

Sunday, January 6, 2008

Praised be Stinky Cheese Man, Lao Tzu, and Lewis Porter.

Â Â Image from Library of Congress's website.Â Growing up, I did not have cable television, iPods, or YouTube competing with my reading time. Particularly when I was a public defender lawyer (literacy problems make a person less attractive to employers), I have had my share of clients who read and write well below their age level. Â Reading is power. If the story is true, Mao knew that, and -- according to a high school social studies teacher -- arranged for his marching revolutionary soldiers each to have a different Chinese character on his back. By switching the marching positions of the soldiers periodically, the story goes, after many months the soldiers became more literate, having learned the characters painted on the backs of their fellow soldiers ahead of them. Â In elementary school, my favorite reading material was Mad Magazine, Mad books, and comics of the horror, mystery, and strange variety. Today, one of my favorite children's writers is Dav Pilkey, the reclusive writer of the irreverent and often gross Captain UnderpantsÂ series. Also intriguing to me is Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid TalesÂ by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith. My twenty-one-month-old son's favorite is The Monster Who Ate My Peas, which at a toddler's level might just be a hilarious story of a putrid monster who eats children's disgusting dinner food for them at increasingly heavy prices ("Give me your dog, and I'll eat your peas" becomes too high a price for the story's hero),Â and at another level introduces themÂ to the real world ofÂ amoralÂ Eddie Haskell.Â It goes without saying that people will read more when they find material that fascinates them. Enter the Library of Congress's first Ambassador for Young People's Literature -- none other than Stinky Cheese Man's Jon Scieszka, who recognizes this truism thusly: "Parents and teachers ... need to help boysÂ [Scieszka believes boys have a lower interest in reading because of the typeÂ ofÂ reading material thrust on them] 'expand their notion of what reading is' by encouraging them to read 'nonfiction, science fiction, graphic novels' or whatever it takes to interest them. 'They want to read about wrestling and cars,' he said, but the message they get is, 'Oh, no, you have to readÂ Little House on the Prairie.'"Â One problem some children might have in learning to love to read is that, after all their required school reading and other school assignments, they may see more reading as drudgery rather than as a joy. This makes it all the more important for them to find writings they love. Sometimes a greater interest in reading is sparked by having friends with whom to discuss particular mutually inspiring writings.Â Â As for me, we recently installed a huge bookcase in our home, and have filled it with great volumes that have been sitting around and that we have acquired at a more accelerated rate from new and used bookstores. My personal shelves include books by Ram Dass, books by and about American Indians, Poe's complete writings, French-language writers from Louisiana and Canada, the Dalai Lama's writings, and other Buddhism books. Currently, I am focusing on Liu Yutan'sÂ extraordinary book from the 1940's entitled The Wisdom of Lao Tse, whose Taoism is closely connected to the t'ai chi that I regularly practice. Â AÂ recent arrival is John Coltrane: His Life and Music, by my college band director and jazz scholar Lewis PorterÂ (with a good general webpage, online jazz musician encyclopedia, interesting YouTube entriesÂ and MySpace pages here and here).Â Porter's ColtraneÂ volume has been available for nine years, but I only recently learned of it as my fascination with Coltrane snowballed during the past year. Porter has also written a volume on Lester YoungÂ and numerous other jazz volumes. Â What does this blog entry have to do with the practice of trial law? For me, I have read so much dry and unenlivened, but often essential,Â writing -- including opinions from courts and other tribunals, discovery from opponents, and reports and volumes by experts in their fields -- that many times I found myself winding down part of the evening with watching some television during the four years that I had cable television (but no more cable for me and very minimal television watching now (as opposed to an occasional DVD), fortunately, and just a small-screen television with poor reception now), figuring that my eyes were too exhausted to read. As t'ai chi master Cheng Man Ching said, if you are tired, take a nap or go to sleep. Otherwise, no reason exists for me to feel too tired to read, unless the reading material does not grab me. All work and no play makes me a dull lawyer; when not spending time with my family, friends, and the outdoors, stimulating reading is a great way to spend found free time. Â Some of my favorite writers and writings are listed here. What are your favorites? Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 00:00

I highly recommend Robert A. Caro's "Master of the Senate," the most recent in Caro's series, "The Years of Lyndon Johnson." Caro is a master storyteller who can turn the driest of parliamentary procedures into a riveting battle in which LBJ's future, civil rights for southern blacks, and all of America's future, are at stake. Caro's book uses LBJ's time in the Senate to illustrate broader points about the accumulation and the exercise of political power. Fantastic book, and I recommend it along with rest of the 3-volume "Years of Lyndon Johnson" series.

Anonymous on Jan 6 2008, 14:55