

2023 Book List

December 31, 2023

AND SO THE EXPERIMENT CONTINUES IN YEAR 2 as I make my way through yet another 12 months of reading. This has proven to be yet another indelible year for my life: I officially gained my doctorate in economics at 27; I began my first post-PhD full time job in economic consulting; my girlfriend and I celebrated our joint graduation by going to Hawaii, the furthest from home I have ever been; and I made leaps in learning about myself in the context of my cultural background. Though I read less books on the whole than last year, I will say that I spend the first five months of the year finishing my dissertation and thus not devoting as much time as I suppose I could have done so. Of course, all of this reading does not count the amount of research I consumed so I can only imagine that this is an estimated floor. Still, to read for pleasure is one of the great joys in life.

1. [Microprediction: Building an Open AI Network](#), Peter Cotton (232 pages)
2. [Kim](#), Rudyard Kipling (320 pages)
3. [The Infidel and the Professor](#), Dennis Rasmussen (326 pages)
4. [A Fairly Honourable Defeat](#), Iris Murdoch (432 pages)
5. [How to Prevent the Next Pandemic](#), Bill Gates (304 pages)
6. [The End of the Affair](#), Graham Greene (192 pages)
7. [Amsterdam](#), Ian McEwan (193 pages)
8. [Brideshead Revisited](#), Evelyn Waugh (432 pages)
9. [The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt](#), Edmund Morris (780 pages)
10. [Theodore Rex](#), Edmund Morris (555 pages)
11. [The Quiet American](#), Graham Greene (249 pages)
12. [Virtues to Happiness](#), Nick Del Castillo (132 pages)

Some quick facts: I read 4,147 pages this year, or the equivalent of about 11 pages a day in a 365-day calendar year. The oldest book I read was written in 1901, the latest was written in 2022.

I will be continuing this exercise in 2024 and highly recommend reflections of this kind in the future.

Take care,
M.

#1. *Microprediction: Building an Open AI Network*, Peter Cotton (2022)¹

SUMMARY

This book came to my purview from LinkedIn and immediately caught my attention given the GPT drop that happened just months prior in November 2022. Overall, I found the book challenging due to my limited background in computer programming, yet appreciated Cotton's use of memorable examples to simplify technical concepts. I do question the book's premise of the necessity and benefits of maximizing everything through microprediction. Specifically, I ponder about the potential negative implications of a deterministic world governed by microprediction, such as a lack of innovation or life becoming mundane. While recognizing the potential monetary gains from faster, automated decision-making tools, would these benefits diminish over time from a societal perspective?

PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

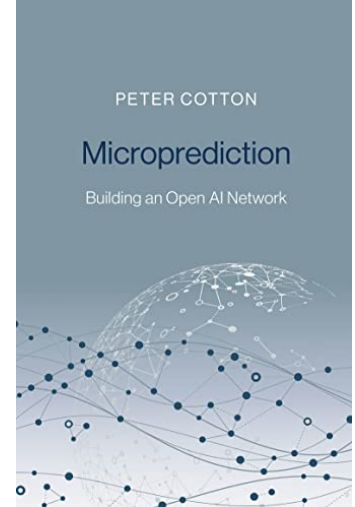
As we know, the world is inhabited by people, data, and algorithms, so the most important thing a prediction device should surely do is connect you to a network of them - or the subset willing to enter a mutually beneficial relationship. [44]

The cost of bespoke micro prediction is falling but not nearly as fast as the cost of instrumentation. Today you can purchase one dollar's worth of instrumentation - sensors are so cheap they are sometimes tossed from plans, but you cannot purchase one dollar's worth of bespoke quantitative model creation. [64]

A tie to economics, from a Friedrich Hayek POV, "[A]s the production web is spun, locality in time, space, and other dimensions is important. It is plausible that micromanagers can leverage their neighbors knowledge but entirely infeasible to send all the worlds data to a central prediction authority- even if they knew what to do with it (and even then, if a tangle of well-meaning regulations allowed for something beyond logistic regression)." (66)

Ossification; (n) — a tendency toward or state of being molded into a rigid, conventional, sterile, or unimaginative condition²

¹ Finished on February 3, 2023 at home, feeling mostly relief with myself given that I had defended my dissertation proposal not too long prior.



² Sadly, this word is not related to bears

[73]

So no, the problem is not the invention of an algorithm for processing data that is assumed to be present in its entirety (an assumption we find even in many papers addressing decentralized learning). The problem is orchestrating a rational order in which there is even a small chance of benefiting from exogenous data or technique we'd otherwise never encounter. . . If you squint, Hayek might even be suggesting that we study how to perform prediction using data held privately by multiple parties, without anyone revealing anything to anyone else. [76]

We assume a single emission will lead to the death of a cat because this serves to make questions about the events that transpired morbidly exciting (and also more concise). [136]

An optimal policy has the property that whatever the initial state and initial decision are, the remaining decisions must constitute an optimal policy with regard to the state resulting from the first decision (this is also the Bellman optimality principle) [150]

Noticed that the compound question from his whole golf example ("what will you think \hat{W} will be after my shot if I choose three wood?") Implies two types of question: an action conditional estimate of a value function, \hat{W} , and also an unconditional estimate of W itself at a future time (which he will be used to judge the former). [157]

Some thoughts: this book was a difficult read at times, given that my background in computer programming and statistics is limited to its involvement with economics. Technical language, though obtuse, was made slightly memorable by Cotton's examples (such as the cat who dies every time an algorithm sends an update and we try to predict when that update is coming, or the microprediction exercise of the bus coming to drop off the kids and wanting to waste as little time away from work, or the taxi driver who needs to decide where to go given he wants to maximize -something-). In that spirit, I would then say that Cotton does a great job at entertaining. However, I somewhat disagree with the premise that we should be thinking about maximizing everything. Imagine this world where microprediction can sell us when certain things occur with perfect accuracy; it's basically

like having these tendrils, or branches, which speak to one another and can give you immediate responses to one thing. Let me think about giving a concrete example...

Suppose you ask these oracles about if I should invest in Apple given that the iPhone has been announced. A myriad considerations, including things affecting the manufacturing (from weather, to local politics, to cost of buildings, to finding enough management to keep them running, to geopolitical events, to shipping), the marketing (is another event happening around that time?, is another tech dropping?, is someone important going to die?, etc), and are people ready to upgrade (though this last one is usually yes). Regardless, the idea that all these small considerations have an algorithm and they feed a larger algorithm that is trying to answer the initial question is so crazy! I don't mean crazy in the sense of practical or that I doubt that we will have the technology, but rather that there is a level of stochasticity that is inherent good in systems because it. Well, not sure here. Would micro prediction give way to a deterministic world? If so, what are the downsides? Is there a need for innovation if everything is perfectly predicted, constantly? My initial feeling is that things become mundane.

So I leave this book wondering that. I think there is a monetary gain with having automated tools that can answer things faster (certainly, working for a hedge fund and being the one who develops something like this guarantees a degree of wealth), but perhaps it has diminishing returns to scale from a societal perspective. Hmm.

I do wish to use the provided Python code to get better at imagining this from a practical perspective (like how do these networks and oracles actually look like in/on a computer?)

