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Don't Ask What Books Are on My Coffee Table!

Every Sunday, The New York Times asks people what they're reading. Boy, do I feel like a plebeian.

posted by John Stark, September 23, 2013 [More by this author](#)



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Thinkstock

Every Sunday I read the “By the Book” column that appears in the New York Times’s Book Review section. The one-page Q&A asks important writers and artists about their reading habits.

I’m always astonished — and intimidated — by the titles and quantity of the books the interviewees rattle off. I just hope I never get a call from the editors of the column asking what I’m reading now.

Whoever compiles the column — there’s no byline — recently asked novelist and screenwriter Michael Chabon to name the last truly great book he read. He couldn’t narrow it to just one. “If I might be permitted to count them

as a single overarching work — a great work — the five Patrick Melrose novels by the English writer Edward St. Aubyn,” he replied.

I Googled St. Aubyn. He writes about dysfunction in upper-class English families. Me, I watch *Downton Abbey*.

The last truly great book I read (at least in my opinion) was Paul Anka’s *My Way*. I couldn’t put it down. It’s a look at the dysfunctional, booze-soaked celebrities of Las Vegas.

Asked if there were any books that moved him to tears, Chabon said it was Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory*. But only, he emphasized, the first time he read it. I guess by the sixth or seventh reading he’d become hardened.

I'll Have Another Cup of Kafka

Do these “By the Book” interviewees ever read anything fun?

I would have thought sex columnist Dan Savage would have been reading *50 Shades of Grey* or Henry Miller. But he recently told the Times that he doesn’t enjoy fiction. He’s currently engrossed in dozens of books about the English Revolution, the Stuarts, James I and II and Charles I and II.

As for his summer reading, James McBride, author of *The Color of Water* and *The Good Lord Bird*, said he’d finally gotten around to William Shirer’s *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. “All 1,100 pages,” he said in his interview. “I just wish there were more.”

(MORE: In the Author's Words: Joan Silber)

Not Exactly Dr. Seuss

"What kind of books did you read growing up?" is a frequent "By the Book" interview question. When asked, Richard Dawkins, the African-born ethnologist, biologist and author, replied, "Elsbeth Huxley's *Red Strangers*, a saga sweeping through four generations of a Kikuyu family." Dawkins went on to say that he'd never read a book that so brilliantly clarified "an economy pegged to the goat standard."

I, on the other hand, read the *Dick and Jane* books as a child. They were required reading at my elementary school in the 1950s. I still have to smile when I think about the time that Puff, Jane's kitten, took a ride on the vacuum cleaner.

This for Remembrance

Jeanette Walls, who wrote *The Glass Castle*, about her horrific childhood, was the subject of a "By the Book" interview last June. It coincided with the release of her first novel, *The Silver Star*.

"Do you read a lot of memoirs?" she was asked. "I devour them," she said, before rattling off a dozen that she'd just polished off. They were all by heavy-hitting intellectuals, including a female terrorism expert who lectures at Harvard. "That's just a few, there are so many more," she added.

The last memoir I devoured was *Life Is Not a Stage* by Florence Henderson. She even signed my copy of the book. I learned a lot about the making of *The Brady Bunch*.

"What's the best book you've ever received as a gift?" Walls was asked. *Peter the Great*, by Robert Massie, she replied. If the Times were to ask me that same question, I'd have to say it was *Home Repair for Dummies*. I go back to it all the time. I particularly love the chapter, "Walkways and Patios."

(MORE: On Rereading Favorite Books)

Roxanne, Put On the Reading Light

This Sunday's "By the Book" interviewee was Sting. I'm not surprised that the musician-singer-songwriter is well read — he's a former English teacher.

But just how much of a bookworm he is blew me away. The best books he's read this year, he said, are two back-to-back volumes on Thomas Cromwell by Hilary Mantel: *Bring Up the Bodies* and *Wolf Hall*. He also loved Nathaniel Philbrick's *Bunker Hill*, about the American War of Independence. He called it "a well-researched story proving to be more nuanced and completing than a well-established myth."

"If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?" Sting was asked. "*Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius," he answered. Written between 170 and 180 A.D., the book examines stoicism and the limitations of power. Sting went on to quote from it. He didn't say whether he preferred it in its original Greek, though.

Sting, when asked what books are on his coffee table, said a new biography of Albert Camus. I interviewed Sting many years ago in his hotel suite, where a female groupie was running around in a bed sheet. I don't recall any books on the coffee table, just a vodka bottle and some Vick's NyQuil. "I'm fighting a cold," he told me, swigging from the two.

I didn't think to ask him about books. I'll know next time.

Should the Times ask me what's on my coffee table, I guess I could say, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. That sounds impressive. I don't have to tell them it's the DVD with Keira Knightly.

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