charge, building speed as they take arrow after arrow, and finally, triumphantly, they break through the line of terrified orcs. They completely turn the tide of the battle. They rally the armies of Gondor. They bring hope and courage to the free peoples of Middle Earth. The orcs flee in fear knowing that they cannot stand against the righteous fury of the Rohirrim. It is a beautiful sight.

It is then that the Rohirrim realize that Mordor is stronger than they realized and another army had been held in reserve: an army of oliphaunts (giant elephants) prepared to lay waste to anyone still on the battlefield. Hope turns sour and despair sets in again.

It is easy to give up when faced with failure. It is not an uncommon thing to give our best and watch it fall apart in front of our eyes. This inevitably leaves us feeling dejected and discouraged. We have all been there. We have poured our hearts into something so important and so precious, only to see it blow away in the cold winds of failure. I would wager that most of us have experienced this in some form or fashion. Many of us are experiencing it right now.

Life can feel unfair. Things go wrong – many times in ways that leave us broken. Often, it goes bad due to our own failings or flaws, though that is a separate conversation for another day. The failure I am discussing now is a different thing altogether. We can diligently live out our purpose and

calling and still see it crumble at our feet. We can know, without a doubt, that we are doing the right thing and still be crushed by disappointment. We can do the righteous thing and receive suffering, loss, and even death as our reward.

Take the real-life story of Jim Elliot and the Ecuadorian missionaries. On January 8, 1956, Jim Elliot, Peter Fleming, Ed McCully, Roger Youderian, and Nate Saint were brutally killed by warriors from the Waodani tribe in the jungles of Ecuador. This occurred after months of trying to connect with the tribe. In fact, a few days before they were martyred, they had met with a small group from the tribe and were thrilled that God had finally opened this door. They had been led to the Waodani tribe. They knew the risks, as their correspondence and writings would later attest, but they also knew that if this was the will of God, they had only one choice: obey. By any human standard, their mission was a total failure.

Their friends and family were heartbroken when they received news of the attack. Instead of hating the Waodani tribe for what they did, some of the remaining family members, Jim's wife Elizabeth in particular, chose to continue the mission. In place of fear, anger, and hatred, they went back to the Waodani and showed them courage, peace, and the love of Christ. Their ministry, and the memory of what the five young martyrs did change the Waodani people forever.

That is the lesson *The Rohirrim*, King Théoden, and *The Return of the King* had for me on my most recent viewing. Mordor was too strong and too powerful to defeat. Théoden and his soldiers knew this. They had done the unthinkable and broken the line on their first, desperate charge. For a few brief and glorious moments, they thought they had turned the tide of the battle and won the day. To the east, the line of oliphaunts and the second army from Mordor shattered that dream. Once

again, they were faced with the futility of their task. They rode to Gondor's aid knowing that death would be their only reward. But they rode nonetheless. Théoden, having already found his courage, sees the new army approaching and the fear it inspires in the eyes of his men, and he stands resolute. He quickly rallies his men and they respond as they have been trained to do from their youth. He yells the line that struck me with such force that I quietly gasped. "Reform the line! Reform the line!" The line reforms and the Rohirrim once again charge, courageously, hopelessly into the gaping maw of a much stronger army.

The outcome is irrelevant. They march because it is right. They march because it is the only honorable and noble choice left to them. I doubt we will be faced with such a choice – a life or death decision. But we are faced with difficulties throughout our lives. We serve in thankless and overlooked ministries. We sow the seed and never reap the harvest. Some of us deal with sickness and infirmity. Some of us deal with tragedy, more than it seems fair for one person to bear. We labor and sometimes, it feels in vain. That is our reality. We see this story play out in Scripture repeatedly. Moses not crossing into the Promised land. David not being allowed to build the Temple. Joseph and his continual setbacks and trials. Paul and his thorn in the flesh. All the martyrs throughout the pages of Scripture.

My takeaway from all of this is pretty simple. God does not promise us an easy road. He does not guarantee success, by any earthly definition. His plan is greater than all of that. He requires but one thing: obedience. That is a lesson I need to hear often. I need to see results. I need to see the Lord move in my church in a mighty way, but at times, it feels as if we are dying a slow and prolonged death. All of this even though I am convinced we are doing exactly what the Lord wants us to do. Perhaps it is His good will to let us serve out our days and never see tangible results. Faced with that possibility,

what are our options? Do we seek greener pastures? Do we compromise in hopes that it will benefit us in the long run? Or do we “reform the line” and do exactly what we believe the Lord has for us to do?

