

WORTH READING: THE ANCIENTS

Jason Smith on Where to Start

Worth Reading is An Unexpected Journal's book recommendations column. Each issue we highlight a few titles, related to that issue's theme, that are recommended by AUJ staff, contributors, or readers. Books featured here can be from any genre, for readers of any age, published at any time. What they have in common is that people who appreciate the work and goals of An Unexpected Journal believe them to be Worth Reading.

To contribute your favorite book to Worth Reading, write ~500 words explaining why it's a good book and a good fit for an upcoming issue and use the Submissions form to send it in.

* * *

When most people think of St. Augustine, the book which typically springs to mind first is his

Confessions, followed perhaps by *City of God*. Less famous but at least equally deserving is *On Christian Doctrine*, a book which (to my surprise) is neither a systematic theology nor a popular introduction to Christian belief. Rather, it's an original and well-developed guide to reading well, addressing how to read attentively and evaluate thoughtfully.

Sourcing the "divine books" for his examples, Augustine presents the essential principles of literacy -- including recognition of metaphors and rhetorical styles, figurative and literal language, interpretive layers, accounting for context, the methods, use, and limits of inferring authorial intent, and even comparing translations to develop a more robust understanding of foreign-language texts. Observations and insights on Christian theology, scripture, and philosophy are liberally sprinkled throughout like so many jewels.

In Augustine's day many converts to Christianity were not literate (and may have wished to become so in order to read the Bible), or may not have been well-practiced in reading complex literature, and in any case resources were in short supply for students. Reading was uncommon, and normally undertaken aloud and in groups; Augustine himself found it remarkable that St.

Ambrose, Bishop of Milan and one of his great heroes, often read the Bible alone and silently.¹

The Bible is a challenging book by any metric; as Augustine observes, speaking of those things “necessary to the treatment of Scripture . . . is a great and arduous work . . . difficult to sustain . . . I fear some temerity in undertaking it.”² Yet he succeeded brilliantly, producing a work that is succinct, illuminating, and itself very easy to read. I’m glad I made time for it as an adult; I wish I’d read it in grade school.

* * *

Understanding how the ancients thought is not always managed by simply reading what they wrote: sometimes, you need a guide. One really stellar example is *The Book of the Cosmos: Imagining the Universe from Heraclitus to Hawking*, edited by Dennis Richard Danielson. Danielson assembles essays from 85 experts, science historians, and modern scientists on cosmology and astronomy and presents them in chronological order, revealing how

¹ see Augustine’s *Confessions*, Book Six, Chapter Three.

² Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1997) 7.

our understanding of the universe evolved sequentially throughout recorded time. Books like this are hugely helpful for coming up to speed on a subject, since every insight builds on those that came before. Periodically, this means disproving the best explanations that were previously available.

Tours de force through time and thought, like this one, go a long way toward refuting the natural but erroneous assumption that our present day has a special monopoly on rational, fact-based thinking. It's very easy to fall into this trap because, generally speaking, our tools for observation and measurement are more powerful and more precise than those available to generations past. But it does not follow that our wits are analogously sharper as well. When scientists of the ancient and recent past were factually wrong, they were sometimes spectacularly wrong. This makes it easy to be distracted by the spectacle and miss how good their reasoning was, given the data they had. *The Book of the Cosmos* brings home that "on the shoulders of giants" is no idle phrase.

* * *

If I asked you to recommend ancient works of fiction worth reading, even if you haven't read them

yourself, you'd probably be confident enough in their reputations to name an epic: The *Iliad*. The *Odyssey*. The *Aeneid*. Maybe even *Gilgamesh*. I wouldn't disagree. But there's an equally important work of fiction you may not have encountered since early childhood, if ever: the complete collection of Aesop's *Fables*.

These stories, whether originated by or attributed to Aesop, have exerted an indelible and pervasive influence on Western culture. Greek philosophers Apollonius and Plato wrote admiringly of them. Roman historians Livy and Plutarch adapted fables like "The Belly and its Members" to illustrate historical events; the same story may have inspired the Apostle Paul's discourse about the body and its members in his first letter to the Corinthians. Aphorisms and morals from the collection are common in everyday speech today, including advice about the treatment of geese that lay golden eggs, comparing the diligence of ants with the carefree irresponsibility of grasshoppers, emulating the steadfast progress of tortoises who outrace hares, recognizing disappointment denied as sour grapes, why having mercy on mice could save your life, and how a bear encounter is a test of true friendship (just to mention a few). These are powerful, formative stories, packing a lot of practical, memorable, easily-

transmissible wisdom into tiny kernels of language. Fluency in Aesop's *Fables* is a worthy pursuit - not just to know the lessons, but to study the technique.

* * *

Have a book Worth Reading? Write ~500 words explaining why and send it in using the Submissions form on our website

Bibliography

"Worth Reading: the Ancients"

Augustine. *Confessions*.

Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1997.