The background of the cover is a detailed line drawing of a library or bookstore. Tall bookshelves filled with books of various colors (yellow, brown, blue) line the walls. In the foreground, a plush red armchair with a light-colored cushion sits on a wooden floor. Several stacks of books are scattered around the chair. To the right of the chair, a small yellow mug with a heart on it sits on a stack of books. The title 'Book girl' is written in a large, teal, cursive font across the center. The author's name 'SARAH CLARKSON' is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font to the right of the chair. A yellow circular badge in the bottom right corner contains the text 'Includes 20+ recommended reading lists!'. At the very bottom, the text 'Foreword by SALLY CLARKSON' is written in a red, sans-serif font.

A Journey through  
the Treasures & Transforming  
Power of a Reading Life

# Book girl

SARAH  
CLARKSON

Includes 20+  
recommended  
reading lists!

Foreword by SALLY CLARKSON

# Praise for Book Girl

The book so many of us have been waiting for. Here's a collection of book lists that will nurture and nourish your own reading life as a woman. I love this book!

SARAH MACKENZIE

Author of *The Read-Aloud Family* and host of the *Read-Aloud Revival* podcast

As a fellow book girl, I delight in Sarah Clarkson's joyful compendium of suggestions and reflections for a life filled with reading. Clarkson's interleaving of personal experiences throughout *Book Girl* shows us that books have the power to transform us, to nourish us, and to sustain us; a good book can be a comfort, a challenge, or a companion for the journey. Why not join the merry company of book girls past, present, and future? The book lists, on a varied range of topics and moods, form the heart of *Book Girl*; Clarkson's warm and relaxed style and insightful comments mean that readers will find many new favorites as they peruse the pages of this charming and valuable guide.

DR. HOLLY ORDWAY

Author of *Apologetics and the Christian Imagination: An Integrated Approach to Defending the Faith*

I can't imagine a more wise and tender guide to a life of reading than Sarah Clarkson. Reading *Book Girl* feels like curling up with a cup of tea in a cozy armchair by the fire, while a soul-friend tells you passionately about her favorite books, how they've shaped her, and how they might shape you, too. My own bookshelves are about to get a whole lot more crowded.

JENNIFER TRAFTON

Author of *The Rise and Fall of Mount Majestic* and *Henry and the Chalk Dragon*

Reading is vital for a faith-filled life. From being read to in the womb all the way to her adventures in Oxford, England, Sarah Clarkson takes us on her journey of becoming a book girl. She invites fellow women to allow books to lead us through all the ups and downs of life. Through her story and her wonderfully compiled lists, you'll find encouragement to seek beauty, strength, and companionship in the books we read.

HOLLY PACKIAM

Storyformed.com

Sarah Clarkson's luminous prose incites the very wonder for which she so lovingly advocates, and her *Book Girl* is a wise and winsome guide to the reading life. Crack open the cover and prepare to embark on a lifelong adventure.

LANIER IVESTER

Writer and speaker

I expected Sarah Clarkson's *Book Girl* to be a warm, winsome eulogy to the reading life—and it absolutely is. But it is so much more! In affirming the power of books to shape our vision and our response to life, Sarah's book does exactly what she says good books will do: spark hope, kindle joy, enlarge love, deepen faith. Reading *Book Girl* revitalized not just my love of books but my love of life and my love of God. I came away from its pages with a renewed commitment to live faithfully, courageously, and joyfully right where I am.

