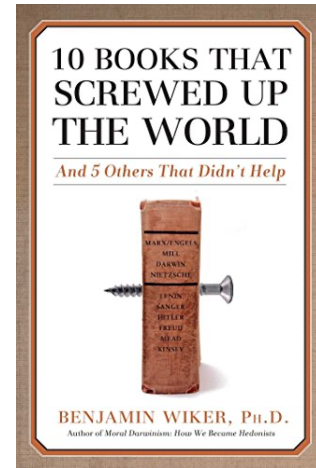


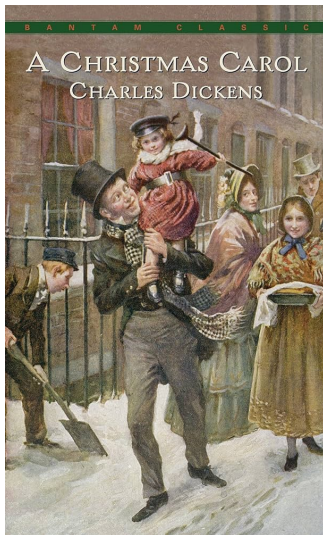
10 Books That Made Us...And 5 Others That Also Helped (Denny & Claire Hartford)

As I mentioned in a recent Book Den post (October 31), I finished a most enlightening and relevant book entitled *10 Books that Screwed Up the World: And 5 Others That Didn't Help* by Benjamin Wiker. That book easily makes my Top 10 for the year and I couldn't recommend it more highly for those who want to know more about why Western Civilization has so tragically "de-evolved" in the last century. I truly hope many of you will take the challenge and read it yourself.



But reading that book also prompted Claire and me to think about the books that had actually made the world *better* -- at least, *our world*. We decided to make it a project, one that would cause us to look back, remember, and evaluate the books that had most shaped our lives for the better. It proved to be a very worthwhile exercise for us both and we have decided to share it. We hope you find our answers of interest even as we suggest that *you* consider pondering a similar experiment. So, let's go. Aside from the Bible itself, we are going to tell you the 10 Books That Made Us...And 5 Others That Also Helped.

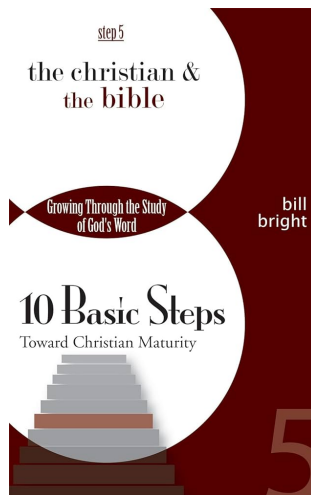
Denny's list:



1) Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. I list this first not only because it is the first serious book I can remember reading, but also because it showed me the power in spiritual conversion -- a fact that the Lord Jesus would bring to fruition many years later. Also, not to be undervalued, it was this Christmas story that introduced me to the works of Charles Dickens, the incomparable English writer of the 19th Century. But, while still in my school years, I was also quite taken with *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Oliver Twist*. Dickens would end up becoming one of my dearest literary friends in life.

2) Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. I first read this book as a high school assignment, but it turned out to have profound effects in my life. Indeed, the Lord used this troubled Russian novelist of the 19th Century to press home to my understanding the ugliness and tragedy of a life lived apart from God. I did not become a Christian from reading this book but it did produce two important effects. One, the book planted in my heart seeds of deep discontent with my philosophy of life (such as I had clumsily formulated it at the time) and two, it pointed to the person of Jesus Christ as the only source of peace and purpose.

3) Thornton Wilders's "Our Town." I read this play just prior to acting the part of Simon Stimson in the Bear Creek High School production in the fall of 1968. This bittersweet, 3-act play underscored the sad restlessness and dissatisfaction I was experiencing in those days and made me think seriously about changing direction. Now, "Our Town" didn't exactly point the way out -- that route was better illuminated by what little Bible knowledge I possessed and by the two books I mentioned earlier. However, the Lord certainly used the Wilder play to press home my moral and intellectual bankruptcy.



