

70 University of Virginia
Professors Recommend
Readings in History,
Politics, Literature, Math,
Science, Technology,
the Arts, and More

What Should I Read Next?

EDITED BY JESSICA R. FELDMAN
AND ROBERT STILLING

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA PRESS
CHARLOTTESVILLE AND LONDON

University of Virginia Press
© 2008 by the Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

First published 2008

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

What should I read next? : 70 University of Virginia professors recommend readings in history, politics, literature, math, science, technology, the arts, and more / edited by Jessica R. Feldman and Robert Stilling.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8139-2736-7 (pbk. : acid-free paper)

1. Best books. 2. Best books—United States. 3. Books—Reviews. 4. Books—United States—Reviews. 5. University of Virginia—Faculty—Books and reading. I. Feldman, Jessica R. (Jessica Rosalind), 1949– II. Stilling, Robert, 1977–

Z1035.A1W48 2008

028.1—dc22

2008009234

Contents

Introduction	ix
1 History, Memory, Politics	
ALON CONFINO The Past as Memory and Oblivion	1
HERBERT TICO BRAUN Human Connections: History and the Latin American Novel	5
DENISE WALSH Your Culture or Your Rights? Women and the Multicultural Dilemma	8
FARZANEH MILANI Best Sellers and Half-Truths: Misreading Iran in America	13
WILLIAM B. QUANDT How to Understand 9/11, Iraq, and Bush's War on Terrorism	17
ELLEN V. FULLER Writing Self and Society: East Asian Women Authors	20
BRANTLY WOMACK Approaching China: Philosophy, History, and Politics	24
SYLVIA CHONG Asian America: Studying Culture and Ethnicity	27
PETER S. ONUF Improvising America: Rethinking the Founding	31
DANIEL R. ORTIZ Discerning Constitutional Meaning	35
LAWRIE BALFOUR The Life and Afterlife of Slavery	39
RISA L. GOLUBOFF Ongoing Struggle: The Deeper History of the Civil Rights Movement	43
GRACE ELIZABETH HALE "The Cruel Radiance of What Is": Poverty in America since 1945	47

opposition. Many an adolescent girl seeks to dance with the dictator, and to become his mistress. Gossip reigns. Trujillo's power digs deeply into people's hearts. Power seduces. And not all of the sisters are equally committed to the struggle, for personality counts too. Intimate reasons for political action, we learn, are often more pressing than ideology. Power enrages.

So too in Vargas Llosa's telling is erotic power the dictator's allure. But here when it counts he can't perform sexually. And alas, the aging Trujillo is forever in fear of a small stain appearing on his carefully pressed trousers. We feel for him. Better still, as his body betrays him and he feels his power draining away, we are emboldened. We too can fight against the oppressors above us, for they are also weak.

Like the dictator in his waning years, the writer is a bumbling politician. When he lost the presidency of his native Peru, he declared that he no longer could be a citizen of such a place. He would return to mother Spain, as though our desperate liberal had not already slain the inscrutable Indian. But his fictional travel into the human psyche, into our attraction to power, is without parallel in Latin America's letters. Fiction exceeds reality, if not history. The protagonist is a woman who refuses to bed down with him. Urania Cabral is her name, and she is unforgettable.

HERBERT TICO BRAUN is Associate Professor of History and writes in different voices about the strains in our human connectedness. In *Our Guerrillas, Our Sidewalks* (University Press of Colorado, 1994), he seeks the voice of his brother-in-law, of the Colombian guerrillas who kidnapped him, and his own, as the family's negotiator. Neither history nor fiction, it is an almost intimate memoir, one filled with stumbling steps all around. He often recalls that liberal who in an intimate moment in the vortex of independence suddenly felt the need to kill.

DENISE WALSH

Your Culture or Your Rights? Women and the Multicultural Dilemma

What is "death by culture"? Is it *sati* (widow burning), a barbaric Indian custom that violates the most fundamental of women's rights? Or is *sati* a Hindu woman's highest, definitive expression of religious faith? Is dowry

the marriage price a groom pays for a bride, equivalent to trafficking in women? Or is it the material expression of families joined in a mutual alliance of care and commitment? Is marriage an exclusionary rite that unjustly privileges heterosexual couples over single women, men, and same-sex relationships? Or is it a sacred covenant underpinning the moral foundations of society? What should governments do when immigrants bring controversial cultural practices with them? Must immigrants reject their culture to claim their rights?

At its worst, this polarized quandary over culture and rights has led conservatives to label feminism a threat to social morality, while feminists have attacked culture as irredeemably retrograde. No doubt elite cultural conservatives have promoted traditions that enhance their power at the expense of women. And liberal feminists have occasionally been at odds with the women they aim to liberate. It appears that neither culture nor rights alone provides a just or sufficient solution.