K. C. IRETON

Author of *The Circle of Seasons* and *Anxious No More*

A Journey through  
the Treasures & Transforming  
Power of a Reading Life

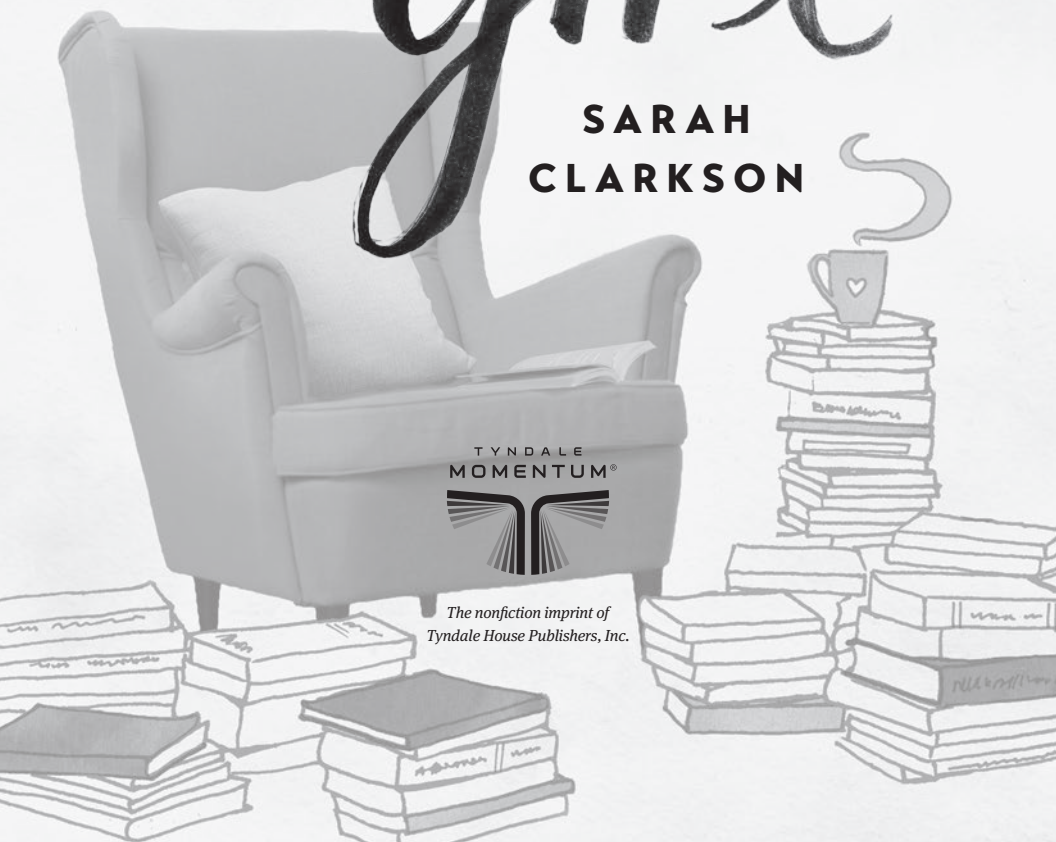
# Book girl

SARAH  
CLARKSON

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# Foreword

THERE ARE MOMENTS when it seems like the clouds of life part and the sun comes peeking through like a warm blanket of grace wrapping around my soul. It feels as if God is tenderly bending down to kiss my cheek to remind me of his affection and grace.

This sunshine invaded my life when I had my first child, Sarah.

I was not prepared to be a *proper* mother. I had never changed a diaper, had only babysat once that I remember, and was totally ill equipped to know what to do. Not being practical by nature, I awkwardly learned how to meet her basic physical needs. But I mainly dreamed of caring for my little one by attentively investing in her mind and soul.

Prior to Sarah's birth, I had lived in Vienna, surrounded by highly intellectual and educated adults from the international community of the United Nations, with diplomats, expats, and people from countless nations and every walk of life coming through the international chapel where my husband and I worked. Though I had a college degree, had studied four different languages in the countries where I'd lived, and had taken theology classes with my husband, Clay, while he was in seminary, I felt keenly the lack of a broad and well-developed education in my own life.



As I rubbed shoulders with these thoughtful and well-read people, it awakened in me a passionate longing to have a deeper well of wisdom born from reading and from the input of people wiser than myself. I yearned to know how to think about a variety of subjects; how to gain insight into history, art, theology, great literature, and philosophy; how to discover the biographies of heroes; how to pursue a soul-satisfying education. But it was only as I was exposed to this new, vast realm of ideas and inspiration that I understood I had been fed on crumbs of knowledge when there was a feast to be enjoyed.

I transferred my own longing for a broader exposure to the best authors, artists, philosophers, and theologians to Sarah and my other children who came after her. I supposed that they, too, had an intellectual potential for growing in these areas, and I made it my mission to read to them as a regular rhythm and habit of our daily lives.

Sarah was a ready companion in all things books. She was born reading, and she read more profoundly than anyone I had ever met. Her enthusiasm pushed me further in my own search for great books. Three more siblings eventually entered our reading community, and reading soon became a daily guide for my children. We journeyed through the pathways of adventuresome tales, mountains of theology, rivers of literary and artistic delight, and mysterious forests of historical odyssey. Swimming in the waters of imagination together gave us a kind of intimate bond with one another that only soul sharing can accomplish. Our souls were shaped and formed on the same stories, experiences, and messages as we grew together.

As I read to my children and watched them grow, seeking out time to spend in our treasured books, I realized that I was beginning to live into my own intellectual potential alongside them. By seeking to explain great ideas to them, my own interest in education and inspiration was satiated. As I taught them, I realized that all people have a capacity to love learning and to seek wells of knowledge, but their “mental muscles,” so to speak, must be exercised.

Now one of my greatest pleasures is to meet with Sarah for coffee and to share ideas, to know what she has been reading, to discuss what we are both learning. The deep wells of reading extensively provided her a treasure chest full of knowledge and ideas from which I could also draw as we grew through the years in our own friendship over books. I have even been known to take notes from our times together. The love for learning has only increased in my life, but it has also led me to greater satisfaction as a woman as I have lived into my educational and intellectual potential.

If you are someone who wants to grow intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and educationally, I know this book will lead you forward in these desires. Following the footsteps of others who are more well read and more broadly educated has given me a pathway to journey forward in my own life. And that is what this book will do for you. It will inspire, encourage, teach, and model the way forward as you expand your own heart, soul, and mind in the great stories and best thoughts found in books from throughout the centuries.

But the best part is that you will feel you have found a friend to guide you, one whose heart is enriched and ready to walk hand in hand with you into an exploration of unmined treasures. Sarah is a companion who will bring you just what you longed for but didn't know how to ask for. Be blessed in the reading of this book!

*Sally Clarkson*

## INTRODUCTION

# Becoming a BOOK GIRL

*The world was hers for the reading.*

BETTY SMITH, *A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN*



MY MOTHER SWEARS she read to me while I was still in the womb. I must admit, I used to chuckle at this idea, half skeptical and wholly amused at the mental image of my mother reading dramatically to her newly swelled belly. But I don't laugh anymore. For even as I type this sentence in the quiet of my tiny front room in an old Oxford row house, I'm aware of the kick of my own unborn girl-child and the picture book I have laid nearby for the read-aloud break we will take in a few minutes. It's *Miss Rumphius* this morning, the story of a little girl who discovered that one of her great tasks in life was to "make the world more beautiful" and did just that by planting lupines in rainbow hues throughout the countryside in which she dwelled.<sup>1</sup>

Words like those, and images like that, are the kind to which

I hope my daughter will waken as the story of her own life begins. In speaking them over her unborn little being, I yearn for her already to be formed by a love for the beautiful in a world that often demeans it, by a sense of her own worth and capacity, by the sort of story that will begin to show her the kind of strong, intelligent, loving woman I hope she will become. I understand now, with an ache in my heart that is both my gratitude and my own newborn hope, that my mother desired the same for me in those months before my birth. I almost laugh into the quiet as time seems to expand around me, past and present united in the stubborn and loving wish of two young mothers who hoped to give their coming daughters the beauty of the world and the strength to bear its sorrow, and knew that one of the best ways to do that was through the gift of the reading life.

