

Great Books

for a
Great Mom

Joseph D. Celotti, Ph.D.



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Note to Reader

The Letter

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The Books

For Beth

Dear Reader,

In this letter Joe Celotti invites his mother, and us, to join him on a journey through Western Civilization. He penned it a few years after graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1960 with a Phi Beta Kappa in English literature. He went on to become a college professor of history.

His mother had inspired his pursuit of learning by buying the Classics for him throughout his childhood, beginning well before he could read.

Here the “Great Books” become enjoyable adventures, philosophies and human foibles. The authors are approachable fellows reflecting their moment in history. They become guides and trusted friends.

Faith, God, and rattling good story-telling interplay with human history starting with the Bible...on to the Greeks, Romans, Middle Ages, Renaissance, the Romantic Period, Age of Science ...through to the 20th century. It ends with American literature reflecting the disillusionment with the massive killing and heartbreak of two World Wars.

After living in Europe two years, Joe went on to earn a Masters and Ph.D. in Modern European History at Stanford. He became a history professor at the University of Notre Dame de Namur in Belmont. He was immensely popular for his mastery of subject and his humor. His classes were known for being challenging ...and witty.

This “Great Books for a Great Mom” is an invitation --- to join him on this journey, a tale of who we are and how we think ... as told by our forebears

Lynn (Celotti) Pigott,
Joe Celotti’s widow

October, 2020

Great Books for a Great Mom

Well, Mom, I don't know how good an outline this will turn out to be, but it should give you a place to begin. I will probably follow a chronological order for simplicity's sake. But you may not want to read the books in that order. If the reading becomes forced, it will cease being pleasant. Perhaps you will read from the beginning for a while and then skip around a bit. In between the rather heavy reading on this list you may want to read something light. I know I usually alternate my reading that way.

As much as possible you should try to understand the historical context in which a piece of literature is written. This will be especially so as far as the Greeks are concerned. This may necessitate going to a history book. Will Durant would be good for this up to the 17th century. The introductions in the books also help. Don't be surprised if you are not ecstatic when you are reading a great work of literature, especially one that is far removed from our culture. That is normal. So much depends upon your mood. Also, much depends upon a slowly built up understanding of the purposes of great thinkers. Perhaps the way to gain that understanding is to find a great writer who is close to you in time and whom you can understand and work backwards. That is, start with Dostoyevsky and end with Sophocles. That's what I did, actually. If you will remember my first "Modern Library" books.

I won't confine my recommendations to fictional works, though they will undoubtedly outnumber the philosophers and historians. All of them should be read together because collectively the poets, dramatists, novelists, philosophers and artists sum up the general (often latent) feelings of their times. I often think of the author as a sort of super-sensitive human seismograph who records the tremors of his generation, perceiving that which his less sensitive confreres cannot see or feel. The result of this is that he is cursed, banished, or executed for lies by the crowd that is unable to see what he sees. Socrates is a good example of this.

I hope that this will be of some help to you, Mom. I know that I am excited that you are interested and I can't think of a better thing for us to share in the years ahead. Maybe I can start to repay you for the inestimable gift you gave me: the reading habit. If it gets hard or boring at times, just remember that it is that way for all of us, no matter how much we've read. Also remember that reading is a mental effort and you recall how hard it was for you to get me to read in the first place!



Let's begin with the *Bible*. I haven't read as much of the *Bible* as I would have liked to but I do have a couple favorite books, "Ecclesiastes" is full of very "modern" ideas, quite pessimistic, indeed, and very human. The Jewish poet who wrote this part of the *Bible* must have sneaked this in while God was looking the other way. Actually, I should have said that about the author of "The Song of Solomon" which is a very

erotic love song, despite the efforts of Theologians to interpret the lover as Christ and his mistress as the Church. The *Bible* in the eyes of most impartial students of literature is the collected folk history, mythology, and wisdom of the Jewish race. Abraham lived about 1800 BC, Moses about 1300 BC. The oral versions of these stories, the creation the flood (taken from the Babylonian flood story in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* [1800 BC]) the exodus, etc. were probably written down beginning about 1000 BC and following. I may be a bit off on these dates, but I haven't time to check. The *Bible* is one of the greatest works of literature in the world and one of the most complete collections of one race's lore. The "King James Version" is the most poetic translation in English.