4) Campus Crusade for Christ's 10 Basic Steps to Christian Maturity. The most important reading *after* my conversion to Christianity (again, except for the Bible itself) would be these little study booklets produced by Crusade for fledgling believers like myself. They were really valuable to me. But for actual books, I will also mention two that I not only read with tremendous interest shortly after my conversion, but which I passed out by the dozens to kids living down in the Denver projects. Those books were *The Cross and the Switchblade* by David Wilkerson and *Run, Baby Run* by Nikki Cruz.

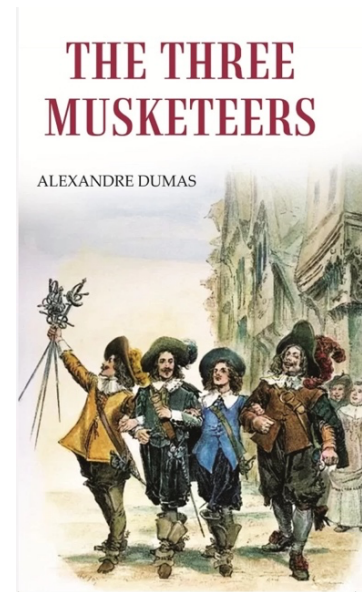
5) Harry Ironside's Commentary on the Book of Acts. After hitchhiking out of Denver early one summer morning in 1970, I ended up, by God's mysterious (yet always gracious) providence in Omaha, Nebraska. Within hours of my arrival on the downtown streets, I met another young believer who invited me to become part of the Christian Brotherhood. And, in doing so, I was quickly introduced to a book that was of critical importance in helping me deal with the crisis in theology that had largely prompted my leaving Colorado in the first place. That book was Harry Ironside's very practical *Commentary on the Book of Acts*. It provided solid teaching and corrective counsel that I sorely needed. Furthermore, it opened a whole new world for me as I discovered the richness of careful, exegetical Bible study. My theological convictions (and subsequent sanctification adventures) were wonderfully affected by this book and the rest of Ironside's commentaries too. They were then followed by a host of other Bible study materials.

6) C.S. Lewis' The Screwtape Letters. While following a course charted by the books mentioned above, I was also stimulated and delighted by reading my first C.S. Lewis book. Lewis readers will not be surprised to learn that once started with the great apologist and storyteller, I didn't stop. Immediately after *Screwtape* came *Mere Christianity*. And then, in quick succession, *Miracles*, *The Problem of Pain*, his space trilogy, *The Four Loves*, *The Great Divorce*, and so on. However, I must confess (with no small amount of embarrassment) that I didn't get round to Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* until much, much later. And, needless to say, I'm continually re-reading C.S. Lewis to this day.

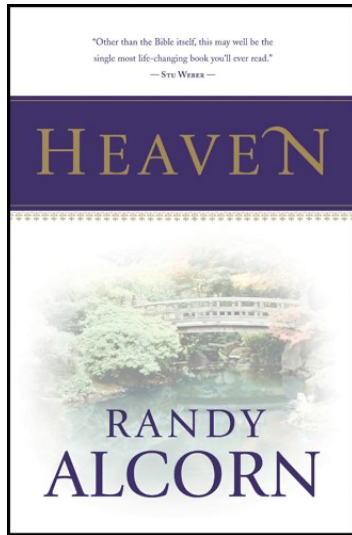
7) Francis Schaeffer's The Church at the End of the 20th Century. I discovered Francis Schaeffer in the spring of 1971 when a friend loaned me this book. I was just preparing to leave the Christian Brotherhood and it seemed like the Lord introduced me to Schaeffer to

open a significant new chapter for me...and for Claire too as were becoming closely attached to one another. (We would marry the following autumn.) I was so impressed with Francis Schaeffer after reading that first book that I took a long road trip (about 900 miles) to hear him, Edith, and other members of the L'Abri team when I learned that they were coming to a conference in Lookout Mountain, Tennessee. The Schaeffers were to soon become major influencers in our lives. Indeed, a few years later, it would be the Schaeffer books *How Should We Then Live?*, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, and *A Christian Manifesto* that would propel Claire and I into the pro-life ministries that have so completely occupied our lives for the last 43 years.

8) Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*. Listed under this particular number, I'm going to start with the two Dumas classic adventures, *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. What delight I have taken in these swashbuckling novels over the years! But I will let my number 8 also stand for the immense enjoyment, encouragement, vision-casting, character development, and spiritual inspiration the Lord has given me in the pages of a lot of other quality fiction. I mentioned the Dickens influence earlier. And then there's the whole canon of Dumas adventures. But there's also Shakespeare, Tolkien, Chesterton, Scott, and Stevenson. And can I leave out Rafael Sabatini, Jane Austen, John Buchan, Bess Streeter Aldrich, Edward L. Beach, Louisa May Alcott, Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, Jan Karon, Booth Tarkington, Edna Ferber, Harold Bell Wright, Owen Wister, James Fenimore Cooper, Anthony Hope, Baroness de Orczy, Dorothy Sayers, O Henry, James Thurber, J.M. Barrie, and yet more? Of course not. Indeed, I dare not even imagine the poverty of my life had I not been blessed with the ongoing friendship of these illuminating, enriching, inspiring storytellers.



9) Walter Lord's *Lonely Vigil: Coastwatchers of the Solomons*. Long before I earned my Masters degree in History, books like this one were important pieces of the "furniture of my mind." But since with Number 8 I've set a precedent in allowing one number to represent a whole category (and since specific titles within this genre are way too many to list), I'm merely going to mention here my favorite writers of history: Walter Lord, Samuel Elliott Morrison, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Winston Churchill, Shelby Foote, William Shirer, Antonia Fraser, Laura Hillenbrand, John Toland, David McCulloch, and Stephen Ambrose.



10) Randy Alcorn's *Heaven*. This is (again, beside the Scriptures) the book that I recommend far more than any other. It's a masterful Bible study that can not only change your understanding and yearning for heaven, it can change your day-to-day life for the better too. I have sung the praises of Randy's book to scores of people over the course of many years (Vital Signs Blog is a source for some of those reviews) so I'll merely say here that my life has been made immensely more hopeful, more joyful, and more spiritually effective for reading (and frequently *re-reading*) *Heaven* by the Director of Eternal Perspective Ministries, Randy Alcorn.

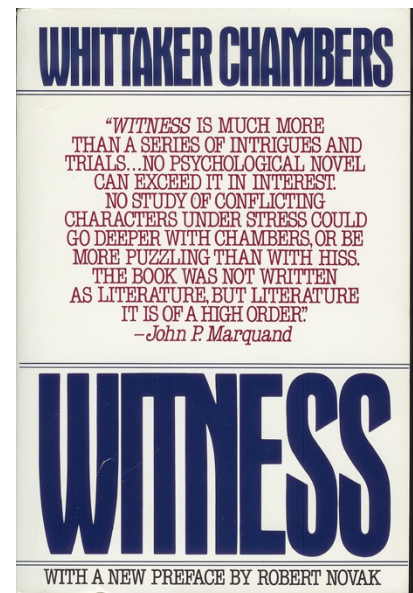
And what of the Five Others that also have had profound influence on my life?

11) Thor Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki*. It was very early in my life (5th grade, I think) that I first read this true-life story of Heyerdahl and his young friends daring to sail across the Pacific Ocean on a balsa wood raft. They took this incredible risk to prove the validity of a theory they had formed about the settlement of the Pacific islands by peoples of South America. *Kon-Tiki* wasn't only a fascinating adventure to me (though it certainly was that!), it created a yearning in my heart for a life marked by courage, vision, and significance.