#2. *Kim*, Rudyard Kipling (1901)³

SUMMARY

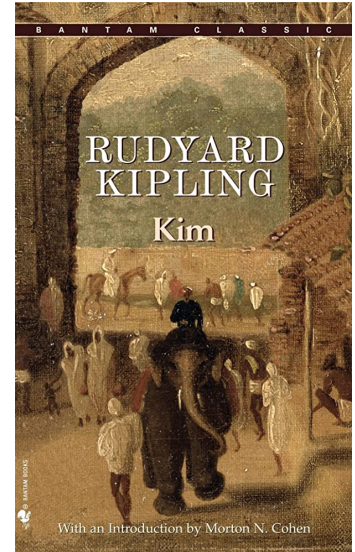
I forget how I found this book, but it could have possibly been from the time my girlfriend and I were walking in the UES and I stumbled across someone who had tossed a bunch of books away (including the Theodore Roosevelt ones I proudly have on my shelf now). Some of my takeaways here involve the topics of resilience and adaptability (Kim's journey through various situations and the ability to adapt is huge). I would also say it's a kind of far-off bildungsroman that takes place over the course of the book in which Kim goes from abandoned street kid (taken care of by the community á la Aladdin) to *chela* for a spiritual lama in search of enlightenment and, in the process, discovers a truth about himself that sets him on a completely different path of growth and manhood. The book, with all its faults of the times given the 'exotic' POV of the author, present a multifaceted view of the human experience, exploring themes of resilience, power, communication, relationships, identity, solitude, and enlightenment.

PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

[From the foreword by Edward Said] "Kipling also manages Kim's progress through it all, chameleon-like in his gift for dancing in and out of it, like a great actor who passes through all situation, at home in each of them" [42]; this, along the description "Central to their predicaments as individuals is the problem of identity - what to be, where to go, what to do. Since they cannot be like the other before, who are they? Impelled by these questions they are restless seekers and wandered ... (further down that page) ... and indeed, through Kim itself we are impressed with the boy's resilience, his capacity for standing up extreme situations such as those trials of identity engineered for him. Part of the boy's strength is his deep knowledge, almost instinctive in its wellspring, of his different from the Indians around him" [39]

This idea of colonial officially and scholar in General Creighton; similar combos of power and knowledge can be seen in Dr Wat-

³ Finished on February 24, 2023 before I did the serious data cleaning I would need for my third dissertation chapter.



son who was both a veteran and having specialized intellect [32]

“‘Those who beg in silence starve in silence” said Kim, quoting a native proverb.’ [61]; as the lama (priest) asked if he should beg in silence or speaking aloud. Kim’s response reminds me of “squeaky wheel gets the grease”, amongst other things

‘And I have never seen such a priest such as thou.’ Kim considered the benevolent yellow face wrinkle by wrinkle. ‘It is less than three days since we took the road together, and it is as though it were a hundred years’ [118] when conversing about the journey together thus far. Similar to how it feels like you’ve known someone for such a long time even though it hasn’t really been as long - sometimes people just click.

Uncommon compliments for a woman’s face: “Moon of Paradise”, “Disturber of Integrity”

Chapter 7. Kim has found his people, or at least his father’s old regiment, and the prophecy turned out to be the flag icon that the regiment uses. So Kim, with his documents proving who he is, is placed in the barracks until they decide to send him to school since he has both white and native in him. The lama is the one who financed his going, which is interesting since Kim required a benefactor. Kim befriended the lama not because he wanted money but because he wanted an adventure in life, and thus fancy unto fancy - it happened. The school, St Xavier, is full of boys he can relate to in some way or another. Adventure. Masters of the universe. People who did not have the regimented lives we now have in this society. There is something in me that yearns for that, frankly. School also trains him to write and speak like a white man, and he takes his first vacation on the road without supervision. This resourcefulness and clever personality is what makes the lama, Mahbub Ali, and Colonel Creighton all take interest in him

Chapter 11. Page 233. Kim, all alone after given his first assignment post passing examinations and being blessed (cursed?) by a witch that Mahbub Ali took him to and told by Babu how to spot the secret society he now works for, says the following: “‘now I am alone - all alone’ he thought. ‘In all India is no one so along as I! If I die today, who shall bring the news - and to whom? If I live and god is good, there will be a price upon my

head, for I am the son of the charm - I, Kim."

Pathan greeting: "May you never be tired", to respond "may you never grow poor"

Page 338. "He crossed his hands on his lap and smiled, as a man may who has won salvation for himself and his beloved" This is the end of the book, where the lama was attained enlightenment and found his river as Kim slept in sickness. The llama rejoices at the find and shared it with Kim, who helped him get to where he needed all while doing his mission as a spy.

#3. *The Infidel and the Professor*, Dennis Rasmussen (2018)⁴

⁴ Finished on April 14,
2023 alongside the NABE
2023-2024 applications.

SUMMARY

I quite enjoyed this book, a recommendation that I picked up on from a Freakonomics episode where Dubner discusses Smith's upbringing in Kirkcaldy.

PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

The introduction acknowledgments section is the author saying he wishes that his son be as fortunate as he in his friends as the author has been; reminds me of the way my acknowledgments section mentions this, too "the new needs friends and I am so thankful to those who have been mine"

Both Hume and Smith were averse to having their unpolished writings and their private lives made public. This is a common thread amongst academics, as I have seen, where they don't like their unpolished works to be looked at. In fact, I would say there is a huge aversion in many to set out their work for others to see, despite the fact that notoriety/fame/opportunities come from this

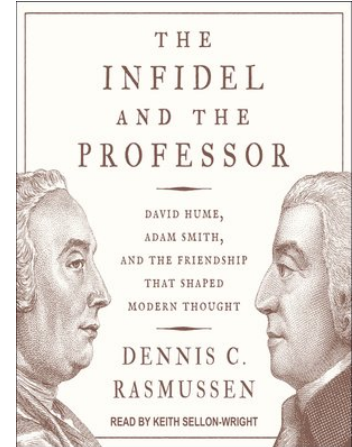
This makes me think about my own life and how I can increase my surface area of luck by writing publicly. I wonder how I can start doing so

Smith has a remarkably private life for being such a well-cited figure

Hume is described as corpulent, in-your-face, outspoken, a heavy drinker/eater/talker, etc, whilst Smith was described as more aloof and reserved. Hume was taller, larger, and much less of a shrewd academic type than Smith

Smith deviates from Hume's viewpoints in the Theory of Moral Sentiments in four ways: sympathy, utility, justice, and religion.

- Sympathy: Smith argues that we "project" our sympathy by imaginatively putting ourselves into the situations of others vs Hume who says we mechanically "catch" the feelings of others
- Utility: Hume says that virtues are the qualities that are useful for ourselves and others, and also that we or others find



immediately agreeable; Smith says that utility considerations enter our judgments as an afterthought, not the original determinants

- Justice: Hume thinks justice derives from utility, Smith says that it is an obvious point to be desired from wanting to see injustice punished
- Religion: Smith says that religion commonly reinforces people's adherence to social norms; so religion is not a foundation for morality but rather supports it from an external POV

#4. *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, Iris Murdoch (1970)⁵

⁵ Finished on May 7, 2023,
a full week after I de-
fended my dissertation.

SUMMARY

This novel, another recommendation by my grandfather* and perhaps his favorite of Murdoch's novels, had me guessing quite a bit. I enjoyed the twists and turns, as well as the insanity of some of the events that transpired. In the backdrop of my personal life was the ramp up to defend my dissertation coupled with baseless accusations of not doing my duties correctly as president of the graduate student government.

PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

Reading this as I think my ending at Fordham, with the fresh accusations clouding the end of my presidency, will lead me to a fairly honorable defeat. The ramifications of which I know not, but which I will try to face head on. I can only hope that the truth will set me free, and that the baseless investigation into my moral conduct will show me to have a clean slate.