Jim Elliot wrote this prior to his death, and though not as famous as his “He is no fool” quote, this speaks directly to the heart of what it means to be a faithful follower of Christ, “Rest in this: it is His business to lead, command, impel, send, call or whatever you want to call it. It is your business to obey, follow, move, respond, or what have you. I may no longer depend on pleasant impulses to bring me before the Lord. I must rather respond to principles I know to be right, whether I feel them to be enjoyable or not.”

Failing is not enjoyable. Suffering is not enjoyable. Sometimes though, it is right and righteous. Sometimes, failure is exactly what is being asked of us. Théoden and the Rohirrim charge the new army and hope rekindles. The good guys win the day as Aragorn arrives at just the right moment with an army all his own. Théoden never sees that victory. In the midst of the battle, Théoden is mortally wounded and as he lies dying in the arms of his beloved niece, he is finally at peace. “I go to my fathers, in whose mighty company I shall not now feel ashamed.” He did what was right, no matter the results. No matter the consequences. That is our calling. That is our purpose. Obey. To do the right thing no matter what. To “reform the line” as many times as it is necessary. This is no fairytale, where heroic deeds are rewarded with victory upon victory. We live in a broken and fallen world where oftentimes, God uses our brokenness and failures for His glory. We fail, but there is beauty and redemption in those failings if they flow from humble and obedient hearts.

As followers of the living God, we too will pass on from this life to the next and if we are faithful and obedient to our

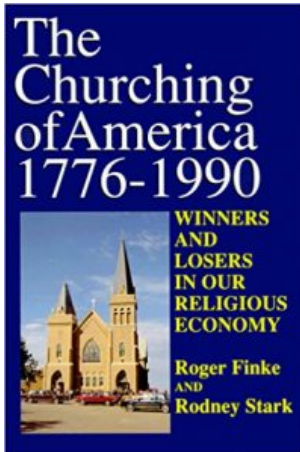
calling, we too will have nothing of which to be ashamed. No matter the earthly successes or failures of our lives, our ultimate reward is waiting for us in the arms of our Savior who will welcome us with the best words imaginable, "Well done my good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!"

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." – Jim Elliot

Five Great books from Rodney Stark

Rodney Stark is a Sociologist from Baylor University. He has mostly applied his craft to understanding religious history in over 30 books and countless articles. Very few authors have such a direct impact on my academic life as him. While great theological minds remain among my favorite authors, Stark has had a profound impact on the way I understand the world. Since I am in the business of communicating an understanding of the world (I'm a history teacher) Stark's influence is incalculable. For today's Friday Five, I offer a mini-review of 5 of his books.

Churching of America with Roger Fink (1992)

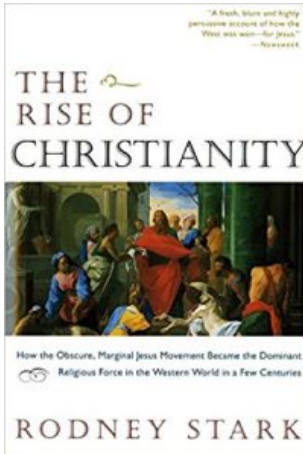


I came across this book in graduate school by recommendation of one of my best professors. As an AP US History teacher, I make frequent use of this book. The authors' argument attacks the idea that the United States was a universally Christian nation at its founding. Their major source for studying religious devotion is church attendance. What they find is that while Americans may have been largely culturally Christian in 1776, they were not zealous churchgoers. In fact, a greater percentage of Americans go to church today than in 1776.

It's no surprise then that evangelists of the early 19th century felt the need for religious revival. It was these revivals, the Second Great Awakening, that made America a "Christian" nation in the way we tend to think of it. As conversions soared, so did church attendance. Every year, I get to teach the Second Great Awakening and using Finke's and Stark's research, I make the argument that it was the most important social or cultural event in American history.