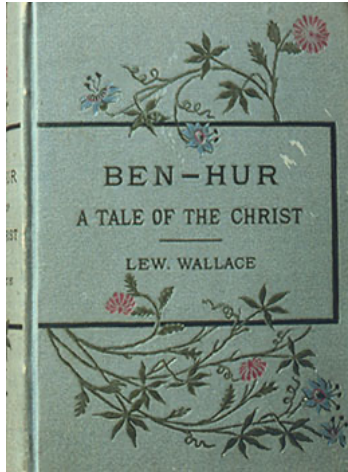
12) Whittaker Chambers' *Witness*. Until Chambers' shocking autobiography, communism in America was largely dismissed as an irrational, conspiratorial prejudice. However, this courageous "inside story" proved otherwise. *Witness* is a classic piece of American history and a tale of one man's moral courage against a whole force of wicked, deadly enemies. Plus it is also a riveting testimony of a wholehearted conversion to Christianity.

13) Arthur Conan Doyle's *Collection of Sherlock Holmes Stories*. This is another work I first read very early in my life. In fact, these stories helped me to love reading and to thereby love the stories, characters, writing skills, and moral lessons that literature opens. Reading the Holmes stories took me to another world, certainly; but they did so in a way that *my* world was made better. I still feel that way about them.

14) Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Here is another number that I'll use for a whole genre; namely, the novels, plays, poems, and stories that are too often mistakenly called "children's literature" but, as C.S. Lewis, G.K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson and so many others argue, is literature that is actually best appreciated by adult readers. That has certainly been my experience and I have established the fondest of friendships with the



characters living in the pages of such outstanding works as *The Wind in the Willows*; A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*; Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus Stories*; Michael Ende's *The Neverending Story*; J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*; Henry Williamson's *Tarka, the Otter*; Howard Pyle's *The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood*; the Brothers Grimm *Fairy Tales*; Roger L. Green's *King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table*; the boy's adventure histories of G.A. Henty, and yes, several others.

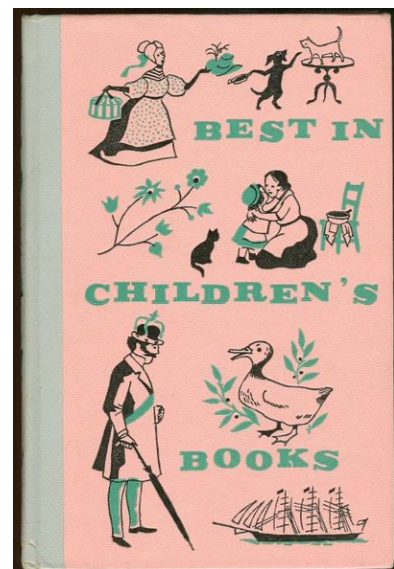


15) “One Hit Wonders.” In my final entry, I’m going to list 7 works of fiction that I dearly love but, interestingly enough, are the *only books* written by these authors that I ever re-read. They are *Ben-Hur* by General Lew Wallace, *The Book of the Dun Cow* by Walter Wangerin, *Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell, *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak, *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, and *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux.

And now, Claire’s list...

I loved reading Denny’s list...and had a thoughtful, fun time studying my own reading history in order to write it out for you. As you’ll see, I take a bit different approach. For instance, my list is more chronological and a few stories will find their way in too. This was a profitable journey for us both and we do hope we will soon be reading some of your lists too!

