

Great Books for a Great Mom

Well, Mom, I don't know how good an outline this will turn out to be, but it should give you a place to begin. I will probably follow a chronological order for simplicity's sake, but you may not want to read the books in that order. If the reading becomes forced, it will cease being pleasant. Perhaps you will read from the beginning for a while and then skip around a bit. In between the rather heavy reading on this list you may want to read something light. I know that I usually alternate my reading that way.

As much as possible you should try to understand the historical context in which a piece of literature is written. This will be especially so as far as the Greeks are concerned. This may necessitate going to a history book. Will Durant would be good for this up to the 17th century. The introductions in the books also help. Don't be surprised if you are not ecstatic when you are reading a great work of literature, especially one that is far removed from our culture. That is normal. So much depends upon your mood. Also, much depends upon a slowly built up understanding of the purposes of great thinkers. Perhaps, the way to gain that understanding is to find a great writer ~~that~~ who is close to you in time and whom you can understand and work backwards. That is, start with Dostoyevsky and end with Sophocles. That's what I did, actually. If you will remember my first Modern Library books.

I won't confine my recommendations to fictional works, though, they will undoubtedly outnumber the philosophers and historians. All of them should be read together because collectively the poets, dramatists, novelists, philosophers and artists sum up the general (often latent) feelings of their times. I often think of the author as a sort of super-sensitive human seismograph who records the tremors of his generation, perceiving that which his less sensitive conferees cannot see or feel. The result often is that he is cursed, banished, or executed for lies by the crowd that is unable to see what he sees. Socrates is a good example of this.

I hope that this will be of some help to you, Mom. I know that I am excited that you are interested and I can't think of a better thing for us to share in the years ahead. Maybe

I can start to repay you for the inestimable gift you gave me; the reading habit. If it gets hard or boring at times, just remember that it's that way for all of us, no matter how much we've read. Also remember that reading is a mental effort and you recall how hard it was for you to get me to read in the first place!

Let's begin with the Bible. I haven't read as much of the Bible as I would have liked to, but I do have a couple favorite books. "Ecclesiastes" is full of very "modern" ideas, quite pessimistic, indeed, and very human. The Jewish poet who wrote this part of the Bible must have sneaked this in while God was looking the other way.

Actually, I should have said that about the author of "The Song of Solomon" which is a very exotic love song, despite the efforts of Theologians to interpret the lover as Christ and his mistress as the Church. The Bible in the eyes of most impartial students of literature is the collected folk history, mythology, and wisdom of the Jewish race. Abraham lived about 1800 BC, Moses about 1300 BC. The oral versions of these stories, the creation, the flood (taken from the Babylonian flood story in The Epic of Gilgamesh [1800 BC]) the exodus, etc were probably written down beginning about 1000 BC and following. I may be a bit off on these dates, but I haven't time to check. The Bible is one of the greatest works of literature in the world and one of the most complete collections of one race's lore. The King James version is the most poetic translation in English.

Now we must go to the Greeks. It is with the Greeks that we, or, at least, I, feel at home. I think it is safe to say that the Greeks were the first group of people to be proud of their humanity. The Hebrews cowered before Jehovah and debased their manhood, and I think one can see some of this unpleasant servility still in the Jewish character. The Greeks laughed often at their gods, indeed they even created their gods in their own image; that's why they were funny. It always strikes me as strange that our Christian (Jewish) God is completely devoid of a sense of humor. Nor

do we feel comfortable enough with Him to be able to chuckle at some of His foibles. The Greeks respected their gods, feared them, too, but were also able to perceive the absurdities in life which the gods were supposedly responsible for. They did not try to absolve the gods of their guilt like we do ours. A lightning bolt that killed a family came from Zeus. A plague may have come from Poseidon. The gods were often malicious, sometimes without justification. The Greeks expected that. When an innocent man suffers and a guilty man prospers in our society, we do not like to attribute that to our God, though we readily attribute all good to Him.