The problem has been particularly intense in postcolonial countries with free speech and a civil society, and in liberal democracies with sizable immigrant and/or indigenous populations. Postcolonial states must grapple with the imperial legacy of denigration and suppression of "native" beliefs and practices. Cultural revival becomes an expressive act of national pride, independence, and freedom. In contemporary liberal democracies, respect and toleration for different customs lie at the bedrock of their governing philosophies and are crucial to the peaceful coexistence of their diverse populations. In both sites the result is contestation that crosscuts women's lives as they become markers in a struggle that pits tradition, family, and faith against individual rights.

Women's status and well-being are also at the contentious center of academic debates over identity and freedom. While liberal feminists have aggressively defended the autonomy of individual indigenous and minority women, immigrant and minority rights champions argue that *group* identity is the fountainhead of personal dignity. Scholars thus debate about how to conceptualize human beings: as group members, individuals, or both? If both, are human beings first group members and then individuals seeking autonomy and freedom—or vice versa? Must either group *or* individual rights always trump? Who should have the power to make this decision? What should the role of government be? Should society regulate group practices that threaten individual autonomy? Promote cultural diversity? Practice neutrality? Solutions are neither obvious nor simple, yet the need for answers is pressing.

The best and most accessible work in the field raises questions, forcing us to think beyond the culture-rights binary. Admittedly, this does not make finding answers easier, but it vastly enriches our understanding of

the problem. Too often, discussions about culture and rights are not only dichotomized, but also abstracted in a way that ignores women's complex, varied interests. The first book on the reading list thus showcases the autobiography of one Indian woman's struggle for survival. Neither culture nor rights is offered as causal problem or solution. Instead, the reader must sift through the evidence, forming her own opinion. She can then turn to Uma Narayan, an Indian feminist and U.S. academic, who integrates her personal history while exploring the clash of women's rights with culture. Read together, the two books reveal that the stark choices offered by the culture versus rights debate are misleadingly simple.

The next two books on the list address culture and women's rights in the United States. Mary Shanley's anthology and Linda Hirshman's contributions are contentious, offering views guaranteed to provoke readers. They are included not because they provide definitive answers, but because of their clarity, directness, and willingness to face the problems equality raises for mainstream Americans. American readers might compare their reactions to Hirshman's controversial proposals with their views on India. In teaching these books, I have found that most of us tend to recommend dramatic cultural transformation for others while resisting it ourselves.

The last book on the list is now a staple in academic circles. A veritable who's who of political thinkers, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* initially poses the culture-rights dilemma in binary fashion, but generates a host of thoughtful critiques rewarding for those interested in investigating the challenges liberal democracies now face as home to peoples from across the globe. A timely concern, it is likely to be with us throughout the twenty-first century.

⇒ Baby Halder, *A Life Less Ordinary*, trans. Urvashi Butalia (Zubaan; Penguin, 2006)

A blockbuster Indian novel, the autobiographical tale *A Life Less Ordinary* is an unblinking account of one Indian woman's saga of tragedy and determination that has been likened to Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. In simple, searing prose, Baby Halder recounts being a child bride at twelve, a mother at thirteen, and a survivor of protracted, brutal domestic violence. The novel was a sensation in India in part because poor, runaway wives like Baby are silenced by social ostracism and shame. Halder's unlikely literary success was facilitated by her employer, Prabodh Kumar, who encouraged Baby to write her life story and sent her manuscript to publishers. Halder continues to work for Kumar as a maid. *A Life Less Ordinary* puts a compelling face on female, impoverished India, illuminating women's multiple

vulnerabilities. Can women's rights ameliorate the situation of women like Baby Halder? The next book on the list explores this question.

⇒ Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism* (Routledge, 1997)

The essays in this collection—forays on rights, culture, and gender politics—are witty and personal. In one chapter, Narayan recounts a woman's opening line at a cocktail party: "I have heard that many Indian women are burned by their families for dowry." How, Narayan wonders, might she respond? "Nice to have met you. I think I need another drink!" The essay that follows is her search for a more thoughtful answer. In the chapter titled "Eating Cultures," Narayan investigates food, gender, and politics, noting along the way that curry powder was a British invention, that her grandmother had a "visceral repugnance" for "beef-eaters," and that "eating cultures" might be one small way to transcend difference. The essays are ruminations, the literary equivalent of dining with Narayan. Entertaining, thought-provoking, and voracious, she raises far more questions than she answers, but nevertheless leaves you sated, relishing the taste of something new.