Aside from the immense impact of the Second Great Awakening, another fascinating argument is that of religious competition. Finke and Stark assert that religious freedom in the colonies and early republic led to a sort of "Free Market" of denominations and religious groups. Each was in competition with the others and had to work for converts. As compared to established state churches in Europe, American denominations had to work to attract new members or die. This factor explains why the United States had not experienced the massive decline in church attendance that Western Europe faced, even if in 1776 we were perhaps less Christian than Europe.

The Rise of Christianity (1996)



For Christians, this may be the most important book on the list. While there were some parts that Bible-believing Christians bristle at, this book is a must-read for anyone interested in church history. The question it addresses is: how did an obscure Jewish sect become the major religion of the Roman Empire in less than 300 years? His answers are exhilarating.

First, he argues that the mission to the Jews worked much more than readers of the Bible would think. Unfortunately, Stark too often presents this as a problem with what the New Testament says rather than what our perception of the situation is. The Bible never claims that all the Jews rejected Christianity so Stark's arguments are not incompatible with Scripture. At this point, Stark makes his classic argument about religious conversion, one that has been the staple of his career for some time. Stark argues that religious conversions do not happen (mostly) because of a preacher or missionary. He argues that people convert to a religion because of the influence of their social networks. If an individual feels a deep connection (through kinship or employment or friendship) to a group of people that are largely one religion, they tend to convert. In other words, conversion is conformity. A more positive way to say this, including people in a community of believers, is the only real way to make converts.

Interestingly, Stark argues that the social networks used by first century Christians were the network of the diaspora Jews. He claims that the number of Gentile God-fearers was probably high and it was through these networks that Jews, half-Jews, and God-fearers became Christian.

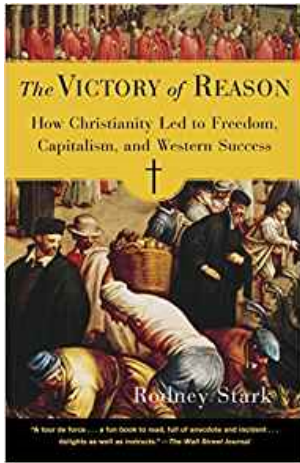
Perhaps my favorite argument in the book is how Christian

sexuality transformed the Empire. Romans were not interested in reproduction; they were interested in gratification. Newborns were often abandoned to die, especially if they were girls. This led to a situation where there were more men than women and where homosexual sex, heterosexual anal sex, and temple prostitution sex were the norms. In this context, Christian sexuality simply out-reproduced the pagans. Christian women married at an older age than pagan girls who often married before puberty. As a result, Christian women had less damaged reproductive systems and were more fertile. They also kept their babies instead of the common practices of abortion and infanticide. Christian men were encouraged to marry and have families rather than gratify themselves in other ways.

Christianity's more positive treatment of women (along with the lack of murder of girls) led to female converts. This established a situation where Christian women outnumbered Christian men significantly. According to Stark, Christian women married pagan men regularly, but would often bring their pagan husbands into their Christian community. This often led to the conversion of the husband and even more so led to more children being born and raised into the Christian community.

There are several more compelling arguments in this book, arguments that have a significant practical impact on our understanding of the early church. In short, however, it was the willingness to include others in social networks, compassion for the poor, intellectual viability, and Christian marital sexuality that won over the Roman Empire and changed the world.

Victory of Reason (2005)

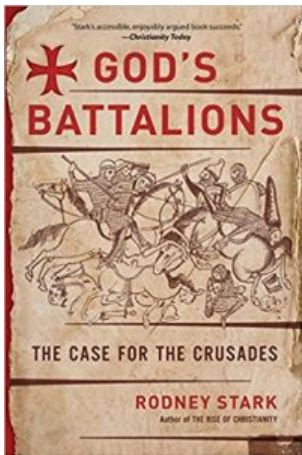


For those interested in medieval history, this is where to start. In this book, Stark goes into the Middle Ages to see the impact of Christianity in advancing the cultural and intellectual life of Western culture. The standard narrative that Stark attacks is the idea that the fall of Rome was the fall of cultural progress, learning, and any sort of modern progress. The medieval era that followed was an era hampered by religiosity and superstition. This era, called the Dark Ages, was eventually rescued by the secularism of the Renaissance.