Homer gave us our first written account of the Greek gods and their relations with the great mythic heroes of the Greek past in the Iliad. This describes the Greek siege of Troy which actually took place about 1200 B.C., though Homer wrote around 800 B.C. All early literatures are passed down by word of mouth for centuries before they are written. That accounts for their distortions. The original battle of Troy was probably fought for commercial reasons; Troy guarded the straits into the Black Sea. Helen is a poetic invention. I would suggest that you read only a few passages of the actual Iliad, but read a summary of it in Edith Hamilton's Greek Mythology. You might read larger portions of the Odyssey (Homer's story of Odysseus' [Ulysses] return home after the war) since there is a faster moving narrative there. Richard Lattimore's translation of the Iliad gives you a sense of the original poetry which was read out loud (sung) on festival days in Greece.

You will also want to read the Greek myths in a collection like Hamilton's or Robert Graves. Myths are a very complicated subject. They reflect the subconscious drives of all humans [e.g. Oedipus]. They most always disguise their real significance. For example, the stories of the so-called dying-and-rising gods like Adonis, Dionysus, Persephone, Orpheus are really the results of an almost primitive understanding of the cycle of vegetation which grows out of the ground, dies and ~~rotts~~ under the ground, only to return the next year. This was of mystical and very important life-giving significance to the

peoples who discovered agriculture (thousands of years before the Greeks), I have found mythology and primitive religion to be among the most interesting things I've ever read about. Read Campbell's The Masks of God.

It is The Greek Dramatists are the writers who are most easily and sympathetically read by us today. They wrote in the 5th and 4th centuries before Christ when Greek culture was at its high point. Their pride as humans was great, but they ~~recognized~~ recognized that man's greatness, the result of proud heroic acts, was doomed to failure because the gods ~~was~~ (fate) would not abide such pride. So they paradoxically warned man against that which alone makes him great, his pride, and, yet, though the heroes meet tragic endings, there is always a glory that surrounds them.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are the three great Greek tragedians and they wrote in that order. Aeschylus wrote in the older, formal style, though he was responsible for much innovation, and tends to be hard for us to understand. Remember Greek drama originated in a religious ritual worshipping the god Dionysus (Bacchus in Rome), so there are always heavy religious overtones in these plays, especially the early ones. They were only presented on "holy" days. Aeschylus' most famous play The Agamemnon discusses the pride of the returning leader of the Greek forces against Troy. Sophocles' play Oedipus Tyrannus (Oedipus Rex) is probably more appealing to us today. Sophocles is interested in the psychology of his characters, and in this play we have one of the first detective stories. Of course, Freud later borrowed the Oedipus myth to describe the subconscious drive which he believed (most psychologists do) we all share. The suspense that builds up, the growing imminence of doom as Oedipus moves closer and closer to the discovery of his own guilt is very effective even today. Remember, also, that reading a drama is not a fair way to estimate its worth, especially a translated one from a different age. Euripides' Medea is often read. Euripides wrote in the 4th century BC and was quite cynical about everything, most of all, the gods. Fourth century Athens was being

similar to 20th century America and Europe in that it was a period just following a series of destructive wars and traditional faiths were shaken.

The great comic dramatist of the Greeks was Aristophanes and his mode was satire. His play Lysistrata is a very bawdy story of how the women refuse to love their husbands until they stop their ceaseless warring. Not a bad idea, perhaps. It's a good indication of the sophistication of the Greek state that a playwright would be allowed to openly criticize the current political policy of the state and win the prize at the festival for that very play. The bawdiness is also characteristic of all of the Greek comedy. Dionysus was a fertility god. Aristophanes satirizes Socrates in The Clouds. Socrates must have seen the play and we guess that he laughed.