Now we must go to the Greeks. It is with the Greeks that we, or at least I, feel at home. I think it is safe to say that the Greeks were the first group of people to be proud of their humanity. The Hebrews cowered before Jehovah and debased their manhood, and I think one can see some of this unpleasant servility still in the Jewish character. The Greeks laughed often at their gods, indeed they even created their gods in their own image; that's why they were funny. It always strikes me as strange that our Christian (Jewish) God is completely devoid of a sense of humor. Nor do we feel comfortable enough with Him to be able to chuckle at some of his foibles. The Greeks respected their gods, feared them too, but were also able to perceive the absurdities in life which the gods were supposedly responsible for. They did not try to absolve the gods of their guilt as we do ours. A lightning bolt that killed a family came from Zeus. A plague may have come from Poseidon. The gods were often mischievous, sometimes without justification. The Greeks expected that. When an innocent man suffers and a guilty man prospers in our society, we do not like to attribute that to our God, though we readily attribute all good to Him.

Homer gave us our first written account of the Greek gods and their relations with the great mythic heroes of the Greek past in the *Iliad*. This describes the Greek siege of Troy, which actually took place about 1200 BC, though Homer wrote around 800 BC. All early literature was passed down by word of mouth for centuries before it was written. That accounts for the distortions. The original battle of Troy was probably fought for commercial reasons: Troy guarded the straits into the Black Sea; Helen is a poetic invention. I would suggest that you read only a few passages of the actual *Iliad*, but read a summary of it in Edith Hamilton's *Greek Mythology*. You might read larger portions of the *Odyssey* (Homer's story of Odysseus' [Ulysses'] return home after the war) since this is a faster moving narrative. Richard Lattimore's translation of the *Iliad* gives you a sense of the original poetry which was read out loud (sung) on festival days in Greece.

You will also want to read the Greek myths in a collection like Hamilton's or Robert Graves'. Myths are a very complicated subject. They reflect the subconscious drives of all humans [e.g. Oedipus]. They most always disguise their real significance. For example, the stories of the so-called dying and rising gods like Adonis, Dionysus, Persephone, Orpheus are really the results of an almost primitive understanding of the cycle of vegetation which grows out of the ground dies and goes under the ground only

to return the next year. This was of mystical and very important life giving significance to the peoples who discovered agriculture (thousands of years before the Greeks). I have found mythology and primitive religion to be among the most interesting things I've ever read about. Read Campbell in *The Masks of God*.

The Greek dramatists are the writers who are most easily and sympathetically read by us today. They wrote in the 5th and 4th centuries before Christ when Greek culture was at its high point. Their pride as humans was great, but they recognized that man's greatness, the result of proud heroic acts, was doomed to failure because the gods (fate) would not abide such pride. So they paradoxically warned man against that which alone makes him great, his pride, and yet, though the heroes meet tragic endings, there is always a glory that surrounds them.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are the three great Greek tragedians and they wrote in that order. Aeschylus wrote in the older, formal style, though he was responsible for much innovation, and tends to be hard for us to understand. Remember Greek drama originated in a religious ritual worshipping the god Dionysus (Bacchus in Rome), so there are always heavy religious overtones in these plays, especially the early ones. They were only presented on "holy" days. Aeschylus' most famous play *Agamemnon* discusses the pride of the returning leader of the Greek forces against Troy.

Sophocles' play *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Rex) is probably more appealing to us today. Sophocles is interesting in the psychology of his characters, and in this play we have one of the first detective stories. Of course Freud later borrowed the Oedipus myth to describe the subconscious drive which he believed (most psychologists do) we all share. The suspense that builds up, the growing imminence of doom as Oedipus moves closer to the discovery of his own guilt, is very effective even today. Remember, also, that *reading* a drama is not a fair way to estimate its worth, especially a translated one from a different age.