It's the same gift I hope to pass on to you in the pages that follow.

### **What's So Good about Being a Book Girl?**

That is the question at the heart of this book, and my answer comes in the pages that follow as I explore the gifts I received from being raised as a book girl myself and as I tell the story of my own reading life, the one I yearn to give my daughter as she opens her story in this world. Gifts of learning and wonder, of hope renewed, of the capacity to ponder, of the will to act—these are just a few of the gifts to be explored in the chapters to come as we consider the particular goodness of being a book girl.

The reading life is like one of those potent graces bestowed by fairy godmothers on princesses in old fairy tales, the sort to help a young heroine grow in all good things, to love life in its fullness and beauty, but also to make her strong in resisting the forces of evil stepmothers or wicked fairies already gathered round her cradle. I read aloud to my belly (as did my mother before me) because

I firmly believe that books will help my daughter come into the full strength of her womanhood in all its intelligence and joy, its capacity and grace—and I'm firmly convinced they'll do the same for you.

Those gifts boil down quite quickly to three basic wishes, bright as any in a fairy story. They are the wishes, the hopes that ache in my heart as I read aloud to my little girl, the ones that echo back to me from my mother and shape my prayers for you as this book begins.

*I want your heart to be stocked with beauty.* To be a book girl is to be formed by a bone-deep knowledge that goodness lies at the heart of existence. The feel of my mother's warmth behind me as she read is one of the first things I can remember—the safe anchor of her body and the music of her read-aloud voice the ocean on which my small consciousness sailed into power through stories of music and brave maidens, feasts and castles, family and home. Before I knew how bad the world could be, I knew that it was wondrously good. I want the same for my daughter and for you. I want your imagination to be shaped by beauty, filled by characters of grace and strength, livened by a sense of wonder in the ceaseless gifts of ordinary life.

*I want you to be strong for the battle.* The future book girl of mine so merrily kicking my ribs will be born into a world where beauty is under siege and goodness is on the defensive. She will live out her story in this broken place, and sorrow will be her portion long before I'm ready for her to bear it. When my mother walked with me through the nightmares of my girlhood, the dark midnight terrors that plagued my young imagination, I'm sure she knew only bewildered grief. But she taught me how to fight the good fight and to hope with a fierce, creative will by reading me stories that came like lifelines in the night. I can picture her there in the shadows, reading of brave Lucy Pevensie or the staunch Princess Irene, who faced down terrors and fought their way back home. In my memory I see us as

held in a circle of light cast from the pages of those stories. It's a light I have found throughout my life in the narratives of great books, the one I yearn for my daughter to discover when her own battle begins, the one I hope will come to you in the stories that cram the pages ahead.

*I want you to know you're not alone.* A book girl is joined not just to one but to two great fellowships, for the reading life sets book girls in the never-ending companionship of story as well as in the company of one another. To be a book girl is to take up membership in the ranks of women who read and, by their reading, live to the brave and courageous full. I knew this deeply in the reading times I shared with my mom throughout my girlhood and in the ideals I now share with both my mom and sister as we write and chatter back and forth about the novel we've both read or the theological classic we feel will change our lives . . . again.

But I also know it in the generosity of the women who have been my mentors and friends, the ones who stepped into my seasons of discouragement or transition with a novel for the road or a quote to set me back on my feet. I yearn for my little book girl to know this rich camaraderie, to know that when she is hopeless or lonely, there is another book girl who can kindle her courage and steady her soul. I hope that she will know this in person, but if she cannot, I hope she will find it in books that stand with her as companions and friends. I long for her to discover, as I have, the voice of companionship that can reach out from the page of some great novel or memoir to help her to find her faith afresh.

### Who Is This Book For?

My desire is that you will find a unique kind of fellowship on the pages of *Book Girl*. Wherever you find yourself in the reading life, I hope that as you turn these pages, you'll discover that you aren't



alone. Do you yearn to be a book girl but don't know where to begin? Oh, you are welcome. There's a fellowship of book girls waiting for your presence, and every page here is my way of passing along the gift of reading that I received by pure grace. I can't wait to set it in your hands. Are you a book girl who struggles to find the time to read? Goodness, my friend, we all understand that dilemma in this busy world. Were you once a book girl but seem to have lost your reading stride somewhere along the way? I hope you will remember afresh the joy and wisdom that wait to form you in the books that follow. Do you struggle with loneliness, do you yearn for a beauty you can barely describe, do you hope for friendship, or do you just need some courage to keep fighting the small battles of the everyday? Then pull up a chair, brew a cup of tea, and join the fellowship here as we read our way back to beauty and courage, to laughter and strength, to life in its fullest grace.