However, some Athenian leaders lost their sense of humor for a while in the year 399 BC and caused Socrates to be condemned to death. He was tried for corrupting the youth and denying the gods. His own defense speech is recorded by Plato in the dialogue called The Apology. On that one short dramatic essay we get what I think is the traditional view of Socrates, the gadfly on the rump of the state. It is beautiful. If you want to read about how Socrates met his death, and, incidentally, get a summary of Platonic philosophy read The Crito and The Phaedo. You may want to browse through Plato's Republic (his version of Utopia), but you may find it a bit tedious. Plato uses Socrates as a mouth piece for his own philosophy. Socrates did not write, but his pupil, Plato, did.

Aristotle, Plato's pupil, wrote an enormous amount but no one reads it any more unless they are professional philosophers. He is very logical and complicated, not near so readable as Plato.

I think I will skip lightly over the Roman writers, Virgil, Horace (you might like Horace), Juvenal, Petronius, I would recommend a little Marcus Aurelius a philosopher-emperor, a rare combination. Frankly I have not read much of the Roman's and what I have read I've found lacking

in human sympathy. 476 AD

After Rome fell, there was a reversion to a feudal barbarism very similar to that period during which the Trojan war was fought and similar myths and legends grew out of this period, only this time the god was a Christian one. Legends arose concerning Charlemagne and his valiant lieutenant Roland - The Song of Roland in France. Charlemagne actually lived in 800 AD. In the 9th, 10th, 11th + 12th centuries legends about Charlemagne and King Arthur (not sure if he is historical or not) grew up. I'd suggest reading any anthology, Bullfinch, for instance, for a summary of these stories. A very charming and witty modern version of the Arthurian legends is The Once and Future King by White. Very good book and very accurate.

The great work of literature of the Middle Ages (actually it is transitional between the middle ages and the Renaissance) is Dante's Divine Comedy. I don't know anyone who has ever read the entire thing. You might read selections e.g. "Francesca De Rimini." Following Dante in Italy there is the great poet Petrarch and the marvelous story-teller Boccaccio. Boccaccio's Decameron is a collection of bawdy stories which give us an insight into the lives of the common people of that 13th century.

In England in the 14th century Chaucer took up where Boccaccio left off, in fact he used many of his plots for his stories in the Canterbury Tales. You might try reading them in the original Middle English, but a modern translation would go faster.

We'll skip to the end of the 16th century and, of course, read the great one, William Shakespeare. Shakespeare must be read slowly + carefully at first - perhaps always. My favorite plays are Hamlet and King Lear. His sonnets are beautiful also.

A contemporary of Shakespeare's in Spain was Cervantes. His Don Quixote is very readable today and really very funny. This book has been called the book that killed

a nation because it satirized the Spanish Code of Chivalry and honor at a time when Spain was just toppling from a brief peak of power that it has never attained again.

I've just recalled the French philosopher, Montaigne. I think he preceded these last two. He's soothing and sane.

~~That's~~ There is also the French satirist roughly contemporary with Montaigne, Rabelais. Another bawdy one - his Gargantua!

I'll mention Milton's Paradise Lost because it is considered to be one of the greatest poetic works in English. It is a poetic narrative of Satan's fall from Heaven and Adam + Eve's sin. The first books describing Satan are exciting and seem to appeal more to most readers today than the latter books about Adam. Lord Byron claimed that Satan (the proud rebel, somewhat akin to the doomed Greek tragic hero) was the real hero in that last of the Epic poems.

The writers start coming hot and heavy now and I will undoubtedly be forgetting some of them. The eighteenth century produced much good humor and sharp satire.

In England Jonathan Swift, a minister, wrote his biting and often scatological satire Gulliver's Travels.

Read the "voyage to Lilliput" and "the Houyhnhnms" (spelling) that would be enough.