Euripides' *Medea* is often read. Euripides wrote in the 4th century BC and was quite cynical about everything, most of all, the gods. Fourth century Athens was very similar to 20th century America and Europe in that it was a period just following a series of destructive wars and traditional faiths were shaken.

The great comic dramatist of the Greeks was Aristophanes and his mode was satire. His play *Lysistrata* is a very bawdy story of how the women refuse to love their husbands until they stop their ceaseless warring. Not a bad idea, perhaps. It's a good indication of the sophistication of the Greek state that a playwright would be allowed to openly criticize the current political policy of the state and win the prize of the festival for that very play. The bawdiness is also characteristic of all the Greek comedy. Dionysus was a fertility god. Aristophanes satirizes Socrates in *The Clouds*. Socrates must have seen the play and we guess that he laughed.

However, some Athenian leaders lost their sense of humor for a while in the year 399 BC and caused Socrates to be condemned to death. He was tried for corrupting the youth and denying the gods. His own defense speech is recorded by Plato in the dialogue called *The Apology*. In that one short dramatic essay we get what I think is the traditional view of Socrates, the gadfly on the rump of the state. It is beautiful. If you want to read about how Socrates met his death, and, incidentally, get a summary of Platonic philosophy read *The Crito* and *The Phaedo*. You may want to browse through Plato's *Republic* (his version of Utopia), but you may find it a bit tedious. Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece for his own philosophy. Socrates did not write, but his pupil, Plato, did.

Aristotle, Plato's pupil, wrote an enormous amount but no one reads it anymore unless they are professional philosophers. He is very logical and complicated, not near so readable as Plato.

I think I will skip lightly over the Roman writers, Virgil, Horace (you might like Horace), Juvenal, Petronius, Lucretius. I would recommend a little Marcus Aurelius a philosopher emperor, a rare combination. Frankly I have not read much of the Romans and what I have read I've found lacking in human sympathy.

After Rome fell in 476 AD, there was a reversion to feudal barbarism very similar to the period during which the Trojan War was fought, and similar myths and legends grew out of this period, only this time the god was a Christian one. Legends arose concerning Charlemagne and his valiant lieutenant Roland in *The Song of Roland* in France. Charlemagne actually lived in 800 AD. In the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th centuries legends about Charlemagne and King Arthur (not sure if he is historical or not) grew up. I'd suggest reading any anthology, Bullfinch for instance, for a summary of these stories. A very charming and witty modern version of the Arthurian legends is *The Once and Future King* by White, a very good book and very accurate.

The great work of literature of the Middle Ages (actually it is transitional between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance) is Dante's *Divine Comedy*. I don't know anyone who has ever read the entire thing. You might read selections e.g. "Francesca De Rimini." Following Dante in Italy there is the great poet Petrarch and the marvelous storyteller Boccaccio. Boccaccio's *Decameron* is a collection of bawdy stories which give us an insight into the lives of the common people of the 13th century.

In England in the 14th century Chaucer took up where Boccaccio left off, in fact he used many of his plots for his stories in *The Canterbury Tales*. You might try reading them in the original Middle English, but a modern translation would go faster.

We'll skip to the end of the 16th century, and, of course, read the great one, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare must be read slowly and carefully at first – perhaps always. My favorite plays are *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. His sonnets are beautiful also.

A contemporary of Shakespeare's in Spain was Cervantes. His *Don Quixote* is very readable today and really very funny. This book has been called the book that killed a nation because it satirized the Spanish Code of Chivalry and honor at a time when Spain was just toppling from a brief peak of power that it has never attained again.

I've just recalled the French philosopher, Montaigne. I think he preceded the last two. He's soothing and sane. There is also the French satirist roughly contemporary with Montaigne, Rabelais. Another bawdy one – his *Gargantuan*.