### **In a World Full of Books, Why Read This One?**

I'd argue that you should read this book because it celebrates not just the gifts of the reading life but also the rich life of the reading woman, her particular experience and journey, and the wise and joyous fellowship that grows between women who undertake that reading adventure together. This isn't a textbook or a how-to for quick education or a tome on the classics. This is a book that explores in memoir and story what it means to be a book girl, for story to suffuse and shape a woman's experience, for books to walk with her as she navigates the varied seasons of her life. All the chapters and book lists are themed around spiritual or experiential seasons, shaped to encourage and companion the book girl who reads them in regaining strength and vision for her own story.

*Book Girl* is also my witness to the fact that the reading life is a gift, one I received largely from the wise women in my life whose

generosity was expressed in the sharing of the books that taught them to live with humor, humility, and grace. In one of my favorite short stories, “A Jonquil for Mary Penn” by Wendell Berry, there is a beautiful scene that describes “the dance of women laughing,” and that image came to my mind countless times as I considered what I wanted to create and offer in this book.

The scene comes near the end of a tale about a young, newly married girl who finds herself woefully underprepared for the farming life to which her marriage has brought her. One winter day she finds herself sick and despairing. She makes it through her chores and crawls straight back, chilled, into bed. But she wakes to warmth—to the creak of a rocking chair, a fire kindled, light streaming in through clean windows. Mary, in a keen, grateful moment, knows that she has been noticed and cared for in her extremity by one of the local women who have claimed and taught her, slowly weaving her into their fellowship. She lies there in bed and remembers the way these women have taught her not only their tricks of gardening and farming but their earthy good humor, their tough grace, their will to endure. The passage describing one such memory is rich in hilarity—how one of them got tangled up in a wire fence and began to chuckle at her own clumsiness, and how they all joined in:

There on the ridgetop in the low sunlight they danced  
the dance of women laughing, bending and straightening,  
raising and lowering their hands, swaying and stepping with  
their heads back.

What that scene evokes for me is the vibrant, joyous fellowship of women who help each other to that fullness of self, skill, and insight that is the richest gift of friendship. That is what I hope *Book Girl* offers as well. This book is about the dance and joy of women

reading, an invitation to that wise laughter, to the grace known by all the book girls of the world who live by the delighted conviction that reading is a vital ingredient in a woman's full engagement with her faith, her creativity, and her capacity to grow in knowledge and love throughout each season of her life.

### **How Should This Book Be Used?**

Consider this book a companion, meant to come alongside you wherever you are in your journey as a book girl. If you are just delving into the reading life and are in need of an overarching vision for what it means to be a reader, you might enjoy reading straight through, exploring each chapter and list as an introduction and an invitation. The following two chapters are especially crafted to be a more practical opening to the reading life, with suggestions on how to begin, how to form reading habits, and how to think about book selection.

But *Book Girl* is meant to last you beyond a first read. By theming the chapters and their accompanying lists to different seasons of experience or growth, I hope you will find this a continuing resource. To that end, and particularly if you are a seasoned reader, I'd say dive straight in and read the sections that speak to you in your particular season of life or describe the sorts of books you are hungry to read in your current phase of exploration.

### **How This Book (and This Book Girl) Came to Be**

With a mother who read to me in the womb, I really couldn't escape engagement with the written word. I loved books from little girlhood, especially stories that fired up my imagination and widened the horizons of what I could dream or hope to become. I grew up in a home crammed with books, in a family who lived by the rhythm of reading—for spiritual sustenance in the morning, for learning or

imagination during the day, for laughter and fellowship in the long, starlit evenings. We spoke the language of story to each other, dreaming up adventures like Frodo, wanting to be brave like Davy Balfour, each of us aware of our own lives as stories just beginning. Reading, I realize now, was one of our prime ways of living and loving to the full.

But it wasn't until I was in my twenties, sitting in a conference on modern culture, that I realized how great a gift this reading life was, how purposefully it had been chosen as a heritage for me. I heard a talk on the decline of reading in contemporary life, especially for children, and it brought me to a sudden epiphany. I can still recall my deep and honestly surprised sense of wonder at having been raised to be a reader, at the gift and intention of my parents' investment in books. I sat there in the old church conference hall, sifting through my childhood as I began to examine the way stories had formed my sense of self, the way my parents had used literature to widen my concept of what was possible and to shape my ideas of the good, true, and beautiful.

That was a moment of catalyst for me—the instant in which I took up the identity of a book girl because I realized that the reading life was a gift, one I, too, had the power to give. I left that room determined to understand more about the power of reading, and that led to a decade of research, speaking, and writing about the powerful gift parents can give their children through a childhood formed by great books. I stumbled into full-time work in reading out of sheer enthusiasm, setting studies and other pursuits aside as I researched the way reading expands the whole being of a child. I spoke at parenting events, wrote a guide to children's literature (*Read for the Heart*), then another book (*Caught Up in a Story*) as I began to think specifically about what it means for a child to be “storyformed.” My passion for reading was such that I wanted to hand out books to children on the street!

But my own reading adventures were just beginning, and several

years ago I found myself not only about to start undergraduate study at the age of thirty but about to realize my dream of becoming a student at Oxford, a desire I'd carried ever since my teenage immersion in the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and the rest of the famed Inklings fellowship. I went to England to do a year of theology as a sort of curiosity, a thirtieth-birthday adventure, and then I fell in love with the subject and decided to stay three years, unexpectedly mesmerized by the study of doctrine as I delved into the core tenets of my faith. I also fell in love with Thomas, my adorable Dutch husband, and before my degree was completed, we'd married, moved permanently to the UK, outfitted our first house, and discovered that we were expecting a baby.