Dilige et fac quod vis — "Love and do as you please". This is a Latin tag that Rupert quotes frequently and says that Morgan, Hilda's sister, loved by and failed since it's not a sustainable way of life.

Axel, while in the car with Simon and talking about Julius' character (25). "He's certainly not cynical; he may seem to some people because he's exceptionally honest. Dostoevsky says that plain truth is so implausible that most people instinctively mix in a little falsehood. Julius just doesn't. And as for ruthlessness, a man of principle can seem ruthless to ordinary mortals. Julius isn't a compromise.

Morgan, page 387, on reflecting how everything she's done lately has ended as disaster yet began seemingly *natural*. "How can one live properly when the beginnings of one's actions seem so inevitable and justified while the ends are so completely unpredictable and unexpected?"

IRIS MURDOCH

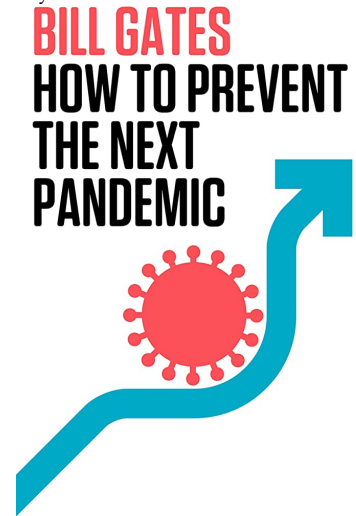
A Fairly Honourable Defeat

#5. *How to Prevent the Next Pandemic*, Bill Gates (2022)⁶

⁶ Finished on May 30, 2023
on a 'stay-at home-boyfriend'
day in New Rochelle.

SUMMARY

I think this book was originally suggested to me via TikTok, so a big thank you to their stochastic gradient descent algorithm. Bill invoked thoughtful exploration of various themes, from the effectiveness of non-pharmaceutical interventions and the importance of ventilation, to the potential of modeling socially engineered events. A few of my big thoughts focused on reflecting on the contrast between the Pentagon's and the National Institute of Health's budgets (spoiler: war > health any day), and the influence of high-ranking evangelical members in U.S. institutions (spoiler: too much). The book also emphasized the value of primary healthcare systems and the need for modernization in public health departments. Most of what Bill Gates writes made me ponder over the potential of contributing to the public health sector as an economist, and contemplating the possible impacts of digital changes on society as a whole.



PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

I turned to a favorite tactic that I've been relying on for years: the working dinner. You don't bother with an agenda. Simply invite a dozen or so smart people, provide the food and drinks, tee up a few questions, and let them start thinking aloud. I've had some of the best conversations of my working life with a fork in my hand and a napkin in my lap (page 4)

Modeling outbreaks and other type of socially engineered events seems to be on the rise (for demand, I mean) and this could be useful. Revisit Keith McNulty's book on social analytics and networks?

Seattle seems like a very techy, forward thinking, research happy space. Could be a potential place to visit? Might be good for Nicole and I to check the vibes and such (from p 66)

Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) have an ironic twist to them: if they work, they are effective and people question whether or not they were needed (p 87)

More than anything else, make sure you have good ventilation.

Air flow is super important as it prevents stagnation vibes. Is this true everywhere in life?

The pentagon's budget is roughly \$700 billion a year while the national institute of health is about \$43 billion a year. Page 196

Also tied in to the story of the LDS director of the CDC and how he stopped an fbi program to combat bio terrorism. I looked this up a bit more and was struck by how all-encompassing high ranking members of evangelical practices get to go in US institutions

Child mortality rates are a good measuring stick for overall health as they need better maternity care for mothers, childhood vaccines, better education for women, and better diets. So this is kind of like finding a proxy variable that serves to gauge other things in part due to being reliant on others

The 20-10-5 story. In 1960, on average 20% of the world's children died. By 1990, it was 10%. By 2020, it is less than 5%. This is one of the great stories in human history.

[pg 225] in talking about making a fund, and plan, for preventing a pandemic. mentions that public health institutions don't get as much public attention or government funding as they deserve - not at the state, national, or global level. This makes it that many elements of public health departments need to be modernized, including the way they retain and recruit great people as well as the software they use. Is this a potential space that I could possibly contribute to? I don't know, but this book has definitely increased my interest in this field and in this calling, particularly as we continue to progress with world issues

[pg 229] He mentions that 80% of health problems can be handled effectively by a strong primary health care system. In other words, preventative care is not only cheaper but also more cost effective in the long run. Why don't we do more of this? The problem is that you don't want to lead policy by 'fear' of what would happen, or do we?

[page 230] As Bill Foege once told me: "The best decisions are based on the best science, but the best results are based on the best management."

The last section of the book covers some changes he sees for digital futures

- The first he heavily discusses are the hybrid work environments, and how he thinks the Metaverse will replace the flat boxes of Zoom screens. With some of the testing of this that I have seen online recently, I don't doubt this. He mentions that may lead to a less heavy population in cities? I wonder if the ability to work remotely will lead to this, though, as cities still offer certain benefits that may not be centered around where to work. We need more walkability, that's for sure (in the United States, anyhow)
- Telehealth, another area where he discusses the benefits (especially in therapy)
- K-12 and other education; I think the professors who will be most effective in the future will be tasked with re-imagining how to teach people using technology as their aid and not their enemy. How to decipher truth from fiction? How to write well and get messages across, not just 'noise'? He notes that people are falling behind on math (Algebra I is the worlds most failed course - but why does this not surprise me in the slightest?)

#6. *The End of the Affair*, Graham Greene (1951)⁷

SUMMARY

Recommended highly by my grandfather*. I came to this novel quite blind.

PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

Any reader will be struck by the degree to which Sarah refuses to think of her vow as occasioned by a simple matter of psychology, a moment of justifiable hysteria that she remains free to ignore. . . her final craving for “ordinary corrupt human love”, her plea that God take his pain “away for a while and give it me another time” (introduction by Michael Gorra, Smith College)

For why should I have spoken to him? I’d hate is not too large a term to use in relation to any human being, I hated Henry - hated his wife Sarah too. (1)

Henry was important, but important rather as an elephant is important, from the size of his department; there are some jobs of unplanned that remain hopelessly damned to unseriousness (4)

And yet he was happier in his unused room simply because it was his: his possession. I thought with bitterness and envy: if one possesses a thing securely, one need never use it. (7)

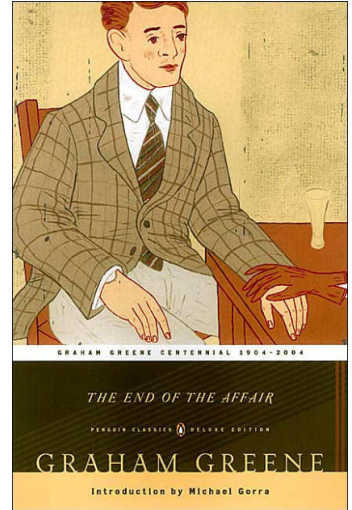
Hatred seems to operate the same glands of love; it even produces the same actions. If we had not been taught how to interpret the story of the Passion, would we have been able to say from their actions alone whether it was jealous Judas or the cowardly Peter who loved Christ? (19)

Then I realized that there was nothing wrong any more with the truth. Lies had deserted me, and I felt as lonely as thought they had been my only friends. (19)

Is it possible to fall in love over a dish of onions? It seems improbable and yet I could swear it was just then that I fell in love. It wasn’t, of course, simple the onions - it was that sudden of an individual woman, of a frankness that was so often later to make me happy and miserable. (33)

To think I had intended just to pick her brain. I crouched on the floor beside her and watched and watched, as though I might

⁷ Finished on June 14, 2023 in Honolulu Hawaii, on the Long-board Club in the Alohilani Resort.



never see again - the brown indeterminate colored like a pool of liquor on the parquet, the sweat on her forehead, the heavy breathing as though she had run a race and more like a young athlete lay in the exhaustion of victory. (38)

Or so I thought then and wonder now.