I'll mention Milton's *Paradise Lost* because it is considered to be one of the greatest poetic works in English. It is a poetic narrative of Satan's fall from Heaven and Adam and Eve's sin. The first books describing Satan are exciting and seem to appeal more to most readers today than the latter books about Adam. Lord Byron claimed that Satan (the proud rebel, somewhat akin to the doomed Greek tragic hero) was the real hero in that last of the Epic poems.

The writers start coming hot and heavy now and I will be undoubtedly be forgetting some of them. The eighteenth century produced much good humor and sharp satire. In England Jonathan Swift, a minister, wrote his biting and often scatological satire *Gulliver's Travels*. Read "The Voyage to Lilliput" and "The Houyhnhnms." That will be enough.

In France at about the same time (actually a bit later), Voltaire produced his magnificent little satire *Candide*. "Candide" means optimist and the book is an attack upon the philosopher Leibnitz's view that this is the best of all possible worlds. You see Leibnitz had tried to explain away the evil in the world so that the Christian God who is all-good couldn't be blamed for it. Remember how the Greeks solved that problem? Leibnitz claimed that the presence of evil makes the good even better or the more evil, the more good. Voltaire couldn't accept this especially when he heard about a horrible earthquake that took the lives of thousands of innocent people in Lisbon. So he wrote this classic satire to refute Leibnitz.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century in England the modern novel developed. Actually *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Candide* are some of its ancestors. *Tom Jones* by Fielding is one of the best of these 18th century novels, most of which were long and humorous.

This form of literature was developed and refined in the 19th century in England by Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*, a mild satire of English country life), Charles Dickens (*Bleak House* his longest and, I think, his best novel – Dickens is very important in the novel's development), George Eliot (a woman) *Middlemarch*, Thomas Hardy (*Jude the Obscure*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* quite pessimistic) and Joseph Conrad (*Lord Jim*, *Victory*).

In France in the 19th century the novel was being developed in its own way. I should have mentioned that the novel is considered the art form of the middle class, indeed you can see its rise correspond with the rise of the middle class. The subject of literature descended from the problems and activities of kings to those of country squires and later farm boys.

Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* is one of the great early 19th century novels in France. It traces the rise of a young man through the church. Great book. Balzac's *Le Pere Goriot* is a powerful novel of a father who dotes upon his two careless and thankless daughters. Balzac is one of the early realists. His characters have guts. Zola took this realism to its extreme in *Nana* the story of a prostitute. Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (subtle satire of bored modern women, a great novel on second reading).

I just realized that I skipped Germany's great poet Goethe whose career stretched from the middle of the 18th century to near the middle of the 19th. *Faust* the narrative poem telling of the man who sold his soul to the devil is considered one of the greatest works of literature in the world.

Russia in the 19th century produced the really great novels to my way of thinking, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev. Dostoyevsky plunges into the deepest parts of his characters' minds in his writings. *Crime and Punishment* analyzes the frightening and intellectual motives of the murderer Raskolnikov. *The Brothers Karamazov* covers a whole world of feeling and thinking in the Karamozov family, each of whom represents a basic human type: Alexy, the mystic, Ivan, the intellectual, Dimitri the strong, compassionate and complete human, and the father, all that's base. Remember Dostoyevsky had mystic inclinations himself and usually favors those types. His *Notes from the Underground* is very modern and dissects much of the modern dilemma concerning our inability to communicate with each other.

Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a novel of great sweep and power. In it Tolstoy put forward his thesis that history is not made by great individuals (The Romantics legacy to 19th century historians) but by the masses whose collective will pushes or pulls the Napoleons. Tolstoy only gets dull when, at the end of his novel, he tries to become a philosopher of history. I never finished *Anna Karenina*, but it might appeal to you more. I recently read Tolstoy's short story "The Death of Ivan Illych" and found it to be very modern and extremely depressing.