As a student, I was immersed in the kind of reading that challenged my whole view of the world, but at the same time gave me a renewed sense of myself as an agent, someone with the power to learn, to discern, to grow, to create. I had been teaching parents about the power of reading to their children for years, but my experience as a student renewed my own identity as a learner. As I read, I saw how deeply I was being formed in my spiritual life, my sense of self, my sense of purpose. The power that came to me both as a reader and as a woman was immense as I discovered my capacity to wrestle well with the doubts and questions I'd always carried about my faith, to face the countless changes that came with marriage and an international move with faithfulness and courage, and to articulate the truth I was discovering to others.

I did all this in the marvelous company of other women who were also avid readers, and of fellow students and dear friends who balanced their lives as learners with their identities as wives, mothers, and teachers. I did this in community with my tutor and mentor, Liz, whose quiet authority and encouragement empowered me to explore; with my sister Joy, also a student, as we wrestled with questions of femininity, theology, and culture together; and with my mother, the

first woman who taught me what it means to act in courageous discovery. When my studies finally drew to an end and my mind turned toward the messages burning in my heart, the ideas that had grown in my imagination throughout those intensely formative years, I realized that one of the first things I wanted to write was a book on the gift and grace and radiant power of being a woman who reads.

The idea for *Book Girl* came to me on an autumn afternoon as I sat in my chilly little Oxford living room, the one crammed with Thomas's and my combined libraries (the first thing we bought as a married couple were five extended-height bookshelves), and began to dream. What if I could write a book for other women that would guide them into the same kind of discovery and power that I had experienced afresh at Oxford? What if the gift of a reading life was available to every woman, something as vital for mothers as for their children? What if I could write specifically to women, exploring the way reading can shape and enrich every season of a woman's experience? With those questions, *Book Girl* began.

Now, over a year later, I sit in that same small living room. The book is complete, a manuscript that has grown alongside my belly as my own little book-girl-to-be has kept me company through all the months of writing. As I contemplate the opening of my little one's story, glancing at the pile of picture books I've set ready for her arrival, my eye is caught by a particularly tattered old book, one of the few I've taken the trouble to cart over the ocean from Colorado because it was one of the first my mother read aloud to me. I flip through the pages, savoring the faded illustrations, remembering the cadence of her voice pronouncing the simple, lovely text, pointing out this detail or that tiny beauty on each page. Through the reading life, my mother yearned to give me, in a sense, the whole world. She wanted to outfit her little girl with a wild imagination, a strong will to discover, a curiosity about the world, and the spunk to explore it. My heart soars with thanks . . . and excitement.



SARAH CLARKSON

Now it's my chance to give that gift. It's the one I'm about to give my daughter, the same one I hope you'll discover in the pages of this book.

So please, my friends, join me in living the gift of becoming a book girl.

*Sarah Clarkson*  
SPRING 2018



## CHAPTER 1

# On the Crafting of BOOK LISTS

How to Set a Course of Reading  
through the Ocean of Endless Books

*Why are we reading, if not in hope of beauty laid  
bare, life heightened and its deepest mystery probed?*

ANNIE DILLARD, *THE WRITING LIFE*



"OF MAKING MANY BOOKS there is no end," says the rather jaded writer of Ecclesiastes. Nor of the making of book lists, says this slightly wild-eyed but altogether idealistic writer. I still remember when a teenage friend and I were hosted overnight by a family in Boston during a history field trip. The mother asked me to jot down a few of my favorite children's books, so I curled on the couch and set to it as the adults packed picnics and snacks. The house grew curiously quiet (considering the combined presence of twelve children), but I was immersed, culling my best-loved stories from memory until I felt a tap on my arm.

"Sarah," said my bosom friend, Katrina, "it's time to go, and—" she peered over my shoulder before looking at me with a huge roll of her eyes—"thirty-five titles is more than enough. Good grief."

We both should have known my future would involve book lists.

The fact is, I can't keep quiet about a book I love. I want people to understand why this novel or that bit of theology can change the *whole way they see life*. I spent ten years reading classic literature and children's stories before I ever got around to starting a degree in theology (I like to say I took at least a dozen gap years), but once I did, I couldn't stop seeing connections between fairy tales and biblical narrative, doctrine and Victorian novels. I dragged my favorite works of fiction into every theological essay I could. I think I have become known as a bit of a Wendell Berry fanatic here in Oxford, because I've quoted him in essays on the Incarnation, argued against his being an anarchist with my college principal, and made my college small group read his poetry aloud. One of the best bookish compliments I've ever received came when a priest who has been mentor, theological teacher, and marriage counselor to Thomas and me asked for a

### Katrina Jones

Katrina has known me since I was eleven years old, and we have been reading novels together (or recommending them to each other), writing letters (we probably number in the thousands by now), and adventuring like good book girls ever since. She is my kindred spirit, my very old and dearly beloved friend, and I couldn't have a book about women readers without a list from her.

#### *My Favorite Books, in No Particular Order (Except the First Three)*

- *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo
- *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë
- *Redeeming Love* by Francine Rivers
- *The Awakening of Miss Prim* by Natalia Sanmartin Fenollera
- *True Grit* by Charles Portis (I was totally surprised by how much I loved this one. It's not necessary to love Westerns at all to appreciate it—it's just a great story of a tough little girl.)
- *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
- *Cranford* by Elizabeth Gaskell
- *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis
- *The Heaven Tree* trilogy by Edith Pargeter



list of novels to take on a spiritual retreat. We showed up at his door with ten possibilities because I couldn't choose just a few.

The thing about my book lists is that they are driven by love—for the story or kernel of truth that lies hidden in the heart of what is written and for the person in whose hands I can't wait to place the book because I honestly believe it will widen and enrich their life. And that's the first thing I want you to know as we open this discussion on the crafting of book lists. The book lists here are formed by love.