I was jealous even of the past, of which she spoke to me frankly as it came up - the affairs that meant nothing at all (except possible the unconscious desire to find that final spasm Henry had so woefully failed to evoke) (42)

I have never understood why people who can swallow the enormous improbability of a personal God boggle at personal Devil. (47)

There is a section that touches upon a probable saintly deed (or two) that Sarah performs after dying. I've noticed that in many of these books Joseph recommends from these great novelists, the women are either often killed and leave the men with reflective, melancholy thoughts, or move far away to a better life. In essence, does not a great love you wonder about also die even if they live elsewhere? I think of that with my own life and the occasional thought I give people I used to care for, "What is she doing now?"

Maurice Bendrix is given Sarah's journal by the detective Parkis and, upon reading it, discovers that Sarah left him after a silent, private prayer during the raids in WWII. There is more nuance: they did not think they might have survived, and many homes were destroyed. Sarah and Bendrix were together and the latter decided to go outside to check what was going on, only to be blown by a bomb, crushed by a door that lay on top of him. In the writing, he did not expand too much on it so the reader does not get the gravity of the situation. We later discover, though, that he had been knocked unconscious and that Sarah had found his hand amidst the debris. There, she prayed that if God let him live, Sarah would devote her life to God and renounce Bendrix. In other words, she loved Bendrix so much that she would give him up in order for him to live even if it meant not being together. What act of selflessness! And to think she kept this vow even though she was not a believer?! This makes me think of how we make commitments to ourselves sometimes and there is a certain degree of strength that comes from giving ourselves our word,

and keeping that word. It's a matter of self worth.

Sarah's journal also reveals her attempts at finding faith, though Henry (her husband) and Maurice both deny that she was anything like that after she passes. Her mother reveals Sarah was baptised as Catholic when she was a child, almost like a prodigal daughter situation.

Book ends with Maurice saying that God robbed him of his joy in life, and that he does not feel peace. But that he does not feel hatred, either.

"A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses a moment of experience from which to look ahead"

From book 2, section 1: "The sense of unhappiness is so much easier to convey than that of happiness. In misery we seem aware of our own existence, even though it may be in the form of a monstrous egotism: this pain of mine is individual, this nerve that winces belongs to me and to no other. But happiness annihilates us: we lose our identity. The words of human love have been used by the saints to describe their vision of God, and so, I suppose, we might use the terms of prayer, meditation, contemplation to explain the intensity of the love we feel for a woman. We too surrender memory, intellect, in-telligence, and we too experience the deprivation, the *noche os-cura*, and sometimes as a reward a kind of peace. The act of love itself has been described as the little death, and lovers sometimes experience too the little peace. It is odd to find myself writing these phrases as though I loved what in fact I hate. Sometimes I don't recognize my own thoughts."

#7. *Amsterdam*, Ian McEwan (1998)⁸

⁸ Finished on June 26, 2023 in New Rochelle's Cafetero Coffee Shop, over iced cappuccino.

SUMMARY

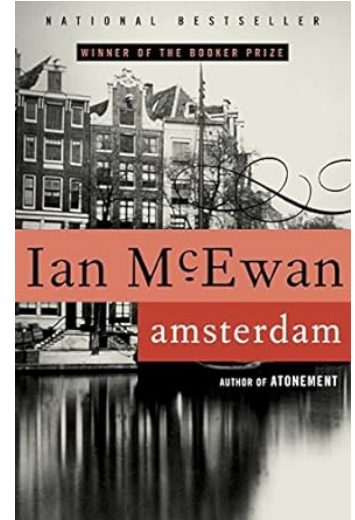
Recommended highly by Meeraj. I had to look up what the Booker Prize was because I was ignorant about its significance before this. The novel, albeit full of beautiful language (the type that makes you happy to read out loud) was not the strongest. I found the plot to move at a strange pace but overall enjoyed the story for what it was.

PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

"He would work through the night and sleep until lunch. There wasn't really much else to do. Make something, and die. After the coffee he recrossed the room and remained standing, stooped over the keyboard in his overcoat, while he played with both hands by the exhausted afternoon light the notes as he had written them. Almost right, almost the truth. They suggested a dry yearning for something out of reach. Someone." [20]

The thought recurred to Vernon Halliday during an uncharacteristic lull in his morning that he might not exist... instead, it seemed to Vernon that he was infinitely diluted; he was simply the sum of all the people who had listened to him, and when he was alone, he was nothing at all. When he reached, in solitude, for a thought, there was no one there to think it. His chair was empty. [31]

In his corner of West London, and in his self-preoccupied daily round, it was easy for Clive to think of civilization as the sum of all the arts, along with design, cuisine, good wine, and the like. But now it appeared that this was what it really was square miles of meager modern houses whose principal purpose was the support of TV aerials and dishes; factories producing worthless junk to be advertised on the televisions and, in dismal lots, lorries queuing to distribute it; and everywhere else, roads and the tyranny of traffic. It looked like a raucous dinner party the morning after. No one would have wished it this way, but no one had been asked. Nobody planned it, nobody wanted it, but most people had to live in it. To watch it mile after mile, who would have



guessed that kindness or the imagination, that Purcell or Britten, Shakespeare or Milton, had ever existed? [68]

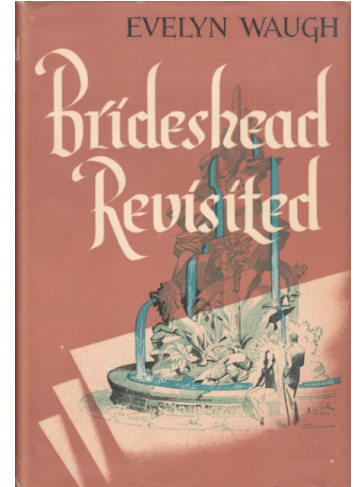
We knew so little about each other. We lay mostly submerged, like ice floats, with our visible social selves projecting only cool and white. Here was a rare sight below the waves, of a man's privacy and turmoil, of his dignity upended by the overpowering necessity of pure fantasy, pure thought, by the irreducible human element—mind. [76-77]

He wanted the anonymity of the city again, and the confinement of his studio, and - he has been thinking about this scrupulously - surely it was excitement that him feel this way, not shame. [97] So, after Clive has found inspiration from a bird call, he witnessed a fight between man and woman in the mountains, decides not to intervene.

#8. *Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh (1946)⁹⁹ Finished on August 9, 2023 after work, on a WFH Tuesday.

