

Dear Jesse Ball/Editors at GQ,

Since I'm the kind of person who finds the idea of a "Must Read" list to be a little presumptuous, perhaps I shouldn't find it surprising that this first "Don't Read" list of my experience filled me with dismay. What could be the motivation for telling one's readers *not* to read certain books? Shouldn't you count on your readers as being thoughtful and intelligent enough to decide for themselves what they *should* or *should not* read? Whereas I, like some of you, find that I wouldn't count *The Ambassadors* among my favorite books, (although I adore Henry James), I'm glad I was able to read and decide for myself rather than blindly follow the instructions and opinion of someone whose literary tastes and predilections may be nothing like my own. One must admit "boring" is a matter of opinion.

The tipping point came when the list glossed over the entirety of the Bible with the adjectives, "repetitive, self-contradictory, sententious, foolish, and... ill-intentioned." Intentionally over-simplified description aside, readers are disserved by a blithe dismissal of a book that covers over 1500 years of history, culture and philosophy (and remains, despite your apparent disapproval, the bestselling book of all time). Reading the Bible from a perspective of faith is unnecessary to comprehend how much it informs. Most western art, including literature, music, and painting, cannot be appreciated fully without understanding the biblical allusions and metaphors within. Just considering literature, the Bible furnishes the background and knowledge to fully and best understand Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Hurston, Atwood and many more. Historically, the Bible offers insight into various ancient cultures—even those whose existence was in question until recently. For example, the land of Ur (Abraham's birthplace) was long thought to be the stuff of myth. However, years ago, archaeologists surprised themselves to find definitive evidence of its existence. Secular archaeologists use the Bible as a guide in their work because of what factual geographical evidence can be gleaned from its pages. The Bible provides rich descriptions of Egypt, Babylon, Israel, and Rome—rich descriptions of topography, buildings, clothing, customs and more. From a philosophical perspective, the Bible presents the history and origin of two major world religions, the ideas that informed many world leaders over the last several centuries, and freely imparts the very words that are banned or otherwise made illicit in communist regimes. A book cannot be called "foolish" that could so enlighten one's understanding of art, history, and philosophy.

As for "repetitive", it can be. Yet it is hardly meant to be read cover to cover in a single sitting. As mentioned earlier, the Bible was written over 1500 years. Some of it began as speeches, oral histories that were passed down over the years, since access to writing materials was scarce or nonexistent. This primary means of protecting and conserving a history perhaps would necessarily be repetitive. Other texts, like the Psalms, were originally songs, meant to be sung aloud. We all understand that lyrics necessarily include repetition. Also, some argue that the Bible in its entirety has one common theme. And any student of music or literature understands that a theme often repeats in a variety of ways. So, one could argue the repetition is actually part of what makes it a cohesive work.

Yes, there are passages in the Bible that appear at first glance to be "self-contradictory", (e.g. "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will also be like him. Answer a fool as his folly deserves, that he not be wise in his own eyes." Proverbs 26:4 & 5), and the thoughtful reader who decides for him or herself to read the Bible can dismiss them as such. However further study and research of the few seemingly contradictory passages is also possible. (For example, perhaps the above quoted passage is suggesting that there are times when it becomes necessary to answer a fool

to stop that person from thinking he/she is “wise”, whereas other times it would make us equally foolish to even answer the person in question. I’m sure we can all think of examples of both such scenarios from our own lives.)

The word “sententious” is perhaps most curious, if for no other reason than it seems sententious to use that word in this context. Also puzzling, though, is that so much of the New Testament covers a history of someone who trying to rid a faith of sententiousness. The Bible itself had been forgotten and replaced with traditions and expectations that were morally pompous and condescending. Within this book, a religion, for the first time ever, revolutionarily declared that all were equal—men, women, all races, all classes (Galatians 3:28). Could that be called sanctimonious? Would you describe “You shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13) or “Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:17) as such? What about “Love one another” (John 13:34) or “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31)?

To call the Bible “ill-intentioned” stymies. How can any of us delve into the minds of ancient writers who described a people who were forced into hard labor and persecution, escaping and eventually coming to “a land of milk and honey” (Exodus-Joshua), or destitute widows being rescued out of their absolute poverty (Ruth), or of women who longed to be mothers becoming pregnant and giving birth after years of heartache (Genesis 21, I Samuel 1, Luke 1, etc.), or of a man who encouraged those who followed him to speak truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), to care for those who are hurting (Matthew 9:36), and to be kind to even those ostracized by society (Matthew 8:1-3)...and declare them “ill-intentioned”? What evil scheme could possibly lurk within these stories? Even the descriptions of war, given the proven historical accuracy, can they be called “ill-intentioned”? It seems too much to presume.

Now, I’ve never read Agota Kristof’s *The Notebook*, and it may be a truly fascinating and wonderful work of art. Hopefully I’ll get to read it one day. No matter its brilliance, it simply cannot rival the scope of the Bible and be considered some sort of substitute. Although I love the Bible as a person of faith, (which brings up another flaw in the article’s argument—because I claim to live by it *and* I’ve actually read it. The whole thing. Some parts more than others, but yes, the whole thing--a few times over.), I know not everyone will approach it from that perspective; I respect that. But to disregard it in one short paragraph--as a work of art, of culture, of history, of philosophy--seems, I’m sorry to say, foolish—and perhaps even a bit sententious and ill-intentioned. One doesn’t have to embrace the Bible, but one would be well-served to consider it (for oneself).

Thank you for your time.

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