Incidentally, this would be a good point to mention that you should not expect to be cheered up by great literature. The great works of literature are great because of the depth and honesty of their perceptions and revelations, and, in our most honest moods, we all recognize the precarious state of existence that all humans experience. Even comedy, when it is great, is often as sobering as it is amusing. In fact, I would say that all great comedy is sobering, for comedy can be as true a perception of life as tragedy and the two are separated by only a hairline. Please don't think, however, that great literature must be avoided if life is to be tranquil and pleasant. It is true that one loses much when he sheds

the childish naiveté which assumes that “all is for the best in this the best of all possible worlds” – (*Candide*), but one *gains* too. The gains are hard to define. One of them is the strange comfort that one experiences when he discovers his opponent in the darkness, whereas before all he saw was the darkness and he merely sensed the presence of the enemy. Another of the gains is the enheartening, if limited, certainty that all you know is the result of *your own* inquiry and, as small as that knowledge may be, at least, it is more certain than those great quantities that most men inherit unwittingly. There is also the pleasure of feeling oneself the compatriot of the great human thinkers who have preceded and exceeded you; and relative to all the billions who have lived, you count up to be a small percentage. But relative to your own limited circle of acquaintances, you add up to a fairly sizable force.

Turgenev describes a Nihilist (a person who is a complete skeptic and believes nothing – “nihil”) in his novel *Fathers and Sons*. It shows the horrors of the excesses of independent thinking as well as Thoreau, a little earlier, showed the horror of the absence of independent thought.

Thoreau leads us to America in the 19th century. Of course, I am most familiar with American literature because of my teaching these past few years, but I will try to confine my comments, lest by their length you make the mistake of accrediting an abnormal amount of importance to American literature.

The nineteenth century saw the birth of what may be called “significant” American literature. Most of this is Romantic literature. I have avoided such terminology up till now and, perhaps, should avoid it entirely, but I have opened Pandora’s box. Most literature up to the mid-nineteenth century could be classified as either “Classic” or “Romantic” which are usually considered as opposite poles.

Classic literature and art is noted for its logic, balance, and rationality. A poem with even rhythm and symmetrical rhyme scheme, or think of the Parthenon. Romantic literature and art is often just the opposite: illogical, disproportionate, emotional. Blank verse or irregular rhythms and no rhyme is romantic poetry. A Gothic cathedral instead of the classic Greek architecture.

In the latter half of the 18th century European literature and art moved away from the neo-classical style that had dominated the century and the Romantic Revolution was initiated. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelly and Keats are English poets who led the movement. Rousseau in France was called the “Father of Romanticism.” You might read his *Confessions* (autobiography).

It was the shock waves of this Romantic movement that influenced the first generation of great writers in America. Emerson and Thoreau were the two philosophers of the movement though Thoreau is hardly a philosopher in the formal sense of the word. His wit and beautiful prose style, his mastery of the sentence, set him apart from the plodding dullness of the traditional philosophers. He was a

naturalist and commentator. *Walden* must be read. His essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” was the source of Mahatma Gandhi’s idea of passive resistance against the British and the current sit-ins in the U.S.

Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is a very important and symbolic romantic novel of the period, but, despite the praise of many critics, I find it boring for the most part. It is a story of the Puritan society and the problem of sin and repentance.

The Great American Novel, as far as I am concerned, is *Moby Dick*. This is, in my opinion, the one American novel that can compete with any novel ever written and, indeed, stand proudly next to the greatest world literature. It is imperfect in its parts (There are contradictions and lapses in the text; it often gets laboriously detailed) but it must be judged for its total effect. It is a powerful symphony that “romanticizes” the whaling industry. Actually the novel which is highly allegorical is describing the whole human race’s search for the unattainable when it purports to be describing a mad man’s pursuit of a white whale. Melville began the book as a simple adventure story, but it changed as he wrote it, it gained possession of him. The factor which keeps the novel from becoming a tedium is its great humor and poetry. Melville sums up all of the comedy and tragedy of life in this great book. Like all great books many people don’t like it on the first reading. I did, however. Pat Sullivan didn’t. Of course, he does now. You have to be in a mood to whale!