SUMMARY

Recommended highly by my grandfather*; he read this as a teenager in the 1950s. At first, the narrative was not so easy to keep up with. In fact, I would say that the introduction with the entire military discussion was quite off putting. There was too much bland vocabulary and logistical exposition to drive anyone away. However, here and there were sprinkled bits of flavorful language that keep me reading. Once the main story got underway, I could hardly put the book down. As usual, I side with the observant Charles Rider and his curious 'out of place' character amidst unfathomable opulence. It is stories like these that make me long for dark academia days, perhaps somewhere like Harvard or Oxford. And I think of what could have been had my socioeconomic and immigration background not been what it was. However, I then stop myself from brooding too deeply on this given that I have been able to carve out a life for myself in spite of all that - and I get to enjoy these stories nonetheless.



PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

It is easy, retrospectively, to endow one's youth with a false precocity or a false innocence; to tamper with the dates marking one's stature on the edge of the door. I should like to think - indeed I sometimes do think - that I decorated those rooms with Morris stuffs and Arundel prints and that my shelves were filled with seventeenth century folios and French nobles of the second empire in Russia-leather and watered-silk. (27)

It seems to me that I grew younger daily with each adult habit that I acquired. I had lived a lonely childhood and a boyhood straitened by way and overshadowed by bereavement; to the hard bachelor Don of English adolescence, the premature dignity and authority of the school system, I had added a sad and drum strain of my own. Now, that summer term with Sebastian, it seemed as though I was being given a brief spell of what I had never known, a happy childhood, and though it's toys were silk shirts and liqueurs and cigars and it's naughtiness high in the catalogue

of grave sins, there was something of a nursery freshness about us that that feel little short of the joy of innocence. At the end of the term I took my first schools; it was necessary to pass, if I was to remain at Oxford, and pass I did, after a week in which I forbade Sebastian my rooms and sat up to a late hour, with iced black coffee and charcoal biscuits, cramming myself with the neglected texts. I remember no syllable of them now, but the other, more ancient, lore which I acquired that term will be with me in one shape or another to my last hour. (44-45)

The languor of youth - how unique and quintessential it is! How quickly, irrecoverably, lost! The zest, the generous affections, the illusions, the despair, all the traditional attributes of Youth - all save this a come and go with us through life; again and again in riper years we experience, under a new stimulus, what we thought had been finally left behind, the authentic impulse to action, the renewal of power and its concentration on a new object; again and again a new truth is revealed to us in whose light all our previous knowledge must be rearranged. These things are a part of life itself; but languor - the relaxation of yet unwearied sinews, the mind sequestered and self-regarding, the sun standing still in the heavens and the earth throbbing to our own pulse - that belongs to Youth alone and dies with it. Perhaps in the mansions of Limbo the heroes enjoy some such compensation for their loss of the Beatific Vision; perhaps the Beatific Vision itself has some remote kinship. with this lowly experience; I, at any rate, believed myself very near heaven, during those languid days at Brideshead. [79]

But as I drove away and turned back in the car to take what promised to be my last view of the house, I felt that I was leaving part of myself behind, and that wherever I went afterwards I should feel the lack of it, and search for it hopelessly, as ghosts are said to do, frequenting the spots where they buried material treasures without which they cannot pay their way back to the nether world [169]

My theme is memory, that winged host that soared about me one grey morning of war-time. These memories, which are my life -for we possess nothing certainly except the past- were always with me. Like the pigeons of St. Mark's, they were everywhere,

under my feet, singly, in pairs, in little honey-voiced congregations, nodding, strutting, winking, rolling the tender feathers of their necks, perching sometimes, if I stood still, on my shoulder or pecking a broken biscuit from between my lips; until, suddenly, the noon gun boomed and in a moment, with a flutter and sweep of wings, the pavement was bare and the whole sky above dark with a tumult of fowl. Thus it was that morning. These memories are the memorials and pledges of the vital hours of a lifetime. These hours of aflatus in the human spirit, the springs of art, are, in their mystery, akin to the epochs of history, when a race which for centuries has lived content, un-known, behind its own frontiers, digging, eating, sleeping, be-getting, doing what was requisite for survival and nothing else, will, for a generation or two, stupefy the world; commit all manner of crimes, perhaps; follow the wildest chimeras, go down in the end in agony, but leave behind a record of new heights scaled and new rewards won for all mankind; the vision fades, the soul sickens, and the routine of survival starts again. The human soul enjoys these rare, classic periods, but, apart from them, we are seldom single of unique; we keep company in his world with a hoard of abstractions and reflections and counterfeits of ourselves - the sensual man, the economic man, the man of reason, the beast, the machine and the sleepwalker, and heaven knows what besides, all in our own image, indistinguishable from ourselves to the outward eye. We get borne along, out of sight in the press, unresisting, till we get the chance to drop behind unnoticed, or to dodge down a side street, pause, breathe freely and take our bearings, or to push ahead, outdistance our shadows, lead them a dance, so that when at length they catch up with us, they look at one another askance, knowing we have a secret we shall never share. [225-226]

In quest of this fading light I went abroad, in the Augustan manner, laden with the apparatus of my trade, for two years refreshment among alien styles. [227]

Quomodo sedat sola civitas: conversation between Cordelia and Charles. She uses them to describe her feelings after the chapel in Brideshead has been left empty. The phrase "Quomodo sedet sola civitas" -how lonely the city stands- is taken

from the beginning of book of Lamentations, when the prophet Jeremiah cries over the destroyed Jerusalem; they are also used by the Liturgy of the Church in the office of *Tenebrae* to lament over the death of Christ. Full text: *Quomodo sedet sola civitas plena populo; facta est quasi vidua domina gentium* ("How lonely sits the city that once was full of people; how like a widow she has become")

"I never see you now," she said. "I never seem to see anyone I like. I don't know why? But she spoke as though it were a matter of weeks rather than of years; as though, too, before our parting we had been firm friends. It was dead contrary to the common experience of such encounters, when time is found to have built its own defensive lines, camouflaged vulnerable points, and laid a field of mines across all but a few well-trodden paths, so that, more often than not, we can only signal to one another from either side of the tangle of wire. Here she and I, who were never friends before, met on terms of long and unbroken intimacy. [230]

#9. *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, Edmund Morris (1979)¹⁰

¹⁰ Finished on October 7, 2023 on the train ride back from Jersey and my brothers 18th birthday.

SUMMARY

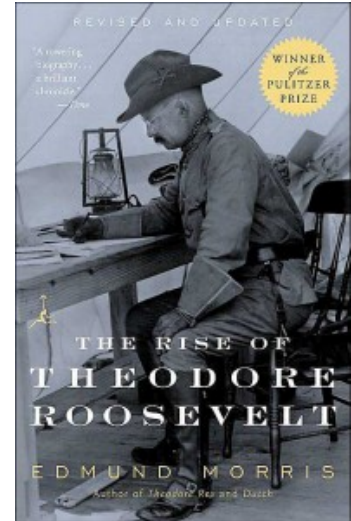
Exactly five years prior, in late July, early August, I had found this book by chance in a free book bin in the Upper West side. Tattered and not at all in amazing condition, I was enveloped completely at Morris' ability to make this incredible historical figure leap from the page. Just as it had been a turning point for me when I had just moved from New Jersey after college to start my PhD in New York, it now accompanied me months after I finished my degree and am working full time. I also keep this book close to my heart as I was reading it when I met my closest mentor and close friend, JR.

PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

One of the best features of his adult descriptive writing—an unsurpassed joy in things seen—dates back to this moment; while another—his abnormal sensitivity to sound—is surely the legacy of the myopic years that came before [35]. This is on Teedie getting his first pair of spectacles at around 13/14 years old. This is after some progress on his physical body which, after an intervention of his father, who said he “has the mind but not the body”, became a daily habit for him. From this, too, came about a passion for boxing and an augmented love for the outdoors. I wish I had someone at that age to impart that kind of mentality/challenge on me.