In France at about the same time (actually a bit later) Voltaire produced his magnificent little satire Candide. "Candide" means optimist and the book is an attack upon the philosopher Leibnitz's view that this is the best of all possible worlds. You see Leibnitz had tried to explain away the evil in the world so that the Christian God who is all-good couldn't be blamed for it. Remember how the Greeks solved that problem? Leibnitz claimed that the presence of evil makes the good even better or ~~of~~ the more evil, the more good. Voltaire couldn't accept this especially when he heard about a horrible earthquake that took the lives of thousands of innocent people in Lisbon. So he wrote this classic satire to refute Leibnitz.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century in England

The modern novel developed. Actually Don Quixote, Gulliver's Travels and Candide are some of its ancestors. Tom Jones by Fielding is one of the best of these 18th century novels, most of which were long and humorous.

This form of literature was developed and refined in the 19th century ^{in England} by Jane Austen (Pride and Prejudice, a mild satire of English country life); Charles Dickens (Bleak House his longest and, I think, his best novel - Dickens is very important in the novel's development); George Eliot (a woman - Middlemarch), Thomas Hardy (Jude the Obscure; Tess of the D'Urbervilles quite pessimistic) and Joseph Conrad (Lord Jim, Victory).

In France in the 19th century the novel was being developed in its own way. I should have mentioned that the novel is considered the art form of the middle class, indeed you can see its rise correspond with the rise of the middle class. The subject of literature descended from the problems and activities of kings to those of country squires and later farm boys.

Stendhal's The Red and the Black is one of the great early 19th century novels in France. It traces the rise of a young man through the church. Great book. Balzac's Père Goriot is a powerful novel of a father who dotes upon his two careless and thankless daughters. Balzac is one of the early realists. His characters have guts. Zola took this realism to its extreme in Nana the story of a prostitute. Flaubert's Madame Bovary (subtle satire of bored modern woman) ^{or great impact on 2nd reading}

I just realized that I skipped Germany's great poet Goethe whose career stretched from the middle of the 18th century to near the middle of the 19th. Faust the narrative poem telling of the man who sold his soul to the devil is considered one of the greatest works of literature in the world.

Russia in the 19th century produced the really great novels to my way of thinking. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev. Dostoevsky plunges into the deepest parts of his characters' minds in his writings. Crime and Punishment analyzes the frightened and intellectual motives of the murderer Raskolnikov. The Brothers Karamazov covers a whole world of feeling and thinking in the Karamazov

family, each of whom represents a basic human type: Alexy, the mystic, Evam, the intellectual, Dmitri, the strong, compassionate and complete human, and the father, all that's base. Remember Dostoevsky had mystic inclinations himself and usually favors those types. His Notes from Underground is very modern and dissects much of the modern dilemma concerning our inability to communicate with each other.

Tolstoy's War and Peace is a novel of great sweep and power. In it Tolstoy puts forward his thesis that history is not made by great individuals (The Romantics legacy to 19th century historians) but by the masses whose collective will pushes or pulls the Napoleons. Tolstoy only gets dull when, at the end of his novel, he tries to become a philosopher of history. I never finished Anna Karenina, but it might appeal to you more. I recently read Tolstoy's short story "The Death of Ivan Ilych" and found it to be very modern and extremely depressing.

Incidentally, this would be a good point to mention that you should not expect to be "cheered" by great literature. The great works of literature are great because of the depth and honesty of their perceptions and revelations, and, in our most honest moods, we all recognize the precarious state of existence that all humans experience. Even comedy, when it is great, is often as sobering as it is amusing. In fact, I would say that all great comedy is sobering, for comedy can be as true a perception of life as tragedy and the two are separated by only a hairline. Please don't think, however, that great literature must be avoided if life is to be tranquil and pleasant. It is true that one loses much when he sheds the childish naivete which assumes that "All is for the best in this the best of all possible worlds" (Candide), but one gains too. The gains are hard to define. One of them is the strange comfort that one experiences when ~~one~~ discovers his opponent in the darkness, whereas before all he saw was the darkness and he merely sensed the presence of the enemy. Another of the gains is the enheartening, if limited, certainty that all you know is the result of your own inquiry and, as small as that knowledge

may be, at least, it is more certain than those great quantities that most men inherit unwittingly. There is also the pleasure of feeling oneself the compatriot of the great human thinkers who have preceded and exceeded you, and though, relative to all the billions who have lived, you count up to be a small percentage, relative to your own limited circle of acquaintances you add up to a fairly sizable force.

