

2018 Reading List

I've never written about a book before, other than the usual school assigned reports, summaries, and analyses. I suppose it would be better to say that I've never recreationally written about a book. I've written about other subjects for fun; movies, travel stories, experiences in diet and exercise and more, just not books. I could speculate as to why I haven't been moved to do so until now, but it's easier to speak about why I am interested in writing about literature now.

After reading *The Man from Beijing* by Swedish author Henning Mankell, I was left with a feeling that I wanted to capture. It's not that *Man from Beijing* was a particularly deep or complex work of fiction, it's a murder mystery - a genre I haven't visited in a while. But having spent the majority of the last 3 days buried in it I had to admit it gripped and thrilled me the way so few movies are able to do throughout the year. Reflecting on all the other books I've read over the past year, I realized they've all made an impact on me, sometimes temporarily shifting my views toward a subject, other times sticking in my consciousness longer term to influence decisions I would make later in life.

It felt like letting those experiences fade would be doing the books and their respective authors an injustice. I see lots of terrible movies throughout the year, yet when it comes to reading I am never left unsatisfied by a book - even if the ending isn't especially rewarding. At 29 years old, there's hundreds of books read already only to be forgotten over time. This is my practice to prevent this from happening in the future. Starting with *The Man from Beijing*, I'll briefly reflect (this isn't an essay, let's keep it brief) on whatever book was most recently completed. This will also serve as a running log of all the books I've read, it'll be something to look back on and I look forward to revisiting this list and reflections in the years to come. I'll do my best to backlog my last year of reading knowing undoubtedly some will be forgotten. I can live with that.

So, without further ado.

The Man from Beijing by Henning Mankell, 2008 (translated by Laurie Thompson, 2010)

Finished: March 22, 2018

It's not often that I actually find anything to pique my interest in the Little Free Libraries scattered around Seattle. Only on one other occasion did I take and finish a book from one. The book was *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, by Barbara Demick (which offered a fascinating and soul crushing look inside the lives of people from hermit kingdom). Apparently I'm only drawn to books in these little libraries if they are from a specific geographic region.

The Man from Beijing likely stuck out to me because I had visited the titular city about two years ago. An international bestseller, the back was covered in praise quotes from publications around the world. Perfect! It was vetted and the back was lacking a description so I'd be able to go in relatively blind, something I don't get to do with books very often.

The Man from Beijing is a crime-noir thriller set in several different countries. The story opens in Sweden, Hesjövalen, it's a small town. Hesjövalen is a retirement community consisting only about 2

2018 Reading List

dozen elderly people, and they've all been brutally tortured and murdered. It is one of the largest mass murders in Swedish history and there are no suspects or ideas towards possible motives. We are introduced to our main character Brigitta Roslin, a big-city judge, who is shocked by the news and driven to investigate herself.

Taking place in equal parts China and Sweden with stints in the U.S., England and Africa, the book develops quickly into a thrilling whodunit with ties to Chinese politics and conflicting communist ideologies. Mankell writes Roslin as a fair and firm judge who is currently struggling to find intimacy in her marriage of over 10 years. She's intelligent and cunning, carrying out her own investigation of the murders while the bumbling police department struggles to find room to work. The press and journalists harshly criticize her every move.

The book puts the reader through a process of discovery, weaving stories from different locations and different eras. I was initially shocked when the setting was suddenly transported to 1867 China. The globetrotting adventure that followed during this timeline became a highlight of the book. Mankell's ability to tie everything together without revealing too much too early makes for several gratifying reveals throughout.

It makes for a thrilling adventure that is damn near impossible to put down. (I wonder how many times I'm going to use the phrases "page turner" or "impossible to put down" in these writings. I'm making a note here to remind myself to limit them.) When it came to the last few pages I was surprisingly doleful about having it all end. Not because it had been poorly written in the final chapters, simply that it was over. I was worried the next book I picked up wouldn't be as entertaining.