Stark masterfully destroys this erroneous assumption about the past. Despite some obvious hardships during the medieval period, Stark argues that they are a time of increased moral, technological, intellectual, and economic progress. The Romans used slaves in abundance, the middle ages saw greater amounts of freedom and human dignity. While the Romans built great aqueducts for the wealthy with those slaves, the medieval times saw the invention of practical labor-saving devices like the windmill. Yes, the classical period produced great minds, but the scholastic emphasis on reason was the foremost prelude to the scientific method. Moreover, the decentralization of the government after the fall of the Roman Empire produces the Italian city-state and chartered towns. These freer societies are responsible for the development of market capitalism that allowed for common born people to climb out of crushing poverty for the first time in human history.

The idea that was most behind all these advances, which give birth to the modern world, is the Christian faith's dedication to reason. Believing that a God of order and logic made the universe, the Christian societies of Western Europe were able to use reason to advance more than any society before them.

God's Battalions: The Case for the Crusades (2009)

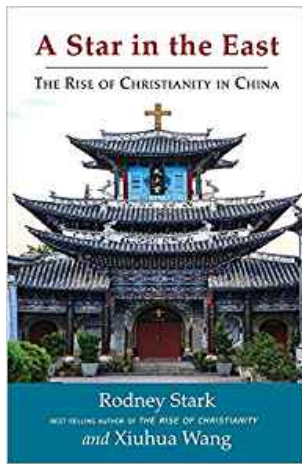


I get the feeling that Stark so enjoyed researching the Medieval period and correcting misconceptions, that he felt the need to set the record straight on the crusades. This work relies much less on originally researched that most of his other works, but is still worth the read for anyone interested in history.

God's Battalions is a fairly detailed history of the Crusades designed to defend Western Europe's involvement in the Wars. Stark sees the Crusades as a counter-attack to centuries of Muslim aggression in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. Aside from the centuries leading the Crusades, the specific violence toward Western pilgrims and Byzantines justify the need for the war. Not only was the reason for War justified, the warfare tactics of the Crusades (while often brutal) were typical of their time and no crueler than those tactics used by Turkish troops.

As someone who cares deeply about Muslims and Muslim-Christian relationships, I hesitate to recommend this book to just anyone. Stark does, however, seem to have a firm grip on the historiography of the Crusades and the way historical understanding has been impacted more by modern political climates than actual historical facts. If you are interested in the Crusades, it is worth the read.

A Star in the East with Xiuhua Wang (2015)



Stark brings his understanding of Sociology of Religion to a modern topic—the growth of Christianity in China. His research is aided significantly by one of his Chinese graduate students, Xiuha Wang. It is in China where more people are currently converting to the Christian faith than anywhere else in the world. How is this possible given traditional oppositions to the Christianity found in Confucianism and Buddhism as well as an officially atheist society imposed by the Communist State? The answers to the questions are multilayered, but ultimately Stark sees that what is going on in China in the 20th and 21st centuries is basically what was going on in the Roman Empire in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

People are converting, Stark argues, in the way they always convert—connections to social networks. In other words, friendships and family ties are how people are coming to Christ. As people feel more connected to a group of Christians than they do to their previous social group, they are willing to convert to the Christian faith. The more people convert to Christianity, the more potential social networks there are to be connected to. The momentum is moving in the direction of the Christian faith.

One of Stark's claims that I found intriguing concerned the impact of Christian missionaries of the 19th and 20th century. Stark asserts that those missionaries, like almost all missionaries, averaged about one or two real converts each. This does not mean they did not have a lasting impact. Institutions like Schools and hospitals were critical in continuing Christian witness long after the missionaries left. More importantly, one convert tended to make more converts than the missionary. As generations pass, thousands of Chinese come to a knowledge of Jesus because of the seemingly insignificant work of that missionary.

One final point about *A Star in the East* deals with the persecution of the Church in China. Since the Boxer Rebellion during the Qing dynasty, Christians have been objects of persecution in China. The modern state has tried to monitor Christianity in China by making some churches legal, while others have resisted. Stark's analyses of these realities is that the persecution in China has led to a more conservative, Bible-following, church than was around in China in the mid-20th century. In the mid-20th century, Protestant (and Catholic) missionaries from the West dominated Chinese Christianity. Many of these westerners were significantly impacted by the popular theological liberalism of their day. As Western influence was curtailed and Chinese Christians were forced to make the choice to conform or face persecution, the church in China became more devout and more faithful to the Scripture.