⇒ Mary Lyndon Shanley, *Just Marriage*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Deborah Chasman (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Nowhere in the United States does culture clash more contentiously with women's rights than in the private sphere. The provocative contributions in this compact, lively collection interrogate marriage, inequality, caretaking, and the family. Modeled on the highly accessible, diverse format of *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* Shanley's highly praised volume makes clear that the private is public in ways we often overlook. Who should be allowed to marry? What does government gain from regulating marriage? Should marriage have a special legal status? Can marriage be a relationship among equals in a society that remains highly unequal? The authors, far from being in agreement with one another, ask difficult, compelling questions, prompting us to think about domesticity, love, and relationships through the lenses of public policy and individual rights. Moreover, the authors powerfully illustrate how cultural practices in the United States come into conflict with equality, dignity, and liberty.

⇒ Linda R. Hirshman, *Get to Work: A Manifesto for Women of the World* (Viking, 2006)

Based on Hirshman's intensely debated article "Homeward Bound," which presumed to offer young women a set of rules for avoiding the

cultural trap of domestic inequality, this little volume packs a wallop. Critics of “Homeward Bound” lambasted Hirshman’s recommendations, such as “find a spouse with less social power than you . . . marry down.” Energized by the debate she ignited and not to be outdone by her opponents, Hirshman promptly published *Get to Work*, an elaboration on her assertion that American women’s “choice” to stay at home “cleaning bodily waste” is an ethical mistake that prevents talented, highly educated women from fulfilling their personal goals and meeting their social obligations. While Shanley’s volume prompts us to think deeply about why such choices are made, Hirshman forces us to squarely face the professional costs of caretaking in a society that rewards status and power far more than its lip service to family values suggests.

⇒ Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha C. Nussbaum, eds., *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (Princeton University Press, 1999)

If people with different beliefs and norms deserve our respect, what should we do about repugnant cultural traditions practiced here at home? Should polygamy, genital cutting, or purdah be tolerated in liberal countries? In direct and accessible prose, this slim book contains a range of philosophical answers. It opens with Susan Okin’s biting rejection of cultural claims that limit women’s rights. In response to her now classic essay, fifteen distinguished scholars plumb the depths of the dilemma. In extremely pointed briefs, contributors explore the philosophical underpinnings of contemporary liberalism and its capacity to integrate diversity while guarding individual rights. Each response can be savored on its own for the insights and questions it raises about rights, diversity, and toleration. When read in its entirety, the volume impresses as a singular example of the freedom of thought that liberalism cherishes yet finds so challenging in an era of multiple, hybrid identities.

DENISE WALSH is Assistant Professor of Politics and Studies in Women and Gender. Her dissertation, “Just Debate: Culture and Gender Justice in the New South Africa,” won the Hannah Arendt Award for best politics dissertation from the New School for Social Research. She was the lead editor and authored two articles for the March 2006 issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies*. Walsh is writing a book about democratization and gender politics in South Africa.

FARZANEH MILANI

Best Sellers and Half-Truths: Misreading Iran in America

“Americans read only American literature,” regrets Maryam, the Iranian American protagonist of Anne Tyler’s novel *Digging to America*. On the face of it, the statement seems implausible. Strictly speaking, it isn’t even true. The Iranian poet Jalal-ed-Din Rumi has been a best-selling poet in America for the last two decades. Iranian studies is a thriving field, producing an avalanche of books from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. Yet, and this is where Maryam has a point, while some poets and academics and a small number of books translated from Persian reach a narrow and ghettoized audience, popular books on Iran reach millions of people. They wield much power by touching the hearts and souls of the American public.

Despite a long history of friendship and cooperation with the United States, Iran is now seen as a purveyor of aggression by many Americans. Persia, “the Land of the Rose and the Nightingale,” is now Iran, the vanguard of a terrorist apocalypse. It is a member of the “Axis of Evil,” a rogue state, a “greater challenge” to the United States than any other country, according to President Bush’s 2006 National Security Strategy.

The genesis of this hostility can be traced back to November 4, 1979, when a group of militant students stormed the American embassy in Tehran, taking fifty-two Americans hostage for 444 days. On that day, a sense of anguish etched itself into the collective consciousness of a justifiably outraged nation. “America in Captivity” was the headline that captured the mood of a country in psychic pain. Twenty-eight years later, Iranians still find themselves hostages of their own hostage-taking. Although they are currently the most pro-American people in the Islamic world, their image as a dangerous enemy dominates the American imagination.

There are several reasons for this misreading of Iran. The two countries have had no official relations since 1980. With scarce diplomacy, a dearth of intercultural communication, and restrictions on travel and tourism, opportunities to reach a better understanding have been few. There are also precious few books translated from Persian into English. Indeed, the number of translations into English from any language is startlingly low in America. The not-so-lucrative business of translation, a cornerstone of intercultural communication and better understanding between nations, barely interests the \$25.1 billion U.S. publishing industry.

The paucity of translated books is further complicated by the increasing politicization of the popular books published in the United States