This was the feeling which led me to want to write and capture my thoughts and experience with books. Fortunately for me, Henning Mankell is an established crime novelist with a huge body of work. He is best known for his mystery novels starring inspector Kurt Wallander. This being noted, I am not quite ready to commit myself to an entire series of mystery novels, nor am I even interested in continuing the genre of crime fiction for now. With so much of this book rooted in Chinese government I am curious to learn more from here, be it fiction or non-fiction. What route I take into this subject is currently unbeknownst to me, but I am enthusiastic to write about whatever may come next.

The Windup Bird Chronicle written by Haruki Murakami, 1994-1995 (translated by Jay Rubin, 1998)

Finished: March 31st

Strange things happen in *The Wind Up Bird Chronicle*. Our protagonist runs into a psychic advisor who gives him vague warnings of future events, he begins having wet dreams for the first time ever - during a particularly tumultuous time in his marriage, and his beloved cat of 7 years has gone missing. As I waded into the dreamlike (and at times nightmarish) world of Murakami's acclaimed novel I quickly became engrossed in Toru Okada's story.

2018 Reading List

Toru, a passive man in his late 20's has recently quit his job at a law firm where he worked as a paralegal. He once had ambitions of taking the BAR exam, but now unemployed, he stays at home and handles the house work. His wife Kumiko works for a publishing house and is the breadwinner of the two. Able to get by on Kumiko's salary and a small inheritance, Toru has no plans of regaining employment. At home he cooks, cleans, reads and relaxes. He doesn't leave the house except for laundry and groceries and genuinely enjoys the quiet and calm life he shares with his wife.

After the cat they adopted at the beginning of their marriage runs off, Kumiko urges Toru to spend his free time wandering the neighborhood looking for the feline. Through the quest to find his cat, Toru meets an ensemble of fascinating characters who share their stories with him and lead him in unexpected directions. These characters include a lieutenant, a psychic, and his teenage neighbor who spends her days sunbathing in her backyard. Every one has a unique story or perspective of life, often shared through lengthy monologues that are every bit as captivating as the main story. These character interactions drive the narrative as Toru apathetically goes through the motions expected of him as a house husband.

As the novel progresses we descend into stranger territory that borderlines supernatural, and the deeper we get the more difficult it is to discern what is real and what's not. Saying anymore would spoil the experience but I can't recommend this book enough. I look forward to exploring more novels by Haruki Murakami.

Kafka on the Shore written by Haruki Murakami, 2002 (translated by Philip Gabriel, 2005)

Finished: April 7th

After walking around with *The Windup Bird Chronicle* for a few weeks I quickly learned that Murakami is an incredibly popular author. Everyone I ran into who was familiar with *Windup* told me I *have to* read *Kafka on the Shore*. "It's his best work" they said. "Alright, twist my arm why dontcha I'll read the damn book."

I wasn't actually that begrudged about it. I was more than happy to jump down another Murakami rabbit hole after my last experience down there.

The book is written in parallel narratives - one featuring a 15 year old boy named Kafka (a pseudonym, his true name is never actually given) who has recently ran away from home and has...issues. The other narrative follows an elderly man named Nakata, a kind soul who was left disabled after an childhood incident that left him mentally handicapped. He can also talk to cats.

Murakami writes in an alternating person story mode, switching between first person for Kafka and omniscient for Nakata. If at some point I've read a book structured similarly I've forgotten it - this mode felt new to me - original, enjoyable, and not as jarring as I would have thought.

Ali Atri

2018 Reading List

Like *Windup Bird Chronicle*, *Kafka on the Shore* is a dream like experience, albeit one that feels much more personal. Again the author portrays an incredibly deep set of characters extending far beyond the two main protagonists. While *Windup Bird* was an exploration of the affects of a post-WW2 Japan that felt meandering in a way, *Kafka* is structured tighter and reads like a mystery novel. I knocked it back in half the time and maybe that's why I am having trouble pulling details for this piece!

Read it, experience it. It's a unique book and I know I'm going to be hooked on this author's work for a while.