

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

10-1-2019

Digging into Durable Books

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Recommended Citation

Matthews, J. (2019). Digging into Durable Books. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/1108

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Digging into Durable Books

Abstract

"In his excellent essay about why people ought to read old books, C.S. Lewis recommends that all readers should read them as much as they do contemporary ones."

Posting about broadening our literary experiences from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/digging-into-durable-books/>

Keywords

In All Things, books, classical literature, reading, C. S. Lewis

Disciplines

English Language and Literature

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt University.



October 1, 2019

Digging into Durable Books

Josh Matthews

In his excellent essay about why people ought to read old books, C.S. Lewis recommends that all readers should read them as much as they do contemporary ones.¹ He writes, “It is a good rule, after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones.”

Why should we bother following this rule?

Lewis gives his reasons. Not only have old books withstood the ravages of vast cultural change, which new books certainly have not, but they also offer different ways of seeing the world. New books tend to offer what we already know—familiar topics, ideologies, perspectives, and beliefs that we have encountered throughout our lives. These are part of the *zeitgeist* of our own time, the spirits of our age which we know all too well, and (for some of us) might believe to be the only correct view the world.

However, old books don’t necessary offer the same topics, perspectives, and beliefs. As products of a different age and *zeitgeist* (and by “old book” I mean something 200 years old or older), they may provide insights that have been discarded or forgotten, which may be as invaluable now as they ever were.

We might call these old books “classics,” although this is not a word I like much. Today, when language is often cheapened by marketing hype, the word “classic” now has several negative connotations. It can mean something that is high-class, which is taken by some people to mean “snobby,” “too difficult,” or “only for super-smart people.” If that is how you perceive what retailers call “classic novels” or “classic works,” I can see why you might stay away from old books.

Or else, the word “classic” is used to market brand-new works as if they are older. The phrase “instant classic,” applied to a book or movie, is a total oxymoron—an impossibility used solely for the purposes of selling a consumer good. There’s even a film company called “Sony Pictures Classics” that claims to make brand-new movies that also are classics, just because Sony says so.

Maybe a better term for Lewis’ old books, or the so-called classics, are “the durable ones.”

Lewis’ examples of classics are Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Shakespeare’s plays, and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, but there are hundreds of others.² These have spanned the centuries, been studied and celebrated in different cultures all around the world, and continue to be relevant in a world that, technologically speaking, is vastly different from the worlds in which these books were produced.³

In truth, the durable books don’t need anybody’s support. They don’t *need* to be read by us. When we see them on the library shelf, at the bookstore, on Amazon’s book pages, or our own bookshelves, it’s not us ignoring them. It’s *them* ignoring *us*. They just wait for the next interested readers. If that’s not us, they don’t care.

Also, we don’t determine whether the durable books are good or not. They determine whether *we* are. They don’t need modern readers to label them as “great” in order to prove their worth. Their worth has already been proven.

What we know about the Bible, the works of Homer, Hesiod, Herodotus, Virgil, Livy, Augustine, Cervantes and a hundred other durable books, is that they will last a long time, whereas we won’t.⁴ What they have to say has proven relevant to multiple ages, cultures, times, and places; what we have to say will be forgotten instantly.

So, we have some options. The first is easy—we try our best to read the durable books.

Other options are more common these days: we forget that they exist, claim that they are boring, or even say that they are immoral in some way.

Now, if we ignore them, something from our own zeitgeist will fill our time—whether it’s watching sports, bingeing on Netflix, surfing the Internet, or scrolling through a social media site’s feed. As Lewis says, if you only ever consider the spirits of your own age, your overall philosophical perspective is probably very limited. Sticking with contemporary fare, we risk remaining narrow-minded and therefore susceptible to the ideologies of our day. To get out of our own zeitgeist and into another helps us realize how limited we are, and how much we have to learn.

If we don't read the durable books at least occasionally, we risk thinking the dangerous thought that we are right, and that everyone who ever lived before us was wrong (Yes, this line of thinking is quite common today—a nasty form of hubris).

What we know for sure is that, even if we never read or even know about the durable books, somebody in the future will read them. Books like Homer's epics, Aristotle's works of philosophy, Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, and Melville's *Moby-Dick*, have been forgotten or lost for a time, only to be rediscovered. If everybody in the world today stopped reading durable books for the next 100 years, they would be found again and read, eventually.

That's what I mean when I say that they test us. The test questions are these, among others: How philosophical are we? How civilized are we? How much do we understand ourselves? Part of the answers to these questions, I think, come from how much the durable books are part of our lives and culture.

This is a test of our educational institutions: how much do we spend time with the durable books in our classrooms? At my college, last I checked a few years ago, about twenty classes out of hundreds had students read books that were older than the 1960s. Most of these were humanities classes. My guess is that this ratio is common, or even lower, in most American educational institutions, from elementary school through college.

Of course, a few high schools and colleges offer "Great Books" programs. These could indeed be great, although institutions don't have to go this far to heed Lewis' rule about old books. For some schools, any engagement with durable books would be better than what they are already doing.

But, we don't need an official school to tell us to read the durable ones. Anybody can read them, discover great information about them online, go through a free online class, or start a local book club.

A durable book will tell us, as Lewis argues, that we and our own age have many blind spots. Anybody who wishes to see better, and to see the blind spots of people in the past better, ought to take up the challenge offered by the durable books.

FOOTNOTES

1. is actually an introduction to an edition of St. Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*.

2. An actual list of durable books would be impossible here, but anything written before the Industrial Revolution (i.e., late 1700s) that is still read, taught, revered, criticized, quoted, or referenced by current works of art counts as “durable.”
3. This concept of classic or durable works is beginning to be needed for movies. Although film is only 130 years old, older movies from before the 1960s provide the same thing as classic books do for Lewis—different ways of seeing, behaving, dressing, thinking, and talking.
4. Although the books I’ve listed are in the tradition of Western Civilization, one could easily apply this to any old civilization in the world, including India, China, Japan, Persia (Iran), etc. The same thing could be said of oral traditions featured in nearly all cultures worldwide since time immemorial.