

# This Splendorous, Stinky Mortal Coil

## Books That Make Me Tremble

If you're like me, some days are better than others. The worst happen when I feel as though I'm sleep-walking through life. I become acutely aware that, just like the ripening bananas on the counter, I am a rapidly-decaying skin suit borne along in one measly corridor of the universe. (How horrifying it would be if Hume were right that we're all just heaps of impressions. Thank goodness for Plato.) Feeling that I already have one foot in the grave, I begin to lose interest in the kaleidoscopic marvel that surrounds us in every moment of our lives. Or rather, to put it more precisely, my vision fails me. We spend months studying the veins of trees and eyes of fish; the movements of stars and our own heartbeats; magnets and bursts of lightning—phenomena which, for eons, and in some places, even now, were regarded as divine in origin. But buzzed by the psychic noise of my Twitter feed, and consumed by grind culture, I develop a distaste for anything that requires focus, and then I become disgusted by being itself. I run around town like a chicken with its head cut off. Ephemerality—or perhaps, more aptly, the existential dread of the Silicon-Styrofoam age—gets me down.

I need my own Beatrice to slap me across the cheek, or at least a Virgil to jam my face in front of a pile of crap. I need whatever it takes to rip off my psychological fetters and *see something real*, which will either fill me with awe or terror, or, more likely, both. Discussions are the best medicine for this ill of the soul, but a good book can also do the trick. I have thus gathered this list of titles that stir me from my stupor. The first section—"The Splendorous"—contains descriptions of those books that whet my appetite for beauty. They are, by turns, alluring, erudite, and charming. The second section—"The Stinky"—elicits disgust, not the kind that begets despair but rather rouses one through the cleansing of pity and fear. (For those of you Nietzsche enthusiasts out there, one may also characterize the categories of my book collection as Apollonian and Dionysian.)

In both sections I have intentionally included multiple works of poetry. I began collecting poetry several years ago after my great-aunt introduced me to the riotously-funny "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats." I believe poetry to be the most meaningful genre of the written word. Events that take place at the summits or rock-bottoms of our lives demand that we speak poetically about them; no other literary sculpture will do.

'Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man.' Its themes are the simplest experiences of the surface of life, sorrow and joy, love and battle, the peace of the country, the bustle and stir of towns, but equally the boldest conceptions, the profoundest

intuitions, the subtlest and moxy complex classifications and ‘discourse of reason’, if into these too the poet can ‘carry sensation’, make of them passionate experiences communicable in vivid and moving imagery, in rich and varied harmonies.

(Grierson 1921, 14)

## **The Splendorous**

**Grierson, Herbert J.C. *Metaphysical Lyrics & Poems of the Seventeenth Century*. London: Oxford University Press, 1921.**

The seventeenth century was an exciting time. We’re still confronting the questions about faith and reason that people examined en masse during this era. The bold physical conceits of the moderns lunged into battle with the wonderfully-verbose abstractions of the scholastics, and consequently birthed metaphysical poetry. New-fangled charts of heavenly bodies meet pressing inquiries such as “How many angels stand on the eye of a needle?,” generating a startling companionship between mechanical schemes and theological flourish. As it turns out, logic and myth make good bed-fellows, and the endless imagination of John Donne is pure delight.

**Pushkin, Alexander. *The Star of Dazzling Ecstasy*. Translated by Philip Nikolayev. New York: tiptop street, 2021.**

All our fantasies exist. Stories and legends take place in the literary landscape of our imaginations, which inspire grand acts of courage and betrayal and everything in between. Pushkin knows. Prophets stumbling through the desert, frantic farewells, glimmering winter mornings—these are just a taste of Pushkin’s ecstatic imagery. He has such verve!

**Oliver, Mary. *House of Light*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.**

If we have the will to witness it, our mundane existence is studded with the sublime. Like a piece of cut glass which, held up to a beam of light, radiates the brilliant expanse and variety of the visible spectrum of light, Oliver’s poetry meditates on the opulence of nature. Most of all I am awed by her attentiveness to the dignity of animals, whose presence in this world magnifies our own. Not persuaded by Leibniz that every soul contains a vision of the infinite? Try reading “Little Owl Who Lives in the Orchard” and “The Kingfisher.”

**Neruda, Pablo. *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*. Translated by W.S. Merwin. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1969.**

Pablo Neruda introduced me, inadvertently, to poetry. When I was a young girl, my teacher read me a biography of his life written for young readers. It contained poems from several of his

works—"The Book of Questions" and "The Heights of Macchu Picchu." At the time, I didn't know that poetry differed from other genres; I only thought it was beautiful.