"*A Star in the East*" is a short book that is illuminating for anyone interested in the story of the world's soon-to-be largest Christian nation.

As shown above, Stark is a revisionist. He seems to live for debunking accepted wisdom and providing fresh new understanding of historical or sociological questions. In doing so, he challenges our cultural's post-enlightenment negative understanding of Christianity and advocates for the real world benefits of faith. Hopefully my efforts today will bring someone to read one of these great books. If you've read anything by Stark, tell us what you think in the comments below.

500 Words or Less Reviews: To Kill a Mockingbird (Film)

In 1960, Harper Lee published her masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It has since become one of the most beloved books of millions of readers. The movie adaptation of the book bearing the same name was released just two years after its original publication. One might have thought that since the movie was released so quickly after the book's first appearance it would be extremely good at best, but it is debatably the greatest movie adaptation of a book ever. (To be honest, there are several others that are very close contenders. Nevertheless, TKaM gets my vote.)

In the year it opened, *To Kill a Mockingbird* garnered eight nominations at the Oscar's, winning three of those. But moviegoers recognized that it was more than merely one of the best movie of the year; both critics and audiences rightly saw it as one of the greatest movies of all time. It has maintained that status.

I don't think anything made by mankind is ever perfect. Things that we do and make can always be perfected in some way. But I do admit that there are some things pretty close to perfection. This particular work of art directed by Robert Mulligan fits well in that category.

There is so much to appreciate here, from the mastery of the music, the directing, the writing, the cinematography, etc. Everything clicks, everything turns like a well-oiled movie machine, a projector, if you will. A good argument could be made that the acting is the film's most outstanding feature. This is particularly true of its three main actors: Gregory Peck (Atticus Finch), Mary Badham (Scout Finch), and Phillip Alford (Jem Finch). This is Peck at his award-winning and iconic finest, which is actually no surprise. Peck is always

so good at his profession that he could probably out-act most actors at acting while gagged, tied, and encased in a coffin—and still win an Oscar. No, the actual surprise here is the acting of Badham and Alford, neither of whom had been previously trained but who both did a superb job carrying most of the movie alone.

To Kill a Mockingbird is set in a quaint little town and looks at the world from the young vantage points of Scout and Jem. The story is a coming of age one of sorts. Along their young journey they get their first real glimpse into the adult world filled with its selfish pride, racism, death, and hatred. In the midst of this stands the pillar that is their father, Atticus, a lone bulwark of wisdom and mercy and grace and love.

Along the journey, they will adventure with their best friend Dill Harris, and encounter unforgettable characters like Boo Radley (portrayed by Robert Duvall in his debut film appearance), Tom Robinson, Calpurnia, Mayella Ewell, Bob Ewell, and many other wonderful and colorful people.

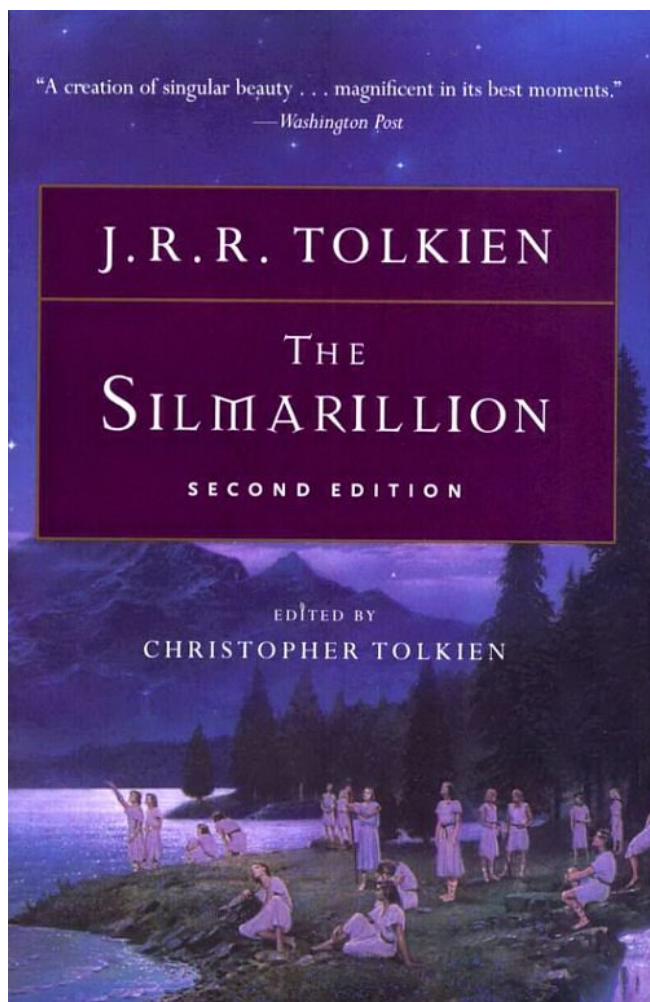
Lastly, a final shout-out to legendary composer, Elmer Bernstein, for the film's haunting, beautiful, utterly timeless soundtrack.