1) Childhood reading. Reading has been an important part of my life for as long as I can remember. As a child, for example, I loved going to the library with my own library card and checking out books. New books meant new friends to meet, new adventures to take. And at home we had our family’s copies of the Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and the Bobbsey Twins. We also had this wonderful set of “the best” children’s literature published by Nelson & Doubleday. Those books included edited versions of *Bambi*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Rip van Winkle*, *Heidi*, and many more. There was poetry there too and I’ll never forget the pleasure I had in memorizing “The Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat” by Eugene Field. It was a neat story of a fight between two stuffed animals in the middle of the night. (And, by the way, I learned later the actual title of the poem is “The Duel.”) And one more reading source from my childhood; we had a full set of Funk and Wagnall encyclopedias which gave



me many hours of looking up interesting and unusual facts about everything under the sun. But what then about books as I got older? Let's move on.

2) The Works of William Shakespeare. I was blessed to have an enthusiastic English teacher in high school who opened my eyes to Shakespeare. She also encouraged us to be diligent to “read, read, read” all kinds of literature. Thank you, Sister Armada! I'm sure your advice and example have served many of your students well. And I'm pleased to be one of them.



3) Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*. I majored in English at the University of Nebraska at Omaha with my studies primarily dealing with American Lit. So, yes; I have dutifully read a good number of books by Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Melville, Hawthorne, Twain, Faulkner, and so on. Yet none of these “curricula regulars” were ever my “go to” authors. The one exception would be Willa Cather. I enjoyed her writings very much and have continued to read her. A lot of that initial interest was due to an exceptional professor I had, Dr. Bruce Baker. He was very knowledgeable of and enthusiastic about Cather and was the person responsible for getting a whole course dedicated to her at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. After all, she was Nebraska's preeminent author but, because of prejudice against the provincials in “flyover country,” Cather hadn't been given the attention and respect her work deserved. Dr. Baker had a hand in changing that...here in Nebraska and around the country too.

By the way, it was Dr. Baker who I decided to point Denny to in the days I was trying to persuade him to go back to college. You see, in the fall of 1969, before he came to trust Christ as his Savior, Denny had dropped out of Trinidad State Junior College. And a couple of years following his conversion, he tried again by enrolling at Grace Bible College. Alas, that lasted only a semester. He had thus decided that college wasn't for him. But I really believed that if he would check out a teacher like Dr. Baker, he might change his mind. He finally agreed to sign up for one summer session, on the condition that I would no longer talk about his going to college after he finished that single course. That course I signed him up for was an American Lit. class taught by Bruce Baker. The results? Denny loved the class and ended up taking several other of the professor's courses. Furthermore, the Liberal Studies degree Denny quickly earned for his Bachelor's (magna cum laude) was a course designed by, you guessed it, Dr. Baker!

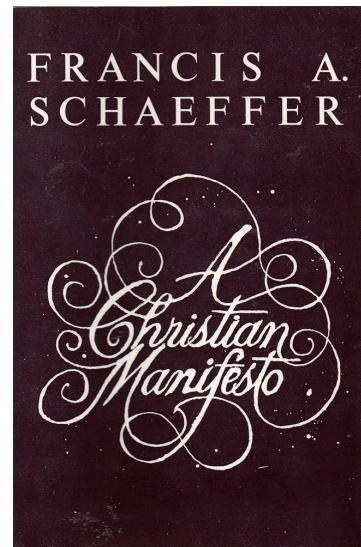
And one more note I've got to drop in here. In the last few years, Dr. Baker and his wife Karen have become dear friends of ours; first, by being fans of our “When Swing Was King” shows and second, by being beloved “members” of our Sunday afternoon church services at Aksarben Village Senior Living. Pretty cool, huh? Okay, back to my reading list.

4) A.A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh* and *The House on Pooh Corner*. Introduced to Pooh when I was a kid through those Nelson & Doubleday editions I mentioned earlier, they became even more precious to me when, early in our marriage when we couldn't afford much “outside” entertainment, Denny would read the stories to me, changing his voice to portray the different

characters. Priceless memories! Of course, there are many other classic “children’s books” that I still love to re-read but foremost among them are Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind in the Willows* and the 7 titles in C.S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*.