This was Neruda's first published book, and it proclaimed to the world that this young man was a master of sensuality. His melee of images are *elemental*, perhaps calling to mind the dance of music, fragrance, and color that unfolds so gracefully in Baudelaire's "Correspondances." Neruda fixates on water, the tinkling of bells, wind, wine and moonlight, and they all lead him back, on his hands and knees, to his lover. He convinces me that eroticism finds its beginning not in strange internet trends, but rather the fecundity of simple earthly things.

**De Saint-Exupéry, Antoine. *The Little Prince*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 1943.**

This soulful story is an homage to all the joy, spunk, and longing of childhood. A pilot who, long ago, renounced his ambitions to become a painter, crash-lands in the Sahara desert. There he meets a young boy who calls himself a little prince and says he hails from a "house-sized" asteroid known on Earth as B 612. While telling his story, the little prince describes why people fail to perceive important things and why we "tame" what we love. Great discussion fodder.

**Merton, Thomas. *No Man is an Island*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955.**

Life is infinitely good. Our silly lizard brains (mine, at least) can barely begin to contemplate the extent of its beauty. In glowing, simple prose, Merton examines love, happiness, prayer, forgiveness and other eternal themes. Think of the earnest, good-humored angel from *It's A Wonderful Life* (fittingly named Clarence), but make him a Trappist monk with an interest in Eastern mysticism. That's Thomas Merton. Reading this book makes me want to run around campus and thank every person I've ever brushed shoulders with for the blessing that is the coincidence of their lives and mine.

## The Stinky

**Poe, Edgar Allen. *The Poems of Edgar Allen Poe*. New York: Dover, 2017.**

Dreamy horror, seraphic visions, early deaths—Poe embraces psychic profanity with the grandiloquent fripperies of the 19th century pen. His phrases have all the musicality and ebb of old lullabies, and it is blasphemous to read them during any other time than at night. Additionally, most poems in this edition are accompanied by gloriously intricate Art Nouveau prints. They are so romantic! It is imperative that we bring this style of illustration back into popular usage.

**Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. New York: HarperCollins, 1961.**

Plath has a bite. No subject cowers her—the Holocaust, the repulsive beauty of paper cuts, violent depression—and her acerbic wit practically burns holes on the page. Every word is fresh and active, arranged alongside its fellows in electrifyingly novel combinations:

Ghostly Vatican.  
I am sick to death of hot salt.  
Green as eunuchs, your wishes  
Hiss at my sins.  
Off, off, eely tentacle!

(Plath 1961, 45)

**Lewis, Clives Staples. *The Screwtape Letters*. New York: HarperCollins, 1942.**

A demon named Screwtape corresponds with his nephew Wormwood about the contents of damnation. It's Wormwood's first time on the infernal job, and he needs advice for tempting the man whose misery he has been assigned to bring about. Their silly exchange about the most serious of matters—the will to turn our desires toward the Good—constitutes this book, and Lewis does wonderful work of painting the absurdity of evil.

**O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971.**

What does ugliness look like? Sometimes it wears a pretty face. Sometimes it festers in a son's resentment of his mother. Sometimes it disguises itself with shallowly charitable intentions. O'Connor, who coined the term "Hillbilly Thomist" (and referred to herself by it!), stares headlong into the abyss of characteristically human darkness. Her medium is the gothic landscape of the crumbling South.

**Yanagihara, Hanya. *A Little Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 2015.**

Four young men live together in New York. They have just graduated from college. That's how this tour-de-force begins. As years go by, the reader becomes acquainted with the gorgeous complexity of their friendship, which weaves together love, ambition, and the deep suffering that each young man carries inside himself. I believe that reading books like this one makes us kinder people—you never know the burden somebody shoulders.

**Frankl, Victor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1959.**

How and why do people endure suffering? This is the question with which *Man's Search for Meaning* begins. Frankl, a psychologist and philosopher, describes all that he saw and survived at Auschwitz. He concludes that resilience is founded upon the sense of meaning and purpose. This passage is one of the best I have ever read, in any book:

Then I spoke of the many opportunities of giving life meaning. I told my comrades (who lay motionless, although occasionally a sigh could be heard) that human life, under any circumstances, never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death. I asked the poor creatures who listened to me attentively in the darkness of the hut to face up to the seriousness of our position. They must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and its meaning. I said that someone looks down on each of us in difficult hours—a friend, a wife, somebody alive or dead, or a God—and he would not expect us to disappoint him. He would hope to find us suffering proudly—not miserably—knowing how to die.

And finally I spoke of our sacrifice, which had meaning in every case. It was in the nature of this sacrifice that it should appear to be pointless in the normal world, the world of material success. But in reality our sacrifice did have a meaning. Those of us who had any religious faith, I said frankly, could understand without difficulty. I told them of a comrade who on his arrival in camp tried to make a pact with Heaven that his suffering and death should save the human being he loved from a painful end. For this man, suffering and death were meaningful; his was a sacrifice of the deepest significance. He did not want to die for nothing. None of us wanted that.

(Frankl 1959, 83)