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**



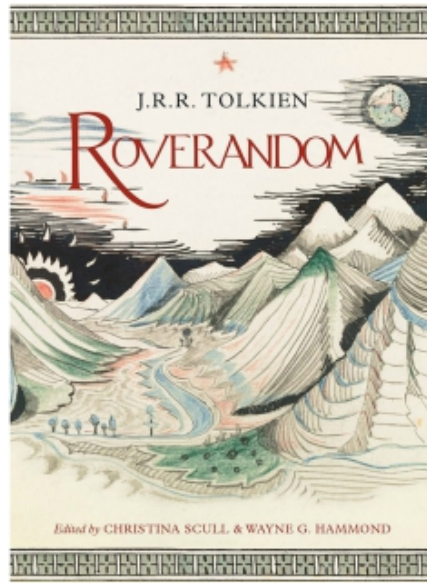
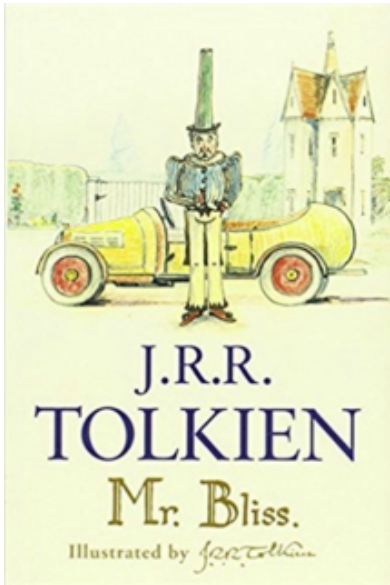
To make a huge understatement, J.R.R. Tolkien was a slow and very meticulous writer. It took him 14 years to write *The Lord*

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.

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.

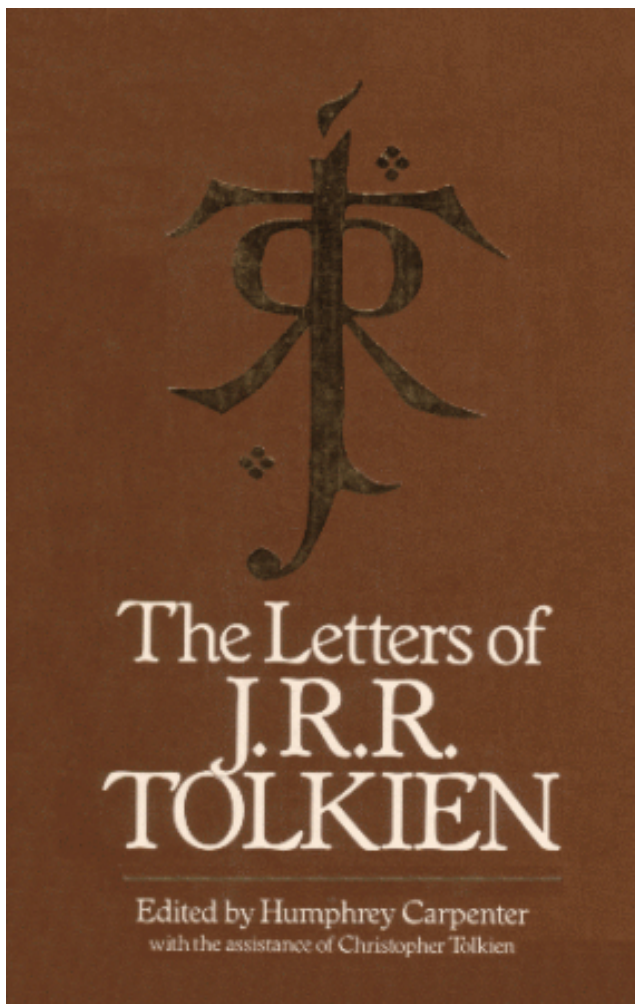
This book contains the letters from 1925 through 1938 as well as the final letter and a short note from the North Polar Bear written in an invented alphabet based on Goblin drawings. Each