5) J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. While I was teaching high school English in the 1980s, I used to have the students do oral book reports on an approved book. Well, one year a young lady did her book report on *The Hobbit*. I was impressed with her report and very curious about the book itself. In talking with the student after class, I also found out about Tolkien’s remarkable *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. That summer I read, in quick succession and with absolute delight, all four of the Tolkien books. And I have re-read them many times, the latest just this summer.

6) Francis Schaeffer’s *The Christian Manifesto*. Denny had been reading Schaeffer ever since his days in the Christian Brotherhood, but it wasn’t until 1981 that I found myself reading him carefully too for it was that year that Schaeffer published *The Christian Manifesto*. That was the book which helped move us into the pro-life movement, a cause which has largely defined our lives for the last several decades. However, I should also mention that Edith Schaeffer’s books, *L’Abri*, *What Is a Family?*, and *A Way of Seeing* also were enlightening to both Denny and me, showing us how a Christian’s life needed to courageously and fully embrace truth, beauty, and loving service for others.



7) Frank Peretti’s *This Present Darkness*. I found this 1986 novel about spiritual warfare very exciting, enlightening, and thoughtful. In fact, it kind of “baptized” my imagination and heightened my understanding of not only what was at stake in the spiritual battles raging around us, but also my honored responsibilities to serve as the Lord’s ambassador in this conflict. I followed up *This Present Darkness* with *Piercing the Darkness* and *The Prophet* -- all of which were instructive and motivational. Perhaps it is here that I should mention the other books in the genre of “Christian fiction” that I have greatly appreciated. These would be Randy Alcorn’s *Safely Home* (dealing with faithfulness, persecution, heaven’s rewards, and more) and his Ollie Chandler series, *Deadline*, *Dominion*, and *Deception*. Chandler is a homicide detective, but the action and the themes go far ahead of what you might be used to in mysteries and police procedurals. Randy, a superb writer of non-fiction as well, is a master of character, plot, and spiritual lessons. I recommend his work highly to you.



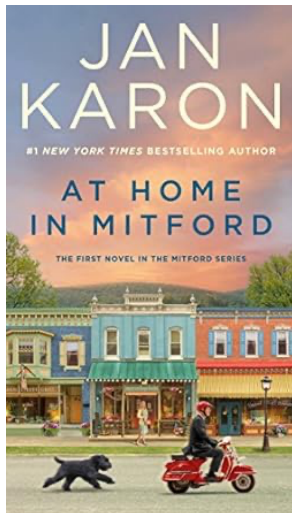
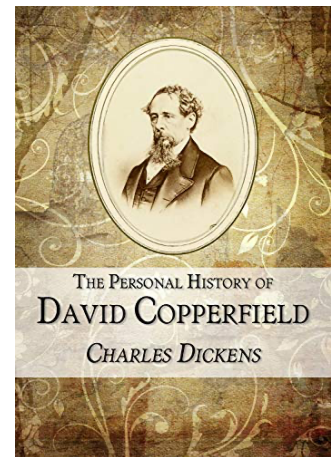
8) *The Notting Hill Napoleons*. In 1992, Denny and I wanted to start a book club which would deal exclusively with classic fiction, a group whose members would all read the same novel or play each month and then get together one evening that month to discuss it over dessert treats. We christened the club *The Notting Hill Napoleons* (after a short novel by G.K. Chesterton) and -- can you believe it? -- that club lasted for 30 years! The Napoleons were a great help to

keep me reading...and reading quality stuff. It also sharpened my thinking, improved my conversational skills, and better developed my arts in literary criticism. It makes me sad to say that the Napoleons disbanded last year, but we had lost two key members and the rest were going through changes in schedules, responsibilities, and priorities. So, yes; it was time.