Turgenev describes a Nihilist (a person who is a complete skeptic and believes nothing - "nihil") in his novel Fathers and Sons. It shows the horrors of the excesses of independent thinking as well as Thoreau, a little earlier, showed the horrors of the absence of independent thought.

Thoreau leads us to America in the 19th century. Of course, I am most familiar with American literature because of my teaching these past few years, but I will try to confine my comments lest by their length you make the mistake of accrediting an abnormal amount of importance to American literature.

The nineteenth century saw the birth of what may be called "significant" American literature. Most of this is Romantic literature. I have avoided such terminology up till now and, perhaps, should avoid it entirely, but I have opened Pandora's box. Most literature up to the mid-nineteenth century could be classified as either "Classic" or "Romantic" which are usually considered as opposite poles.

Classic literature and art is noted for its logic, balance, and rationality. A poem with even rhythm and symmetrical rhyme scheme or think of the Parthenon. Romantic literature and art is often just the opposite: illogical, disproportionate, emotional. Blank verse of irregular rhythms and no rhyme in poetry. A Gothic cathedral instead of the classic Greek architecture.

In the latter half of the 18th century European literature and art moved away from the neo-classical style that had dominated the century and the Romantic Revolution was initiated. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron,

Shelley, and Keats are English poets who led the movement. Rousseau in France was called the "Father of Romanticism." You might read his Confessions (autobiography).

It was the shock waves of this Romantic movement that influenced the first generation of great writers in America. Emerson and Thoreau were the two philosophers of the movement, though Thoreau is hardly a philosopher in the formal sense of the word. His wit and beautiful prose style, his mastery of the sentence, set him apart from the plodding dullness of the traditional philosopher. He was a naturalist and commentator. Walden must be read. His essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" was the source of Mahatma Gandhi's idea of passive resistance against the British and the current sit-ins in the U.S.

Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter is a very important and symbolic romantic novel of the period, but, despite the praise of many critics, I find it boring for the most part. It is a story of the Puritan society and the problem of sin and repentance.

The Great American Novel, as far as I am concerned, is Moby Dick. This is, in my opinion, the one American novel that can compete with any novel ever written and, indeed, stand proudly next to the greatest world literature. It is imperfect in its parts (There are contradictions and lapses in the text; it often gets laboriously detailed) but it must be judged for its total effect. It is a powerful symphony that "romanticizes" the whaling industry. Actually, the novel which is highly allegorical is describing the whole human race's search for the unattainable when it purports to be describing a madman's pursuit of a white whale. Melville began the book as a simple adventure story, but it changed as he wrote it; it gained possession of him. The factor which keeps this novel from becoming a tedium is its great humor and poetry. Melville sums up all of the comedy and tragedy of life in this great book. Like all great books many people don't like it on the first reading. I did, however. Pat Sullivan didn't. Of course, he does now. You have to be in a mood to whale!

We might as well stay in America while we're here, but we are changing writing styles. I mentioned "Classic" and "Romantic". Well, in the late 19th century in Europe and America ~~the~~ a new literary technique replaced Romanticism. In its broadest sense we can call this new approach "Realism"; the attempt to describe life as it really is. The extreme or pessimistic realism is often termed "Naturalism". It might be said by way of analogy that the realistic writers saw and described the garbage cans in life, while the naturalists pulled the lids off the cans ^{and} described even the filth inside. Most literature of the twentieth century is realistic, at least, in part!