We might as well stay in America while we’re here, but we are changing writing styles. I mentioned “Classic” and “Romantic.” Well, in the late 19th century in Europe and America a new literary technique replaced Romantic. In its broadest sense we can call this new approach “Realism,” the attempt to describe life as it *really is*. Extreme or pessimistic realism is often termed “Naturalism.” It might be said by way of analogy that the realistic writers saw and described the garbage cans in life, while the naturalists pulled the lids off the cans and described even the filth inside. Most literature of the twentieth century is “realistic,” at least, in part.

Of course, you realize that authors don’t suddenly wake up one morning and decide to invent or change a style of literature. They reflect and even anticipate the collective mood. Many things are responsible for the swing toward Realism that is characteristic of our age. Science is the obvious culprit and, perhaps, the most guilty. The scientific method which began to be widespread in Europe in the 17th century is one of description of that which can be seen and measured. I need not mention the obvious results of this method, results that were so spectacularly beneficial that we can safely say that we are in an age of science. All the arts reflect this fact. With the dominance of this method of rational analysis began the dissolution of older methods of seeking the truth, namely, the intuitive or subjective method which can be closely linked with romanticism in art.

Mark Twain’s realistic humor and description foreshadow this trend in American literature. He is one of the great humorists of all time. Some would call him the greatest

American novelist. *Huckleberry Finn* is the novel they would point to. Like so much great humor it is often read as a children's book. Actually it is a tremendous satire which tears apart American society and, indeed, all of humanity and its prejudices. *Letters from the Earth*, Twain's last work, shows the bitterness that his old age brought him, but also it demonstrates the brilliance and incisiveness of his prose.

At this point I will mention Henry James who is sort of an isolated figure in American literature. He is a very *subtle* writer and could be called a psychological realist, I suppose, since he tries to dig into the psyches of his characters. You might like his *Portrait of a Lady*. James doesn't excite me, though some would call him our greatest novelist. In a way he is like Proust, now that I think of it, and they were contemporaries – late 19th early 20th centuries.

Before we get away from the late 19th century I might mention briefly the aesthetic revolt in Europe at the end of the 19th century. This was the result of a revolution among some of the more cultured or monied for the ugly by-products of science and the machine: slums, nouveau riche, common tastes broadcast throughout the land, and a decline of interest in art. Actually Thoreau anticipated this when he criticized these very things 50 years earlier. Oscar Wilde and the poet Rossetti (not too important) were associated with this group, and I suppose you can say that James and Proust were, too, in an indirect sort of way. Read Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Lady Windermere's Fan* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde was the greatest conversationalist and wit of his and, perhaps, any time. He is a particular favorite of mine.

But this was only an interlude; Shaw, the socialist, quickly led everyone back to the path of realism. *Man and Superman* is one of his best. His long introductions are outstanding essays on his times, art, and life in general.

The 20th century is a tortured century. No century has been more torn by war and no *three* centuries in history have seen more men killed by other men. We have almost come to accept this mass killing as normal. It is not! No wonder that our most intelligent and perceptive men, the writers, are skeptical and pessimistic! It is a century without Faith.

It may have seemed unusual to you and Dad that Catholicism no longer means anything to me, but it would not seem unusual to many others. Science, war, communication with other cultures, psychology, history and old age have dealt traditional religion in the West a devastating blow; I'd guess it to be ultimately a death blow. Actually "blow" is the wrong metaphor. That implies a sudden knock down, when actually this is a process that is, at least, seven hundred years old and may continue as many more in the future.

The philosopher Nietzsche in the 19th century announced that "God is dead!" Nietzsche went insane eventually from the agony of realizing that all nonsense had been

taken out of the universe. His fate is good testimony to the seriousness of “nonbelievers” who would love to believe but can’t! *Thus Spake Zarathustra* is his great work. Nietzsche is very readable and a remarkable wit. Melville struggled with this very same problem in *Moby Dick* the ambiguous white whale, the “colorless, all-color of atheism.”