As you might imagine, the Napoleon booklist was quite impressive and it provided me with motivation, accountability, and a lot of sheer joy in reading great books -- a lot of great books! Dickens. Lewis. Shakespeare. Sir Walter Scott. Cather. Hugo. Dumas. The Bronte sisters. John Buchan. Austen. And on and on. But let me slip in here a few of the authors whose work I was completely unfamiliar with before the Napoleons, but who ended up providing me a great deal of very enjoyable, profitable reading. Nevil Shute (especially *The Piped Piper* and *Ruined City*). Michael Shaara's novel of the Battle of Gettysburg (*Killer Angels*) led us into reading nearly 12-15 military novels written most ably by his son, Jeff Shaara. Reading *Three Cheers for Miss Bishop* by Bess Streeter Aldrich started me along a delightful path and she has now become one of my all-time favorites. I could name several other authors where the same kind of thing happened...but I'll stop here.

9) Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*.

As I mentioned above, Charles Dickens was one of the writers we frequently read in the book club. In fact, our November book each year was a Dickens novel...and when we had read all of them, we simply started over! But we had been fans of Dickens long before we started the Napoleons. For instance, *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* were two of the books I regularly assigned to my students when I was teaching at Bellevue East High School. And, as Denny suggested, I agree that my favorite Dickens novel is usually the one I'm currently reading. What an exquisite, incomparable talent.



10) Jan Karon's *At Home in Mitford*. The first of what would be 14 Mitford novels was published in 1994 and it was only within a couple of years that I discovered them. Wow, what pleasure and blessing these books have given me! And I've been pleased to introduce many friends and family members to Fr. Tim and all of the other funny, heartwarming, inspiring characters in these novels. They are truly among my literary treasures.

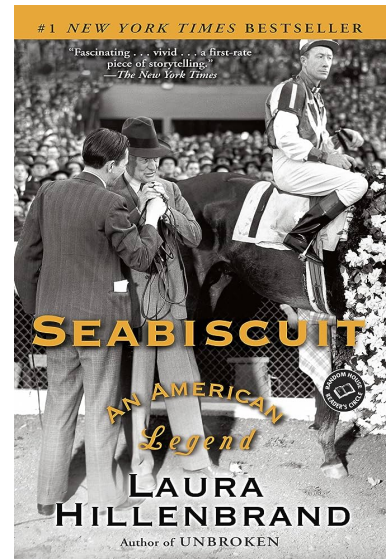
And what of the Five Others that also have had profound influence on my life?

11) Randy Alcorn's *Heaven*. I've already mentioned Randy's novels, but I would be woefully negligent if I didn't tell you that Randy's *most* important book in my life has been his thoroughly-biblical (and very exciting) study, *Heaven*. Denny and I have read this several times; Denny has taught three Sunday School series on it; and we have hosted several book discussions with friends about

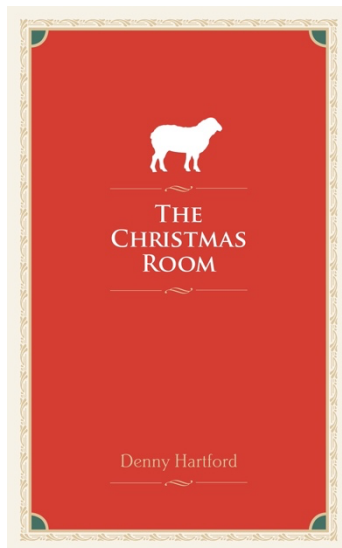
it. It's not only the best book about heaven I have ever read, it is one of the best and most inspiring Bible studies on *any* subject out there.

12) Richard Adams' *Watership Down*. A serious adventure novel with rabbits as the protagonists? That's right. And I love the novel. I also love Adam's 2nd book, *Plague Dogs*.

13) Laura Hillenbrand's *Seabiscuit*. Though Hillenbrand has only written two books (mainly because of ill health, I understand), these two are fantastic histories that are every bit as exciting and inspirational as any novel could be. Those books are *Seabiscuit* and *Unbroken*.