The problem, though, is that there really is no end to the number of book lists I could make, the number of absolute favorite titles I want to review in detail, the books I haven't yet had time to read, and the ones I've heard are wondrous. During the months of writing this book, I frantically read as many new books as I could, afraid to miss that one great title or be "behind" on a contemporary classic. I finally had to take a deep breath and remind myself that I have to begin exactly where I am, with the riches I've culled as a reader up to this point in my life.

So before you dive into the lists ahead, a few brief thoughts. First, on *selection*. It's pretty straightforward: I list what I love. Then, *organization*: in other words, how I've arranged these potentially unwieldy lists of beloved titles so that you will know exactly where to go, depending on what kind of book you want to read. Finally, *content*, in which I will briefly discuss the difficult and nuanced practice of discernment and its role in helping me to evaluate the literary quality and worldview of the books I've chosen.

## Selection

I can't say it often enough: this book is not meant to be a be-all, end-all list of every modern book you should read or the classics you should cover before death. This is *not* a comprehensive guide to literature. (For that, take a look at the highly ambitious recommended

reading list compiled by Mortimer Adler and thank your lucky stars I'll never be as well read as he is.<sup>1</sup> And at least I'm not insisting you read Thucydides.)

Rather, my collective book list is one you could consider a story—a history by book recommendation; a living, delighted record of the books that have most kindled me to life in heart, mind, and soul. The selection process for the lists that follow is pretty basic: every one is a book I have loved. These are the books I press into the hands of my nearest and dearest, the titles I carefully select when those I love are in need of encouragement or freshened vision or comfort.

But I am only one reader who has happened upon a certain stream of books in the great ocean of the written word. The book lists that follow are thus highly individual, even eccentric at points. Of course, I've tried to read widely, dip into the classics, tour contemporary stories, taste some poetry, explore the paths of theology. I honestly think that if you read every title in this book, you'd have a rich exposure to some of the best writers around. But I know I have missed a lot as well. I know some of what I love will resonate with you and some just won't.

My goal in sharing the following lists is to simply open the reading life a little wider to you, set you on your feet, and launch you on your own journey of exploration. "Way leads on to way," wrote the poet Robert Frost, and I hope that you'll discover that book leads on to book and that the titles in these lists will lead you beyond, into the book lists of other writers and the best beloveds of other friends.

## Organization

Each chapter is themed around a gift or grace that comes to a book girl through the reading life. The lists that follow are crafted to follow that theme, introducing you to the books that embody and continue the qualities discussed in the chapter. This book is structured



specifically to address the different seasons of reading and experiences in the life of a book girl, organized in such a way that you can dip into this chapter or that list and find the resources you need in that particular phase. The lists are shaped to address different needs, varied amounts of time or attention, and different seasons of learning and growth. If you're a mother of toddlers, I'm guessing your reading needs might run toward a restorative novel, while if you're a student in a season of discovery, you'll find the tougher theological titles or cultural commentary to be the meat you need. The lists and chapters are individual, meant to meet you in these varied seasons.

These selections reflect my own reading experience, my deep sense of books as companions that come alongside me to help me to be faithful wherever they find me. During my twenties, during many long, lonely hours, I discovered classic writers on prayer and spiritual formation and spent hours in their brisk and convicting company. At the moment, as I sit here pregnant and overwhelmed by daily life, I doubt I could read one of them without feeling frustrated. Instead, it's a novel I crave, one that helps me to reconnect to ordinary life as a gift and a wonder.

In theming the chapters and lists that follow, I've tried to create the resources and stories I would want to discover in my own various stages of life. My hope for you as a reader is that you will encounter this book as an adaptable companion and resource through many seasons.

## Content

### *Literary Quality*

The easiest way to understand what makes a book excellent is simply to read good books. Read a short story by Wendell Berry, dip into George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, throw in a snippet of Narnia and a William Wordsworth poem, and you will be well on your way to

discerning, even intuitively, what makes writing *good*. Along with C. S. Lewis, I am not particularly interested in the “chronological snobbery” that prizes writing according to what is popular in a particular age. And like Lewis, I think children’s books, mysteries, classics, and contemporary fiction can be excellent, but all of them should share a few basic qualities, ideas for you to consider in forming your own idea of what makes for literary quality:

- *High quality of language*. A good book wields language with skill and insight, using words that broaden your experience of the world; that help you to see in a fresh way; that bring a person, a landscape, or a history to life. Good writers also have a certain degree of particularity in the words they choose. As Mark Twain said, “The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—’tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.”<sup>2</sup>

- *Showing, not telling*. It’s probably the first thing you’ll be told to do in a beginning creative writing class, but it’s vital, the thing great writers do without even thinking about it. An author who *shows* sets you as a reader in the scene, immersing you in the scents and sights, feelings and emotions of the setting. To tell is simply to relate facts; to show is to place a reader in a world.

- *Concision*. With all this praise for good words and evocative descriptions, you might think good novels have to be hundreds of pages. In fact, some of the best novels are brief. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a fairly short story that manages to communicate the profound racial tension and moral dilemmas dividing a small Southern town, but all of it is told through the eyes and vocabulary of a child (though Scout is probably a wordier little girl than most!). Good writing is taut. It doesn’t waste words; it puts them to swift, disciplined work.