One of the greatest novelists (some say the greatest) of the entire 20th century, James Joyce, writes specifically about this problem. In fact, you can hardly be a serious writer in this century and ignore this problem. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Joyce describes the growth of doubt in his mind as a youth and his break with the Catholic Church in Ireland. He continues this in *Ulysses*, one of the great novels of our time. It is a very complicated, witty and profound novel that describes one day in the life of Stephen Dedalus (Joyce). I’ve read it twice. Mark Shorer called it in one lecture I heard at Cal “The book I’d take to a desert island.” Joyce is not easy reading, though *Portrait* is not difficult.

There is a heavy tone of pessimism in all serious 20th century literature – perhaps in all literature!?! The pessimism or realism at the best is more disturbing or unrelieved in the 20th century because of the perspective in which the modern thinker views mankind. Looking at man biologically we see that he is just one more form of life, a form that has been very successful in dominating its environment for about a million years, but one that could pass away just as easily (perhaps more so) as the dinosaurs which ruled their environment for many millions of years a long time ago. When the dinosaurs ruled the earth, our ancestors were rat-like creatures which scurried to avoid being trampled by the local lords of 180 million years ago. Perhaps our successor is scurrying under our feet right now. That sounds absurd, but who could have chosen a rat over a dinosaur years ago.

The latest findings in astronomy suggest that the universe is finite, estimated to be a mere 13 billion light years (the distance light travels in a year at 186,000 miles per second) and expanding. Astronomers figure that it started about 13 billion years ago in a great explosion (The “Big Bang” Theory) and that the universe is still spreading out from the force of the explosion. They also guess that the universe will eventually contract (come back together towards a center) till everything collides and fuses and another explosion like the first one will follow – all this over an 82 billion year cycle. If this is so, all present life, or whatever its ancestors, will be wiped out and it will all start again.

The immense amount of time and space, the multiplicity and abundance of life forms, and the apparent mechanistic and heartless nature of the universe reduce man’s ego to the vanishing point. The quaint idea that the world was created for human beings seems silly to many who are aware of these other facts, and I have not even mentioned the many other facts in the fields of psychology, history, anthropology, etc, etc which also have reduced man to a blundering, but temporarily brilliant and lucky ape. These facts, the world view that they imply, have forced many to look in new directions for meaning in life. This process has been going on for hundreds of years and it is especially powerful in our century

The Existentialists are just one group who have attempted to come to grips with the harshness and meaninglessness of reality in the 20th century. Read Camus' *The Stranger* or some of Sartre's plays, *No Exit* for example. The viewpoint of the existentialist *very simply* is that man must recognize his loneliness in space, the lack of cosmic purpose for man, and face up to it. He must give his life meaning himself through his actions. I am not a fanatical Existentialist nor any kind of "ist," but I do think that a lot of their ideas are sensible.

It is silly to dislike the Existentialists or the scientists or the novelists and poets whose work points toward this new realistic view of life. They are not members of a secret organization designed to overthrow the older views of reality; they are not "bums" who have nothing better to do; they are the men who have the eyes to see the facts of their age they live in and the wit to describe what they see. They are the same men who thousands of years ago painted pictures of bison on the walls of caves, or discovered astronomy, or the wheel, or geometry. They are the same men who wrote the "Song of Solomon" or "Ecclesiastes."

So, when F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the death of romantic idealism and "the American Dream" so beautifully in *The Great Gatsby*, or Hemingway describes the loss of faith and the disillusionment of Americans after World War I in *The Sun Also Rises* or *A Farewell to Arms*, or Faulkner describes the moral and cultural decadence of the South in *The Sound and the Fury*, or Steinbeck describes the exploitation of the Oakies in *The Grapes of Wrath*, or J.P. Salinger describes the helplessness of an adolescent in *Catcher in the Rye*, or Joseph Heller describes the riotously funny and morbid world of war in *Catch-22*, these men are not being un-American or unpatriotic, and they are not lying. They are describing the America that is all around them and which anyone could see if he opened his eyes or had the courage to accept what he saw.

