

Summer Reading

I WALKED ALONG Lopez Cotilla through the used-book district. I was leaving for 10 days in Ecuador and wanted something to read on the trip. In the small English section of one stall, I found a serviceable trove: Kipling's *Plain Tales From the Hills* and *Soldiers Three*, the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Ernest van den Haag's *Jewish Mystique*, and Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. These set me back \$22.

Any reader of my age and reasonable intelligence might have bought the same books. None of them is demanding. I had read Kipling before high school and *Berlin Diary* in high school. Yes, Shirer requires a sophisticated vocabulary, a first-name familiarity with sentences of more than one clause, and an attention span measured in units greater than milliseconds. In aggregate, these were once known as "being able to read."

Anyone familiar with today's young must be painfully aware that few can, or would, read these books. For one thing, they are too impatient, perhaps having been shaped by the flick-flick of television to the point that lengthy concentration is beyond them. For another, they lack the indefinable but crucial background that comes of having read hundreds of books.

And they don't know English—what an indirect object is or the subjunctive or why. They do not know that a word that looks vaguely like another may mean something different or that the finer shades of meaning have their uses.

Worse, they have been taught that careful literacy is not democratic and that the value of a book springs from the ethnicity of the author. I am aware of no other civilization that has regarded benightedness with irredentist longing.

If I were to make a list of books I would recommend to adults and children alike, I would begin with *Winnie*

the Pooh and *The House at Pooh Corner*, not because I am in arrested development, though I may be. It would be because the English is masterly, the limning of a magical world adroit, and Shepherd's drawings exquisite. But to enjoy them you need to appreciate the language (and not be too full of yourself).

I would follow Pooh with *The Wind in the Willows*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, *Stalky and Company* and both *Jungle Books*, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. At this point we reach the realm of purely adult books, of which there are thousands of excellent examples, almost none of them written recently. The young who have read the books suggested in the foregoing, and gorged indiscriminately on whatever the library offers, will be ready for other fare. Instead they watch the Disney versions—grinning, shallow, degraded.

Once short stories were everywhere—sparkling, varied, idiosyncratic, and sometimes eccentric, crafted by writers who knew what they were doing. And they were read by readers who knew what they were doing. Gone.

Poetry? Once it was vastly enjoyed by cultivated people who knew how to read it. Of course, it was produced by people who knew how to write it. Today there is almost nothing, and what there is, shouldn't be. How is it that a nation of 300 million people, with far more avenues to learning than existed in 1600, cannot belch up a single Edmund Spenser? The entire nation is literarily inferior to 30 men in the reeking nightmare that was Elizabeth's London.

America was not always so. I just ordered a collection of Dorothy Parker's poetry and short stories, chiefly for the verse. Critics say that she hasn't worn well. I suspect that the critics are idiots.

This is always a good bet. She can make the language jump through hoops, say exactly what she wants to say crisply and originally. ("What fresh hell is this?")

Even trivial literature used to be pretty good. In high school I discovered Thorne Smith's *Night Life of the Gods*. When it was written in 1931, readers were expected to recognize the play on Twilight of the Gods; it is the sort of thing that one picked up through wide and voracious reading.

Great literature *Nightlife* isn't. It is, however, light, amusing, imaginative, unpretentious, and written by a writer—an uncommon circumstance these days. He never lapses into the clanking solecisms that many professors today never lapse out of. He uses the language instead of walking over it. It is froth, but good froth. This we almost no longer have.

Is there something about modern life that makes impossible both writing and reading beyond the level one associates with drug dealers? The British once wrote graceful prose, but they are barely better than Americans now. Is it that both countries have shifted from aristocratic to proletarian ideals? That no esthetic enterprise can survive the imposition of vulgarity by television?

The best have become afraid of the worst, have lost all confidence in themselves. A couple of times in Smith's novels, a character misuses a word, whereupon another corrects him. I recall that such minor policing was common in the Fifties. The civilized seemed to regard English as public property that the well-bred should treat with respect.