- *Humanity (the particular and the universal)*. By which I mean the capacity of a book to realistically describe the human experience on the level of the individual—whether Potok’s depiction of a Hasidic Jewish boy or Eliot’s depiction of a lonely English woman in the Victorian era who is caught in a difficult marriage—and through that depiction to say something universally true about what it means to be human, to suffer, to hope, to love, to work. A good book should ring true to human experience, regardless of character or setting.

Or, in C. S. Lewis’s loving description: “Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. . . . In reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Worldview*

The first real doctrine essay I wrote at Oxford was on the Incarnation. I was asked to outline why Christ’s human life was as important as his death. Intuitively, I understood that it was pretty radical that God took flesh at a certain point in space and time, but I struggled to get the abstract theological points straight in my head until I remembered a particular character from a Wendell Berry novel. It all came clear when I revisited Berry’s tale of Nathan Coulter, a Kentucky farmer and war veteran. His experiences left him horrified at the way people and land became nameless, depersonalized, and lost in the face of violence, good only for destruction. Berry’s novel recounts the way Nathan came home determined to live a life rooted in love, one opposite to war, in which he would care for the named and known people in his place on earth, tending his farm, committed to his

marriage and community, faithful in the smallest, local particulars of everyday existence. As his wife, Hannah, puts it, “It is by the place we’ve got, and our love for it and our keeping of it, that this world is joined to Heaven.”<sup>4</sup>

In Nathan’s story I recognized an incarnational, Christ-shaped love. He helped me to understand that the Incarnation means that God himself came into a particular corner of the war-torn universe to embody a life that is the opposite of war and death; to name, know, and love each human being into redemption. The Word who spoke everything into being became flesh in the squirming, little baby Jesus, asleep in the musty hay of a Bethlehem manger. Before Jesus died, he lived, and in doing so, he started the story of humanity afresh as his perfect, faithful, loving life became the ground of renewal for the whole world.

I wrote the rest of that paper in a blaze of inspiration, delighted by the way a story I loved made theology clearer to me. But that was only the first of many such instances. The more I studied doctrine, the more I realized that the great books I’d been reading all my life had already been teaching me to think about the ultimate questions at the heart of theological study. In *The Lord of the Rings*, I had already learned to consider what it means to be an agent responsible for my actions. *Middlemarch* taught me about what real compassion might mean. *A Wrinkle in Time* challenged me to consider what love really is . . . and isn’t.

The great stories I have read have impacted my spiritual and moral development more than almost anything else. Next to Scripture and the influence of my parents, great books have formed my worldview, developed my moral imagination, and shaped my idea of virtue. But I think this is true of most human lives, whether we get our stories from great books, from other people, or from TV sitcoms. Stories shape our existence because we recognize in a deep part of ourselves that life itself is a story. The tale of the world opens with a sort of

divine “once upon a time,” or “in the beginning.” Much of Scripture is narrative, and the Gospels are crammed full of the parables Jesus told to announce and explain the coming of his Kingdom. The gospel itself comes to us in narrative form, and one of its great tenets is that we have the chance to join the story of the Kingdom come in this world, to be agents in the ongoing story of redemption, what Rowan Williams calls the “freedom of a sort of *authorship*.”<sup>5</sup>

To read a story is to be shaped in the very depths of one’s soul. Because of this power, this grace given by great books, I’ve often had to ask the question “What makes a book acceptable for a Christian reader?” Because stories engage my imagination and heart on a deep level, I am aware of the fact that what I encounter on their pages will teach me how to see the world, and this is why I’ve had to learn to practice discernment. As you explore the vast realm of books available today, you might have to ask, as I have, where we draw the line on the inclusion of sex or violence or “bad language” in a story. How deeply should we delve into worldviews that run contrary to what we believe? What does it mean to read faithfully?

First, let’s briefly consider the cultivation of discernment, the means by which we nourish our inner capacity to love what is good and hate what is evil, to know when evil is presented to us in whatever form. The temptation here would be to create a list of rules by which each piece of reading could be evaluated, but I think this is both unhelpful and, in the long term, destructive. Discernment has far less to do with creating an outward legalism than it does with cultivating our innermost hearts. Real discernment, I believe, springs from a heart so nourished by the true, the good, and the beautiful that what is evil simply cannot find room to root.

In my earlier book on children’s literature, *Caught Up in a Story*, I explore the difficult question concerning the age at which children can safely be exposed to evil, suffering, or darkness in the world of literature. While I agree with Chesterton that “fairytale do not give

the child the idea of the evil or the ugly; that is in the child already, because it is in the world already,”<sup>6</sup> I think the question we really should be asking is not so much “When do I expose my children to darkness?” as “Have I exposed them to light?” My contention is that in order for children to cope with evil, they need a bone-deep knowledge of what is good. Like the heroes and heroines in fairy tales, they need stories that begin in a powerful picture of joy. They need minds stocked with the imagery of love, beauty, laughter, and song before they can have the necessary hope to shield them in their battle against sin and evil.

I think the same idea applies to us as adults as we evaluate the content of the books we read. Read what is good, cram your imagination with nuanced characters and truth-telling authors, and you will know how to handle books that have questionable content. If you read Goudge and Tolkien and Chaim Potok and Chesterton, you will be equipped to evaluate a just-released novel that deals with more common modern discussions of sex or an ambiguous worldview. Because the soil of your imagination is rich in what is good, you will know how to deal with what isn’t.

Now let us briefly turn to the books themselves.