Awareness does not mean despair and suicide. It is quite possible to have a strange sense of elation in the face of all this. There is the pleasure of independence and intellectual consistency, and there is the challenge. There is also an entirely different feeling of oneness with the world and life that can be attained in many ways. Oriental philosophers are more familiar with this view than we are. Hemingway's great novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* demonstrates the optimism of this type of individual courage better than any American's novel of the 20th century. It is a beautiful book. Quite inspiring. So we are not without hope, but it is not easy, not *ready-made*!!

Great Books for a Great Mom

Well, Mom, I don't know how good an out-line this will turn out to be, but it should give you a place to begin. I will probably follow a chronological order for simplicity's sake, but you may not want to read the books in that order. If the reading becomes forced, it will cease being pleasant. Perhaps you will read from the beginning for a while and then skip around a bit. In between the rather heavy reading on this list you may want to read something light. I know that I usually alternate my reading that way.

As much as possible you should try to understand the historical context in which a piece of literature is written. This will be especially so as far as the Greeks are concerned. This may necessitate going to a history book. Will Durant would be good for this up to the 17th century. The introductions in the books also help. Don't be surprised if you are not ecstatic when you are reading a great work of literature, especially one that is far removed from our culture. That is normal. So much depends upon your mood. Also, much depends upon a slowly built up understanding of the purposes of great thinkers. Perhaps, the way to gain that understanding is to find a great writer ~~that~~ who is close to you in time and whom you can understand and work backwards. That is, start with Dostoyevsky and end with Sophocles. That's what I did, actually. If you will remember my first Modern Library books.

I won't confine my recommendations to fictional works, though they will undoubtedly outnumber the philosophers and historians. All of them should be read together because collectively the poets, dramatists, novelists, philosophers and artists sum up the general (often latent) feelings of their times. I often think of the author as a sort of super-sensitive human seismograph who records the tremors of his generation, perceiving that which his less sensitive conferees cannot see or feel. The result often is that he is cursed, banished, or executed for lies by the crowd that is unable to see what he sees. Socrates is a good example of this.

I hope that this will be of some help to you, Mom. I know that I am excited that you are interested and I can't think of a better thing for us to share in the years ahead. Maybe

The “Great Books”

The Bible
“Ecclesiastes”
“Song of Solomon”
Epic of Gilgamesh

The Iliad
The Odyssey
Agamemnon
Oedipus Rex
Medea
Lysistrata
The Apology
The Crito
The Phaedo
Plato’s Republic

Marcus Aurelius

The Song of Roland
Divine Comedy
The Decameron
The Canterbury Tales

Hamlet
King Lear
Don Quixote
Montaigne’s philosophy
Gargantua
Paradise Lost
Lord Byron
Gulliver’s Travels
“The Voyage to Lilliput”
“The Houyhnhnms”
Candid
Tom Jones

Pride and Prejudice
Bleak House
Middlemarch
Jude the Obscure
Tess of the d’Urbervilles
Lord Jim
Victory
The Red and the Black
Le Pere Goriot
Zola
Nana
Madame Bovary

Faust

Crime and Punishment
The Brothers Karamazov
Notes from the Underground
War and Peace
Anna Karenina
The Death of Ivan Illych

Fathers and Sons

Wordsworth
Coleridge
Byron
Shelly
Keats
Confessions

Emerson’s “Essays”
Walden
“The Duty of Civil Disobedience”
The Scarlet Letter
Moby Dick

Huckleberry Finn
Letters from the Earth
Portrait of a Lady
The Importance of being Earnest

Lady Windermere’s Fan
The Picture of Dorian Gray
Man and Superman

Thus Spake Zarathustra
A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man
Ulysses
The Stranger
No Exit
The Great Gatsby
The Sun Also Rises
A Farewell to Arms
The Sound and the Fury
The Grapes of Wrath
Catcher in the Rye
Catch-22
The Old Man and the Sea