But his personality was too warm, and his manners were too good, for him to ignore others completely. Roosevelt felt perfectly willing to talk to others, recalled a member of the lower orders, when the occasion arose. As a result of this attitude, his popularity at Harvard was confined to the minority who would call him “Teddy”. Partly because he gave so little of himself for the majority, and partly because the variety of his interests kept him constantly on the move, beignets of him during those early days of Cambridge are sketchy and similar. Yet all are vivid. [58]

Teetotal / abstemious [79] (adj): Roosevelt was not a drinker. After a night of revelry celebrating his initiation into the porcelain



club at Harvard, he has a terrible hangover and reflected on becoming “fighty” So he vowed to not do that and was either completely sober on most occasions or just had one drink at others. This was around the time he turned 20. He also didn’t smoke out of a promise he made to his father to not do it until he turned 21, but by then he had lost interest in it. And he was, by moral choice, a virgin throughout his bachelor years.

From Benjamin Kid’s *Social Evolution*: “Laissez-faire economics might suit one stage in a nation’s development, but not necessarily the next. Some governmental tamping down should follow a period of explosive growth. Nor was discipline incompatible with democracy.” (88). A passage introduced as something Attorney General Knox mulled over as he and Roosevelt figured out their opinion over prosecuting a trust. Roosevelt saw this increasingly as the defining move which would jumpstart the presidency, something “marked” that could be his.

It comes as a surprise to flick through Theodore’s diary for these momentous final weeks of his junior year and find no hint of crisis in its bland pages. Since ripping out his written vow to marry Alice, he had begun what was to become a lifelong habit, that of simply not recording what was ominous, unresolved, or disgraceful. Triumph was worth the ink; tragedy was not. Until Alice was his, he would continue merely to list the trivial details of their relationship, so that if he failed, posterity would not know it, and even he, in time, might forget his aching desire for her. [93]

Joining the 21st District Republicans in Morton Hall, he was a stranger and failed to shmooze with the higher ups. Instead, he mingled with the rank and file crowd, saying that it helped him live down “the defective moral quality of being a stranger”. More: “It is not often that a man can make opportunities for himself. But he can put himself in such shape that when or if the opportunities come he is ready to take advantage of them” [126] Something else to note is that his joining the governing class was looked down upon by the rest of his echelon, especially his family. It was too dirty for wealthy people.

Insalubrious (adj): not conducive to health. Defining the air during winter months in Albany, where Theodore was an assemblyman for New York (and missing the social season of 5th Av-

enue) [146]

Roosevelt made a point to be overdressed when he came to the assembly (*sartorial fashion*) and this caused his colleagues to poke fun of him at first. However, the content of what he said made them rethink their evaluation. In any case, Isaac Hunt, who had a rural background and tried to hide it with expensive clothes, could not escape Roosevelt's 5th Avenue background eye and his knowledge of the country because he spotted him and divined correctly that he was from the country. An interesting anecdote that wealth recognizes wealth through subtle messages and that the uninitiated, or not part of the world, will only appear like playing at it to those who truly know. Money talks, wealth whispers. [148] I suppose it should be pointed out that the two became fast friends due to the exuberant nature of Roosevelt's inquiries about Hunt's background.

Vituperative (adj) "bitter and abusive"; when Roosevelt's anger was kept in check, his choice of words was this as he chastised the assembly for voting against a measure to impeach a corrupt judge. (165)

However cloying his love-talks however reminiscent his attitude of David Copperfield's to the "child-wife" Dora, Alice Lee was still, after three years and three months of marriage, his "heart's dearest" [219] What more to say about this that I did not already think about? Not only is David Copperfield one of my, if not the, favorite stories, but the whole comparison to my own first wife, and subsequent affair in late 2021, is too similar.

Defenders of the status quo invoked the Jeffersonian principle that minimum power should be shared by the maximum number of people. Roosevelt, whose contempt for Thomas Jefferson was matched only by his worship of the autocratic Alexander Hamilton, believed just the opposite. [220]

Moving on from Alice Lee, who he buried alongside his mother on Valentine's Day, 1884, just about 21 months later when he fell for and began to love Edith Carrow. Edie was an old family friend so it was not like they were strangers. But after seeing a friend, Henry Cabot Lodge, run for Senate and write a historical book on George Washington, Roosevelt felt restless and wanted to do something too. Hence his return to Dakota to make something of

his life once again. It was this environment, and his exposure to the elements, that forged him to change physically but also get over his grief in 1884 and 1885.

"It has been objected that I am a boy...but I can only offer the time honored reply, that years will cure me of that." This was his reply to his critics when he was running for mayor of NYC at 28 years old. A lot of what Roosevelt did he did while rather young for his age, even becoming president eventually. And so I wonder just how in common it is to be so bright early on in life, and continue being so.

Roosevelt's long term dream was nothing more or less than the general, steady, self betterment of the multicolored American nation. This is when discussing his passages in "the Winning of the west", what many consider to be his Magnus opus. Fredrick Jackson Turner, who gave his thesis at the Chicago world fair in 1893, was another who was defining the origins of Americanism. "It was not blood but environment that made the frontiersman unique: he was shaped by the challenge of his situation at the meeting point between savagery and civilization." Characteristics: "that coarseness and strength combined with schemes and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick To find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for god and evil, and withal that buoyancy which comes with freedom- these are the traits of the frontier." [477-479]

Atavism (n) a tendency to revert to something ancient or ancestral. This influenced me to read about Alfred Mahan, the creation of the Panama Canal, and other things relating to this time period from Roosevelt's POV.

"I know perfectly well that one is never able to analyze with entire accuracy all of one's motives. But... I have always intended to act up on my preaching if the occasion arose. Now the occasion has arisen, and I ought to meet it". This is TR responding to the protest that came from his resignation as assistant secretary of the navy in favor of fighting in the Spanish- American war in 1898. (641)

After war was declared, Teddy assumed lieutenant colonel

position under John Wood because he himself get too inexperienced to lead. They both rounded up the 1st US Volunteer Regiment which came to be know as the Rough Riders. They were a patchwork of all of American society: American Indians, African Americans, western cowboys, northeast Ivy Leaguers - a bit of everything that Roosevelt had touched in his life. Glory was to be his in San Juan hill after taking another nearby one (Kettle Hill) and he returned home to Montauk a hero. From this, the governorship of New York which he served with great fervor as he did the police commissionership and, from before, the civil service commissionership. From this, and a lot of pushing forward in his typical Rooseveltian fashion, the vice presidency after VP Hobart died. But it also happened that immediately after, nearly 7 months or so after he assumed office in March 1901, McKinley died and he became president. What a crazy world to live in. He was a locomotive of force, passion, and absolutely zest for life.