14) "Most Honorable Mentions." Here's a few more specific books that I feel deserving of particular attention in my list, books that are all 5-star reads that I recommend as highly as I can. *Ben-Hur* by Lew Wallace. The Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers mysteries. *The Book of the Dun Cow* by Walter Wangerin. *That Printer of Udell's* by Harold Bell Wright (a book, by the way, that deeply influenced Ronald Reagan). *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo. *The Jeweler's Shop* by Pope John Paul II (a play he wrote as a young man in occupied Poland during WWII). John Buchan's Richard Hannay thrillers. *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas.

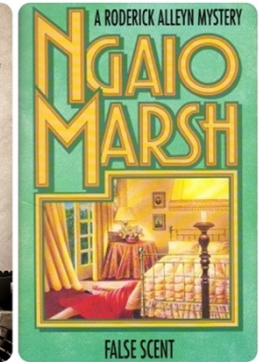
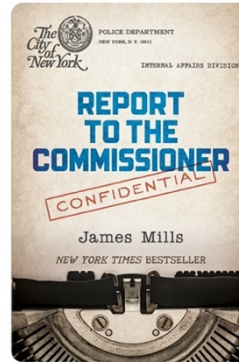
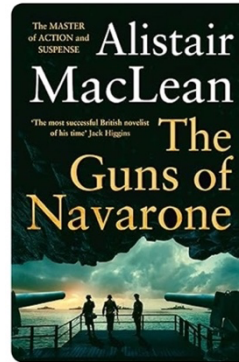


15) Denny Hartford's *The Christmas Room*. Denny's unique novel tells very touching, humorous, and spiritually challenging stories about life in a nursing home. The book shows some of the day-to-day heroes on the staff, the patience and fortitude of the residents, the different ways families interact (or not) with their loved ones, a couple of romances, the fallout from a crime as well as the surprising good news coming from a rescue, a strange mystery, and more. Oh yes; there is also this "Christmas room" that's decorated all the year round! Here's what one reviewer said about the book, "*The Christmas Room* is a book that holds your heart. Each page is full of love, compassion and joy. While the characters go through their trials and doubts -- their faith grows, as forgiveness, mercy and understanding is waiting for them if they just trust and believe. A good read from a strong Christian writer." I couldn't agree more.

So, there you go. Have we left out some of our favorite books and authors out? No doubt we have. Yet we think we've covered it pretty well, at least enough to give you a few things to think about, agree with, criticize, wonder about, and be moved to write out the list of books that have changed *your life* for the better. As Denny said, we hope to read your list very soon.

Postscript: Lest there be any misunderstanding about our “life of books,” please know that our reading over the decades has not always been of the quality stuff we have listed here. Remember, our task in this project was to mention the books that have *most influenced us* for the better. But there have been a whole gang of other books along the way: history, politics and culture, Christian theology and practical sanctification, and plenty of such light reading as Alistair MacLean, C.S. Forester, Dorothy Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, James Mills, Agatha Christie, John D. MacDonald, Donald Hamilton, Helen MacInnes, Erle Stanley Gardner, Dashiell Hammett, Eric Ambler, P.D. James, John Dickson Carr, Earl Derr Biggers, Edmund Crispin, Josephine Tey, Edgar Wallace, Daphne du Maurier, Wilkie Collins, H. Rider Haggard, Jeff Shaara, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Zane Grey, Leslie Charteris, Aldous Huxley, James Hilton, Raymond Chandler, Margery Allingham, George Orwell, Nicholas Monsarrat, Frances Hodgson Burnett, J.P. Marquand, and many others.

But, make no mistake (and I smile as I write this), reading even a Perry Mason mystery or a Wizard of Oz fairy tale is, on many fronts, preferable to watching television! Remember Groucho Marx’s sage observation, “I find television very educational. For every time someone turns on the set, I go in the other room and read a book!”



[Read more.](#)