

BOOK REVIEW

Dambisa Moyo: By the Book

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The economist Dambisa Moyo, author most recently of “Edge of Chaos,” loves Agatha Christie’s “detestable, bombastic, tiresome, egocentric little creep” Hercule Poirot.

What books are on your nightstand?

A mishmash of books that reflect my interests — Hal Higdon’s “Marathon”; Chris Bower’s “Federer”; William N. Thorndike’s “The Outsiders: Eight Unconventional CEOs and Their Radically Rational Blueprint for Success”; Graham Allison’s “Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?”; “The Beekeeper’s Bible: Bees, Honey, Recipes and Other Home Uses,” by Richard Jones and Sharon Sweeney-Lynch; Robert J. Gordon’s “The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living Since the Civil War”; “The Government Inspector,” by Nikolai Gogol; and, hot off the presses, Iris Apfel’s “Accidental Icon: Musings of a Geriatric Starlet.”

Oh, and a King James Bible just in case my mother comes by for a visit.

Tell us about the last great book you read.

Jeff Hobbs’s “The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace.” I wept throughout. It is the true story of the life (and untimely death) of an amazing young black man as told by his white Yale roommate and best friend. His struggle with straddling different cultures — Newark’s drug-fueled and gang-ridden streets versus Yale’s establishment and world of legacies — resonated with my own travails of being born

and raised in Africa and living in Europe and the United States. Tragically, he did not escape his demons. This book impacted me in a deeply profound way.

What's the most interesting thing you learned from a book recently?

That would have to be from William Thorndike's "The Outsiders: Eight Unconventional CEOs and Their Radically Rational Blueprint for Success," with its revelation that companies that outperform their peers and financial benchmarks over long periods of time are doggedly focused on "capital allocation." Generally these companies have split roles at the helm: the chief executive, whose only job is to allocate capital (i.e. where to spend the company's marginal dollar), and the company president or chief operating officer, who is charged with running virtually everything else, from legal and regulatory matters to operations and technology, human capital, treasury and finance.

What's the best book on economics? And the best work of economic history?

"The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some Are So Rich and Some So Poor," by David S. Landes, is, to my mind, right up there for the award for the best book on economics. Landes's comparison and explanation of the different success or failure rates among different regions of the world — from the United States and Europe to China, Japan and Latin America — remains a seminal work for anyone curious about economic growth.

In a similar vein, Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies" reset thinking on what explains economic growth. While not a traditional economics text, the book takes economics back to its roots to show how a country's material success crucially depends on the resources and factors with which it is endowed.

What books do you think best capture your own political principles?

I have always been fascinated by this quip famously attributed to Mark Twain: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

So I tend to gravitate to books (and people) that question ideology and challenge sacred cows, which means no one book could capture my political principles.

I do find Jonathan Haidt's book "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion" captivating. I am intrigued by the fact that a self-described liberal (at least he was in 2009) has the temerity to investigate why people (in particular working-class Americans) vote Republican. His answer? Human nature. In particular he argues that people are fundamentally emotional, not rational. This argument flies in the face of all the economics I have been taught, which rests on the foundation that people (economic agents) are rational. For anyone who wants to understand why liberal thinking can be unappealing at the polls (and what to do about it), read this.

What's the last book you've recommended to somebody in your family?

"Living with a SEAL." This is Jesse Itzler's insane story of living with David Goggins, a former Navy SEAL and workout fiend who has completed around 50 ultra-endurance races (including the 135-mile race in Death Valley, and an Ultraman: 6.2-mile ocean swim, 261-mile bike ride and then a 52.4-mile run), and has had Top 5 finishes in at least 20 of them. He also set the Guinness World Record with 4,030 pull-ups completed in 17 hours.

I would train with Goggins (aptly nicknamed "the toughest athlete on the planet") if I had the guts. Sadly, I don't. But I loved the fact that Itzler moved Goggins into his home with his wife and kid for a month. I could not put the book down (I read it in one sitting with my mouth open in astonishment), and now follow Itzler and Goggins on Instagram.

Which books do you think capture the current social and political moment in America?

With the manifold cultures, religions, races and political beliefs that define America, I do not think such a book has been written, nor do I necessarily think it could be written — certainly not by a singular author.

That said, I am intrigued by two books that, if true, foretell a challenging road ahead for the United States. One is “The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy — What the Cycles of History Tell Us About America’s Next Rendezvous with Destiny,” by Neil Howe and William Strauss.

The other is Philip Roth’s “The Plot Against America,” which offers an alternative history where Franklin D. Roosevelt loses the 1940 presidential election to Charles Lindbergh. Although both books are somewhat dated (published in 1997 and 2004, respectively) they offer compelling narratives that could explain the social and political shifts that appear to characterize the path the United States is on today.

For what it’s worth, I hope both books are wrong.

Which historians and biographers do you most admire?

As far as contemporary biographers go, I believe Walter Isaacson is in a class by himself. Leonardo da Vinci, Steve Jobs, Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, Kissinger, take your pick — all brilliant.

How do you like to read? Paper or electronic? One book at a time or several simultaneously? As a long-distance runner, do you ever listen to audiobooks while you run?

I am definitely a simultaneous reader — I choose what to read based on my mood, rather than force myself to keep reading or finish a book if it is not moving me at a particular moment. I read economics, politics and history books in paper (I need to scribble on the page and add dog-ears liberally), and sports and lifestyle books electronically. I have not yet switched my music playlist for audiobooks while I am running, but I am working on it.

What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

Murder mysteries! I love Agatha Christie’s Belgian character Hercule Poirot (who appears in over 30 of her novels), but I confess my small collection is gathering dust as British television created a wonderful series with David Suchet. I find it particularly hilarious that Christie described Poirot as “insufferable” and a “detestable, bombastic, tiresome, egocentric little creep.”

What kind of reader were you as a child? Which childhood books and authors stick with you most?

I was born and raised on a healthy diet of the African Writers Series. Flora Nwapa's "Efuru," Ngugi wa Thiong'o's "The River Between" and, of course, Chinua Achebe's "No Longer at Ease" and "Things Fall Apart" will forever be etched in my mind as shaping my formative years.

You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

1) Vikram Seth, the economist turned novelist. His "A Suitable Boy" remains one of my all-time favorite books. 2) Ayn Rand, the philosopher and novelist. I am drawn to her irreverence — a woman ahead of her time. 3) Maya Angelou, the poet who penned "Still I Rise" and "Phenomenal Woman" ... enough said.

Of the books you've written, which is your favorite or the most personally meaningful?

That's a hard question — I imagine it is like picking your favorite child. I write the books I want to read so I am genuinely curious and intrigued by all the subjects I write on. But I suppose "Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa" is the most poignant.

For me, finding a sustainable solution to Africa's woes is a personal quest. Having been raised in one of the poorest countries in the world, I feel a strong desire to help families like my own, who continue to suffer the consequences of economic failure every day of their lives. In "Dead Aid," I offer a way.

What do you plan to read next?

Douglas W. Hubbard's "How to Measure Anything: Finding the Value of 'Intangibles' in Business," and his book with Richard Seiersen, "How to Measure Anything in Cybersecurity Risk."

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