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.

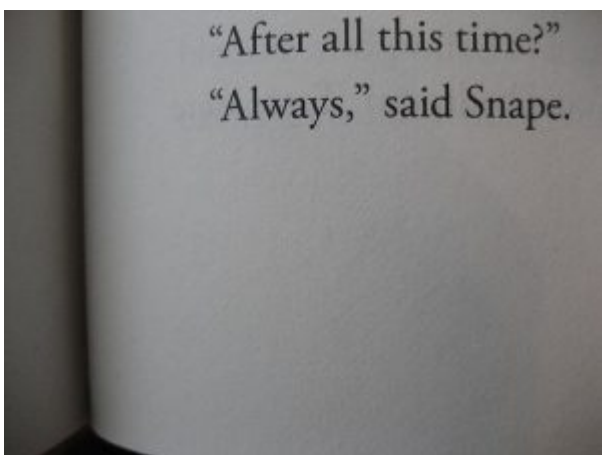
The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien – Phill Lytle



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.

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: *Sectumpsempra* 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.

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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.

500WoL: Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Are you tired of these *Harry Potter* reviews yet? Are you as fed up as the poor Sirius relegated to spending his days in a dilapidated old house that he loathes? Are you as fed up as Harry was for pretty much this whole book? Well, humor me for three more journey's into the magical world of Hogwarts, will you? I'll be upfront with you about something. While I thoroughly enjoyed most of *The Order of the Phoenix*, I do consider it the least among the five *Harry Potter* books I have now read. And I think it is a lesser work for three reasons.

First, it's too long. In my review for [The Goblet of Fire](#), I said that while I think smaller literary works are usually better because the author has honed it and taken out all or most of the fat, I do concede that long works can be great and also well-honed. The long *Goblet of Fire* is an example of this. With very few rough spots and fatty tissue, Rowling honed it to a sharp edge from beginning to end. *The Order of the Phoenix*, not so much. It was too long and too full of fat and fluff. Thus, it was a bit duller of edge. I think *Order of the Phoenix* would have been just fine and dandy with 100 to 150 less pages.

There are a couple of other lesser reasons I place this in a decided last place of these first five. Second, there is much less imaginative detail than in the preceding books. There is some, I know, but less. Loved the imaginative description of their cleaning the worn down 12 Grimmauld Place, the inherited home of Sirius Black. But there weren't as many imaginative details after this. Way too little of the ghosts, too little candy and Quidditch and magic and wonder and the fat lady. The

third reason was Harry's almost continual bad attitude throughout the book. It is totally realistic for a boy of his age and in his very problematic situation in life to experience such angst, I suppose. But it doesn't add to the enjoyment when a book's main protagonist is so unlikable most of the time.

Despite these bad things and despite my putting it at the bottom of the list, I absolutely do not consider this a bad work or that I have wasted my time. Thoroughly enjoyed it and you will too. Saying it is the worst doesn't seem right. Instead, lets say it is the least of the best. Plus, it contains several very key elements of the overall story and centaurs, giants, lots of intriguing side plots, and the sadistic Professor Umbridge. Not to mention the string of very authentically moving moments after about page 500. I consider these most touching moments in the series so far. But be warned: Here you're going to face dangers more ominous than O.W.L exams. So gird your minds, boys and girls, gird your minds. That is all.