Can you imagine today saying to someone, "Lying down, not laying down"? The consequence would be an explosion of anger in which all about would agree that such elitism was reprehensible. Onward, upward, and back into the trees. ■

Arts & Letters

BOOKS

[*The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas L. Friedman, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 469 pages]

Flattening Will Get You Nowhere

By James P. Pinkerton

NOBODY HERE BUT us flat people, living here in this flat world. That's the message Thomas L. Friedman wants to convey after we finish reading *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*.

It's not true, of course: the world is plenty vertical—hierarchical, bumpily uneven in the distribution of resources, power, and controlling secrets—and it's becoming more so. But Friedman has history on his side, or at least his sense of an inevitable history, derived from a perhaps surprising, albeit well-known, voice from the 19th century.

In Friedman's telling, you and me, plus blue-collar workers, Third World farmers, *New York Times* columnists, and Bill Gates, are all living in a flattened planet on which the forces of globalization are buffeting and transforming us. And, oh yes: each of us, regardless of wealth or power differentials, should do our part to accelerate the progressive rush of the future.

In his 469 pages, the three-time Pulitzer Prize winner scopes out the planet's new contours, offering this con-

sidered judgment: "Both classic economic theory and the inherent strengths of the American economy have convinced me that American individuals have nothing to worry about from a flat world—provided we roll up our sleeves." Note the jaunty "we," as in, we're all in this together, folks, here in Flatworld.

Yet for all his propagandizing for flattery, Friedman seems to spend his time in the far pavilions, atop the commanding heights. The inspiration for the book, he tells us in the first few pages—beginning a long skein of name-dropping—came from Nandan Nilekani, CEO of Infosys Technologies Limited in Bangalore. And the rest of the book features a cavalcade of corporate leaders, from Reuters to Wal-Mart to UPS to Intel to Rolls-Royce to JetBlue to Dell to eBay. In between CEO-fluffing, Friedman shares the names of favorite airlines, cool family friends, and TV networks that have paid him money.

Not surprisingly, such chumminess with chieftains has softened, not to say dulled, his critical faculties. Wal-Mart, for example, gets slapped around more in the pages of *Fortune* than in Friedman's book. Similarly, Boeing's decision to outsource aeronautical jobs to Russia is treated as unalloyed good news because, he is assured, there's a "shortage" of such engineers in the U.S. Then the unnamed honcho of a major European multinational reveals "we are a global research company now"—which revelation the *Times*-man treats as a scoop—and former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo takes Friedman aside and shares this pearl: Mexico and Latin America have "fantastic potential."

Of course, high-level hobnobbing yields up some good stuff, too. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell recalls

that when he wanted to examine old treaty texts, he simply Googled them; in other words, technology enabled him to bypass the Foggy Bottom bureaucracy. And Microsoft's Bill Gates shares a mini-insight: "When you meet Chinese politicians, they are all scientists and engineers. You can have a numeric discussion with them—you are never discussing 'give me a one-liner to embarrass [my political rivals] with.'"

Friedman has done his homework on such just-in-timely topics as how computers are made, how supply chains operate, and how browsers function. This behind-the-scenesing and inside-the-machinesing will be familiar to readers of business magazines and perhaps an issue or two of *Wired*, but Friedman wields a deft pen as he provides both anecdotes and historical context. In the '50s, he recalls, the Interstate Highway System flattened America, making it "so much easier for companies to relocate in lower-wage regions, like the South." Today infrastructural improvements are flattening the world as a whole, such that "3 billion people who had been frozen out of the field suddenly found themselves liberated to plug and play with everybody else."

One might suppose that Joseph "creative destruction" Schumpeter has been an influence on Friedman, but in fact the Austrian economist is nowhere to be found in this book. Instead, Friedman provocatively—and revealingly—gives maximum intellectual credit to an earlier German-speaker: Karl Marx.

It first occurs to the reader that Friedman is playing name-games with communist lore in chapter two, titled "The Ten Forces That Flattened the World." That label seems like an inside-joke play on John Reed's eyewitness account of the Bolshevik revolution, *Ten Days That Shook The World*. But