As a Christian who seeks to live out my faith in every area of my life and who sees reading as a formative force to that faith, I have often asked myself, *What makes a book acceptable for me as a Christian reader?* What I have found in my own process of discernment is that I need to ask what a book communicates as a whole rather than if it explains or mentions the Christian message. What does the book seek to have me believe through the development of its characters, in their choices, in the consequences that follow, and in the way it frames belief? Does it portray the human capacity for choice? Does it deal with the reality of sin? Does it affirm what is beautiful and kind? Does it value human life?

The quality of a book’s worldview cannot be measured by the



number of times the name Jesus is mentioned or Scripture is quoted. We get confused at times, I think, in contemporary Christianity and particularly in evangelical culture about the difference between Christian form and Christian vocabulary. A novel can be crammed with “Christianese,” using recognizably Christian phrases but communicating in form and plot what amounts to a secular story.

Consider: *Anna Karenina* is a book about an adulterous affair, while your local bookstore may have a half dozen Christian romance novels with couples who get married and perhaps share nary a kiss until their wedding day. The dialogue of the latter may well include verses straight out of the Bible, while the former revolves round the decadence of Russian high society and its many gossipy intrigues. But many “Christian” romance novels have stories based far more on a secular model of romance and self-fulfillment, where emotion is valued as truth, where trouble miraculously disappears and the ultimate goals of ease and happiness are reached by the novel’s close. *Anna Karenina*, on the other hand, wrestles with the desires of the heart and the obligations of integrity; it shows us what it really looks like to “listen to your heart” and the consequences of putting self-fulfillment above other people, above morality, even above God. *Anna Karenina* tells us the truth about the world and confronts us with the realities both of desire and of choice in our own lives, and for this reason, I consider it a novel that has much truth to impart to every Christian.

This is not to say that all Christian romantic stories are lacking in content—far from it! (I cut my teeth on Janette Oke.) But it is to say that our standard for what makes something an acceptable book for a Christian reader must be one that looks to the truth the book is telling about the human condition, the possibility of redemption, and the reality of grace, whether that book is a romance novel, a murder mystery, a picture book, or a tragedy. This applies to the author as well. George Eliot is one of my favorite writers, an author I turn to for wisdom and moral courage and for her portrayal of profound,

active compassion. She is well known for her impassioned rejection of the Christian faith, but her novels reflect a call to Christ-shaped mercy, a value for human life and dignity, and an awareness of mystery that I have rarely found equaled in an explicitly Christian novel. The capacity to see and portray what is true is part of what it means to be made in the image of God, something as true for those authors who struggle with faith as those who embrace it.

However, this is also not to say that anything goes when it comes to moral or graphic content as long as the book speaks spiritual truth. I take seriously the Philippians exhortation to dwell on what is excellent, lovely, of good repute. I don't think this limits me to kittens and flowers, but I do think it means that I have to discipline my imagination and keep myself from temptation to paths that would lead me away from holiness. Here again we return to the theme of discernment—an inward standard rather than an outward rule. I have a vivid imagination and learned very early that I cannot expose myself to graphic written descriptions of violence or sex, so I just don't read books with that kind of content. (To be frank, I think there are few who can do so without a sense of unease.) But some of my favorite contemporary novels do contain moderate scenes of both as integral elements to their plots. My evaluation usually runs somewhat toward the model of the biblical narrative—an epic crammed with all sorts of human depravity, sexual desire, and wanton violence—in which the discussion and account of evil is frank but there is no detailed soak in the finer points of egregious sin.

If you read *The Brothers Karamazov*, well, you'll encounter a lot of sexual depravity. If you read *Island of the World*, one of the most remarkable contemporary novels I've encountered, you'll have to face the wanton brutality of concentration camps and the senseless violence that can be inflicted even on children. But neither of these books presents the evil in which they necessarily deal in a way that glorifies it or makes it a graphic memory. You may love these books

as I do, or you may decide to put them away. That depends on your heart, your walk with the Holy Spirit, and the nourished soil of your own discerning imagination.

## The Art of Discernment

Discernment really is an art—a skill we learn in the doing, something we gain confidence in through practice. In that sense, it's a forward journey, a habit we learn in the midst of reading, not a list we make before we start. If it still seems overwhelming at times to know how to choose the good and beautiful and best from the plethora of books out there, I find that a final question often helps me to come to a conclusion: *What is it I hope to become?*

My parents talked a lot about appetites and reading when I was a little girl. At the time, I usually associated this with the fact that they wouldn't let me read straight through the fifty-eight available Nancy Drew girl detective titles. I was forced (I write this tongue in cheek) to read a good children's novel, a piece of science or poetry, a book of history, and usually a biography before I could return to the next Nancy Drew. What my parents understood was that my mind and desires would be powerfully formed by what I read. They wanted me to have a hunger for good literature, for deep ideas and crafted words and the nuance and adventure of history. They wanted me to encounter characters who rang true to real life and challenged my decisions, who helped me to imagine what I might create or attempt or love. Of course, fun and relaxation were part of it (and oh, I did indeed make it through all fifty-eight Nancy Drews), but they weren't the first or most formative force in my reading.

As an adult, I'm profoundly grateful for the way my reading desires were set as a child; I'm also keenly aware that I'm now the one in charge of my own development. I know that the books I read deeply shape the person I am becoming day by day. When I come to a

dilemma of discernment, I often find that if I examine what the book produces in me—in my emotions, my imagination, my desires, my sense of what is real or true—I can quickly identify whether the book is one I want to continue. In his fascinating sermon “The Weight of Glory,” C. S. Lewis writes that we are all helping each other to grow, day by day, into either the divine beauty that reflects the fullness for which we were created or a corrupted self that would shock us if we could see the end result. I try to choose the books that help me toward glory.<sup>7</sup>