#10. *Theodore Rex*, Edmund Morris (2001)¹¹

SUMMARY

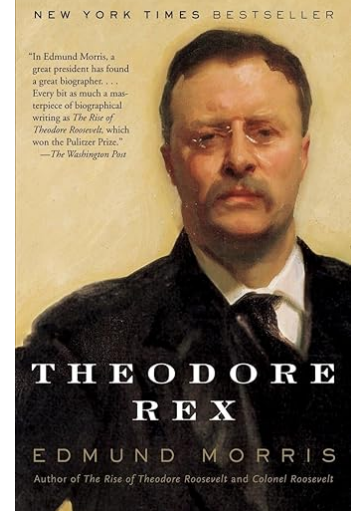
During one of my nightly strolls when I called the Upper East my neighborhood, I stumbled upon a myriad books that someone had tossed. Amongst them were a copy of the *Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* and the sequel, *Theodore Rex*. *Rex* focuses on the presidential years and all the highs, lows, and in betweens therein. I was so happy to continue the TR narrative, especially as he faces what it is like to lead. It was almost as if this was his pinnacle, something he did not know he was working towards in the first book but, once he discovered it was the goal, set a clear focus on. I feel that way with my life (regarding all the planning I have done) but am yet looking for my "Rex" moment, the key defining era in my professional life.

PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

"What shadows we are, and what shadows we pursue". This is part of the opening section in the prologue where Morris follows Roosevelt's journey from Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks towards DC. McKinley was killed in Buffalo and he joined the hearse via train car; we get a glimpse of the state of the nation and this quote is in reference to a group of reporters that talk about death as they observed another funeral procession following the presidential bier (a stand where they place a casket) [36]. Also, something I'm immediately noticing is the lack of references in this book compared to the "Rise Of" book, which makes me feel a little sad. I miss the comfort of the annotated references.

"It was still the Wild West in those days, the Far West. . . It was a land of vast silent spaces, of lovely rivers, and of plains where the wild game stared at the passing horseman. It was a land of scattered ranches, of herds of long-horned cattle, and reckless riders who unmoved looked in the eyes of life or of death. In that land we lived a free and hardy life, with horse and with rifle. We worked under the scorching midsummer sun, when the wide plains shimmered and wavered in the heat; and we knew the freezing misery of riding night guard round the cattle in the

¹¹ Finished on December 19, 2023 on the couch listening to the fireplace.



late fall round-up. In the soft springtime the stars were glorious in our eyes each night before we fell asleep; and in the winter we rode through blinding blizzards, when the driven snow-dust burnt our faces... We knew toil and hardship and hunger and thirst; and we saw men die violent deaths as they worked among the horses and cattle, or fought in evil feuds with one another; but we felt the beat of hardy life in our veins, and ours was the glory of work and the joy of living" [218]. This is TR's reminiscing of his life out west. Most of his administration has so far dealt with immigration, race, and the foreign policy that dominated the day, such as the Panama Canal, and a potential war with Germany. But he now saw refuge a trip out west to speak with the public and take a vacation as the frontier no longer held the same status as 20 year prior.

"Psychology of inconsistency, illogically reflecting both an aristocratic will and a democratic desire to please. Hence, the president was both coordinated and conflicted, inimitable yet representative of a wide range of new, hard to define trends." [220] This is Henry Herzberg on how paradoxical TRs popularity issues with Wall St/politicians were versus the nation as a whole.

Thanksgiving approached with lowering skies and shortening days. [298]

Theodore Roosevelt, when about to go meet with the Republican National Committee on 11 December, 1903, was told by Mark Hanna that "You will have no trouble [whichever way to get at them]... they are all anxious to see you." To which Roosevelt replied, "I have sat at the feet of Gamaliel." [304]. I found this to be such a curious passage. Hanna, once thought to be a contender for the presidency in 1904, was obviously exhausted to run. The phrase "I have sat at the feet of Gamaliel" refers to a Biblical allusion, specifically to Acts 22:3 in the New Testament, where Paul the Apostle says, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors." Gamaliel was a respected Pharisee and a noted teacher of the Law in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. By using this phrase, Roosevelt is most probably implying that he had learned from a master teacher or had gained wisdom from a highly respected source,

equipping him to handle the political challenges he was facing - indeed, Hanna had been a teacher for years from the point of adversarial authority. The context of Roosevelt's remark suggests he felt confident and well-prepared to deal with the Republican National Committee, just as Paul was confident in his training under Gamaliel.

"From Panama on down I have been able to accomplish certain things which will be of lasting importance in our history. Incidentally, I don't think that any family has ever enjoyed the White House more than we have. I was thinking about it just this morning when Mother and I took breakfast on the portico and afterwards walked about the lovely grounds and looked at the stately historic old house. It is a wonderful privilege to have been here and to have been given the chance to do this work, and I should regard myself as having a small and mean mind if in the event of defeat I felt soured at not having had more, instead of being thankful for having had so much." [331] This is TR writing to Kermit about him having gratitude and pride for nearly three years of power were he to lose the convention. A reminder that Roosevelt ascended when he did in 1901 only because of McKinley's assassination.

"The power to seize the psychological moment is the essence of genius in politics, and if anybody doubts that Theodore Roosevelt is a genius he should reverse himself on this further evidence." [352] This is a quote from the Brooklyn paper *Eagle* after Roosevelt delayed Admiral Jewell's squadron at Smyrna. U.S. Minister John G.A. Leishman's negotiations with Ottoman Sultan Abd al-Hamid II, primarily concerning the protection of American interests and missionaries, encountered challenges. Amidst a potential crisis, Roosevelt, advised by Secretary of State John Hay, deviated from his typically assertive foreign policy (the whole "speak softly and carry a big stick", which he had reworded from an African proverb). His decision, a blend of diplomatic restraint and timing, was lauded for its strategic prudence. It reflected Roosevelt's ability to adapt his approach to international affairs, skillfully balancing force with diplomacy, a trait that was recognized as a hallmark of his political genius.

"The only nationally empowered defender of the rights of their

villein consumers had been Roosevelt, intervening partly from benevolent disinterestedness, partly from statecraft, much as did the medieval Church." [505] This is in assessing his last year in office, Ambassador James Bryce (who had followed Roosevelt's career from afar for decades), likened Roosevelt's struggle to this medieval situation he describes. Roosevelt's position had gained him plebeian devotion, but scorn amongst the old moneyed, Ivy League, Yankee class, it was much less favorable

"Referring to himself not infrequently in the royal plural, Roosevelt admitted that he was engaged in a campaign against privilege that was fundamentally an ethical movement." [507] Thought this was a fun reference to the royal "we", used initially by Richard the First (the Lionheart), from the Third Crusade, and how I often think in the same type of way. I definitely do not claim royalty.

"New issues are coming up: The tariff, currency, banks. They are hard questions, and I am not deeply interested in them: my problems are moral problems, and my teaching has been plain morality." [528]. This is in talking to Ray Stannard Baker after Taft was nominated for President. While wistful, Roosevelt did not feel that going up for reelection was a morally good idea.

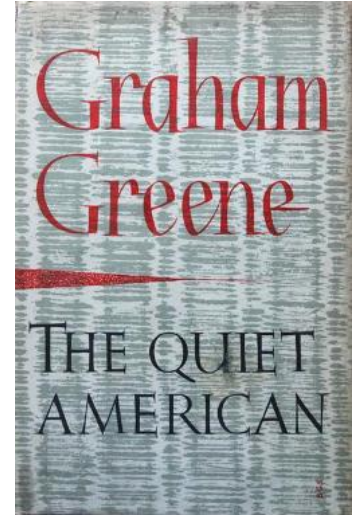
Roosevelt reflects on leaving the White House to not hang onto power for too long. His handling of the Brownsville Affair in 1906, where he dishonorably discharged 167 African American soldiers of the 25th Infantry Regiment without a trial, is referenced in conjunction to Lord Acton's famous dictum, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The incident exemplifies the potential pitfalls of unchecked executive power. Roosevelt, in exercising his authority decisively but arguably without adequate evidence or due process, demonstrated how power could lead to unjust and morally questionable decisions. His action, particularly given his reputation as a progressive leader, underscores the ethical challenges and responsibilities that come with power: he affected not only the lives of these soldiers but also his legacy by making his choice. The eventual posthumous reversal of these dishonorable discharges in 1972 by the U.S. Army shows how we need to be willing to continually reassess and hold ourselves accountable when exercising power, acknowledging any potential fallibility.