Of course, you realize that authors don't suddenly wake up one morning and decide to invent or change a style of literature. They reflect and even anticipate the collective mood. Many things are responsible for the swing toward Realism that is characteristic of our age. Science is the obvious culprit and, perhaps, the most guilty. The scientific method which began to be widespread in Europe in the 17th century is one of description of that which can be seen and measured. I need not mention the obvious results of this method, results that were so spectacularly beneficial that we can safely say that we are in an age of science. All the arts reflect this fact. With the dominance of this method of rational analysis began the dissolution of older methods of ~~attainment~~ seeking the truth, namely, the intuitive or subjective method which can be closely linked with romanticism in art.

Mark Twain's realistic humor and description foreshadowed this trend in American literature. He is one of the great humorists of all time. Some would call him the greatest American novelist. Huckleberry Finn is the novel they would point to. Like so much great humor it is often read as a children's book. Actually it is a tremendous satire which tears apart American society and, indeed, all of humanity and its prejudices. Letters from The Earth, Twain's last work, shows the bitterness that his old age brought him, but also it demonstrates the brilliance and incisiveness of his prose.

At this point I will mention Henry James who is sort of an isolated figure in American literature. He is a very subtle writer and could be called a psychological realist, I suppose, since he tries to dig into the psyches of his characters. You might like his Portrait of a Lady. James doesn't excite me, though some would call him our greatest novelist. In a way he is like Proust, now that I think of it, and they were contemporaries - late 19th early 20th centuries.

Before we get away from the late 19th century I might mention briefly the aesthetic revolt in Europe at the end of the 19th century. This was the result of a revulsion among some of the more cultured or monied for the ugly by-products of science and the machine's slums, nouveau riche, common tastes broadcast throughout the land, and a decline of interest in art. Actually Thoreau anticipated this when he criticized these very things 50 years earlier. Oscar Wilde and the poet Rossetti (not too important) were associated with this group, and I suppose you can say that James and Proust were, too, in an indirect sort of way. Read Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest and Lady Windham's Fan and The Picture of Dorian Gray. Wilde was the greatest conversationalist and wit of his and, perhaps, any time. He is a particular favorite of mine.

But this was only an interlude; Shaw, the socialist, quickly led everyone back to the path of realism. Man and Superman is one of his best. His long introductions are outstanding essays on his times, art, and life in general.

The 20th century is a tortured century. No century has been more torn by war and no three centuries in history have seen more men killed by other men. We have almost come to accept this mass killing as normal. It is not! No wonder that our most intelligent and perceptive men, the writers, are skeptical and pessimistic! It is a century without Faith. It may have seemed unusual to you and Dad that Catholicism no longer meant anything to me, but it would not seem unusual to many others. Science, war, communication with other cultures, psychology, history and old age have dealt traditional religion in the West a devastating blow; I'd

guess it to be ultimately a death blow. Actually "blow" is the wrong metaphor. That implies a sudden knock down, when actually this is a process that is, at least, seven hundred years old and may continue as many more in the future. The philosopher Nietzsche in the 19th century announced that "God is dead!" Nietzsche went insane eventually from the agony of realizing that all purpose had been taken out of the universe. His fate is good testimony to the seriousness of "non-believers" who would love to believe but can't! Thus Spake Zarathustra is his great work. Nietzsche is very readable and a remarkable wit. Melville struggled with this very same problem in Moby Dick the ambiguous white whale, the "colorless, all-color of atheism."

One of the greatest novelists (some say the greatest) of the entire 20th century, James Joyce, writes specifically about this problem. In fact, you can hardly be a serious writer in this century and ignore this problem. In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man Joyce describes the growth of doubt in his mind as a youth and his break with the Catholic Church in Ireland. He continues this in Ulysses, one of the great novels of our time. It is a very complicated, witty and profound novel that describes one day in the life of Stephen Dedalus (Joyce). I've read it twice. Mark Schorer called it in one lecture I heard at Cal. "the book I'd take to a desert island." Joyce is not easy reading, though Portrait is not difficult.