#11. *The Quiet American*, Graham Greene (1955)¹²

¹² Finished on December 27, 2023 after Nicole and I saw Joseph for brunch.

SUMMARY

A book suggested by my close friend and literary genius, Meeraj. I was particularly drawn to the novel's intricate exploration of human emotions, morality, and the complexities of relationships set against a backdrop of political upheaval. Walking away from this reading, I took with me a deep appreciation for Greene's ability to evoke powerful emotions through simple imagery and subtle narrative techniques. It was a bit uncanny how much I resonated with the characters' internal conflicts, especially Fowler's struggle between professional duties and personal loyalties, and his moral ambiguity in the face of political and romantic entanglements. I reflected on the universal themes of fear, guilt, and the desire for absolution (particularly at the end - all I could think about were the lines spoken by Michael Caine; Brendan Fraser also gives an incredible performance in the film adaptation) that Greene masterfully weaves into the narrative, and on which he draws poignant connections between the novel's setting and broader human experiences.



PASSAGES, VOCABULARY, RANDOM THOUGHTS

"I shut my eyes and she was again the same as she used to be: she was the hiss of steam, the clink of a cup, she was a certain hour of the night and promise of rest." [12] This is in describing Phuong, which means Phoenix in Vietnamese. The narrator, Fowler, is waiting for a man named Pyle in his apartment on the rue (street) Catinat one evening. I loved this allusion to feelings evoked by a woman, something that Greene does quite well.

"There was no scene, no tears, just thought - the long private thought of somebody who has to alter a whole course of life." [22] After being told that Pyle had been killed, Phuong had to reflect about how now she had to reassess on her future. I like this explanation to a thought that is more common than not, but difficult to phrase.

"We didn't want to be reminded of how little we counted, how quickly, simply and anonymously death came. Even though my

reason wanted the state of death I was afraid like a virgin of the act. I would have liked death to come with due warning, so that I could prepare myself. For what? I didn't know, nor how, except by taking a look around at the little I would be leaving." (52) This is when Fowler and company are exploring a canal in Phat Diem, they find it full of bodies. One anonymous head was buoyed over the water, and Fowler reflects about death on the bank of this canal.

"If the story had seemed good enough I could have flown to Hong Kong and sent it from there, but was any need good enough to risk expulsion? I doubted it. Expulsion meant the end of a whole life, it meant the victory of Pyle, and there, when I returned to my hotel, waiting in my pigeon-hole, was in fact his victory, the end of the affair [with Phuong] - a congratulatory telegram of promotion. Dante never thought up that turn of the screw for his condemned lovers. Paolo was never promoted to Purgatory.' (67) This is Fowler on why he did not chase the news story of how the American help promised to the French in September had not arrived by year's end (particularly the helicopters). He struggles between his professional duties and his personal attachments. The chapter ends with him receiving a notice of promotion to return to England; he sits in Hanoi and plays that *Quatre Cent Vingt-et-un* game with Pietri, a Surete officer with no intentions of going home.

"I have read so often of people's thoughts in the moment of fear: of God, or family, or a woman. I admire their control. I thought of nothing, not even the trap-door above me: I ceased, for those seconds, to exist; I was fear taken neat. At the top of the ladder I banged my head because fear couldn't count steps, hear, or see. Then my head came over the earth floor and nobody shot at me and fear seeped away." (92) This is when Fowler and Pyle, heading out of the Caodaist Zone into the Hoa-Haos area in Fowler's car, run out of gas. They find themselves in approaching darkness and Fowler climbs up a tower to see if there's anything up there for shelter. He thinks these thoughts as he climbs since he is exposed and the army could easily shoot him out there. It reminds me a lot of my confrontation with the GSC and Union. My thoughts were just *fear taken neat*, but then nobody shot any-

thing meaningful at me and fear seeped away.

"He seemed to take up no room at all: he was like the piece of greaseproof paper that divides the biscuits in a tin." (126) In describing Mr. Chou, a man Fowler is told knows more about Pyle and his third force.

"A man's body is limited in the acts which it can perform and mine was frozen by memory. What my hands touched that night might be more beautiful than I was used to, but we are not trapped only by beauty. She used the same perfume, and suddenly at the moment of entry the ghost of what I'd lost proved more powerful than the body stretched at my disposal. I moved away and lay on my back and desire drained out of me." (153) This is when Fowler takes the *métisse* to bed at the suggestion of Captain Trouin after he and Fowler went on a vertical raid. The raid, near Haiphong, made Fowler witness as they bombed the jungle, full of the enemy. Fowler, a guest that night at the opium house, argues that he cannot be involved in the whole thing and will remain just an observer (I.e. not take sides in the war); Trouin argued that it's not a matter of reason or justice. That they all get involved in a moment of emotion and then we cannot get out. That war and love have always been compared. Then he suggests that Fowler beds the woman at the opium house and while she is more beautiful than Phuong and a willing participant, he cannot. This feels like an allusion to the very warning the captain says, that once you get involved, no matter how, you cannot get out of it.

"I was in no mood to fight him, but at that moment I would have minded if he had beaten me unconscious. We have so few ways in which to assuage the sense of guilt." (184) As Fowler is taking dinner, pretending to wait for Pyle (whom he knows is probably being killed at the moment given his discussion with Mr Heng), Granger comes up to him and Fowler thinks it's about the situation at hand. His guilt is already consuming him.

"Everything had gone right with me since he had died, but how I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry." (189) The ending! What a superb line to end it with, wow. Got away with playing a role in Pyle's death, keeping Phuong, and got a divorce from Helen.

#12. *Virtues to Happiness*, Nick Del Castillo (2016)¹³

SUMMARY

After a recent meetup with a newer friend, Nick del Castillo, I had discovered he wrote a series of books some years prior. I had met Nick through a series of unrelated events: in a spur of looking for a new home as I was going through personal turmoil and thought I could leave my apartment, I turned to a friend of my close friend Joseph who mentioned Nick and his apartment north of Manhattan. Nick struck me as a rather pure and truth-seeking soul, with little desire to "use" anyone to his benefit. There was something else, too, that felt almost ascetic about him. I ended up living in that building months later in a different apartment, and the friendship we formed has been helpful to my spiritual musings. I leave my thoughts to my own imagination but leave behind a free form poem that I had written a while ago that his book reminded me of.

"Friendship, what do we sum up in that one word?

What virtue of heart and spirit, indifferent at last to all but character, lives in those two syllables?

We cling to it as the heir to the throne of our affections with steadfast loyalty.

What unspoken bonding at the outset accounts for its depth?

Is it the rush of recognition given in a phrase or gesture, or is it conferred by a glance that permits a glimpse of our complete souls?

No matter the origin, we find joy in the riches dispensed over the course of our lifetime:

the companionable silences without any discomfort, the critiques born of esteem, the disinterested caring without a hidden agenda.

It is a wholly communion.

Many composing a solitude.

Warmth from our mutual fire."

¹³ Finished on December 31, 2023 on the train ride down into Manhattan apartment hunting.