There is a heavy tone of pessimism in all serious 20th century literature - perhaps in all literature!?! The pessimism or realism at the best is more disturbing or unreleived in the 20th century because of the perspective in which the modern thinker views mankind. Looking at man biologically we see that he is just one more form of life, a form that has been very successful in dominating its environment for about a million years, but one that could pass away just as easily (perhaps more so) as the dinosaurs which ruled their environment for many millions of years a long time ago. When the dinosaurs ruled the earth, our ancestors were rat-like creatures which

scurried to avoid being trampled by the local lords of 180 million years ago. Perhaps our successor is scurrying under our feet right now. That sounds absurd, but who would have chosen a rat over a dinosaur years ago?

The latest findings in astronomy suggest that the universe is finite, estimated to be a mere 13 billion light years (the distance light travels in a year at 186,000 miles per second) and expanding. Astronomers figure that it started about 13 billion years ago in a great explosion (The "Big Bang" Theory) and that the universe is still spreading out from the force of the explosion. They also guess that the universe will eventually contract (come back together towards a center) till everything collides and fuses and another explosion like the first one will follow — all this over an 82 billion year cycle. If this is so, all present life ~~is~~ or whatever its ancestors will be like will be wiped out and it will all start again.

The immense amount of time and space, the multiplicity and abundance of life forms, and the apparent mechanistic and heartless nature of the universe reduce man's ego to the vanishing point. The quaint idea that the world was created for human beings seems silly to many who are aware of these other facts, and I have not even mentioned the many other facts in the fields of psychology, history, anthropology, etc., etc. which also have reduced man to a blundering, and but temporarily brilliant and lucky ape. These facts, the world view that they imply, have forced many to look in new directions for meaning in life. This fear has been going on for hundreds of years and it is especially powerful in our century.

The Existentialists are just one group who have attempted to cope with the harshness and meaninglessness of reality in the 20th century. Read Camus' The Stranger or some of Sartre's plays. No Exit, for example. The viewpoint of the existentialist very simply is that man must recognize his loneliness in space, the lack of cosmic purpose for man, and face up to it. He must give his life meaning himself through his actions. I am not a fanatical Existentialist or any kind of "ist," but I do think that a lot of their ideas are sensible.

It is silly to dislike the Existentialists or the scientists

or the novelists and poets whose work points toward this new, realistic view of life. They are not members of a secret organization designed to overthrow the older views of reality; they are not "bums" who have nothing better to do; they are the men who have the eyes to see the facts of their age they live in and the wit to describe what they see. They are the same men who thousands of years ago painted pictures of vision on the walls of caves, or discovered astronomy, or the wheel, or geometry. They are the same men who wrote "The Song of Solomon" or "Ecclesiastes".

So, when F. Scott Fitzgerald describes the death of romantic idealism and the American Dream "so beautifully" in The Great Gatsby, or Hemingway describes the loss of faith and the disillusionment of Americans after World War I in The Sun Also Rises or A Farewell to Arms, or Faulkner describes the moral and cultural decadence of the South in The Sound and the Fury, or Steinbeck describes the exploitation of the Okies in The Grapes of Wrath, or J. P. Salinger describes the helplessness of an adolescent in Catcher in the Rye, or Joseph Heller describes the notoriously funny and morbid world of war in Catch-22, these men are not being un-American or unpatriotic, and they are not lying! They are describing the America that is all around them and which anyone could see if he opened his eyes or had the courage to accept what he saw.

Awareness does not mean despair and suicide. It is quite possible to have a strange sense of elation in the face of all this. There is the pleasure of independence and intellectual consistency, and there is the challenge. There is also an entirely different feeling of oneness with the world and life that can be attained in many ways. Oriental philosophers are more familiar with this view than we are. Hemingway's great novel The Old Man and the Sea demonstrates the optimism of this type of individual courage better than any American novel of the 20th century. It is a beautiful book. Quite inspiring. So we are not without hope, but it is not easy, not ready-made!!