



**There is no  
friend as loyal  
as a book.**

—ERNEST HEMINGWAY



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# My Love of Books

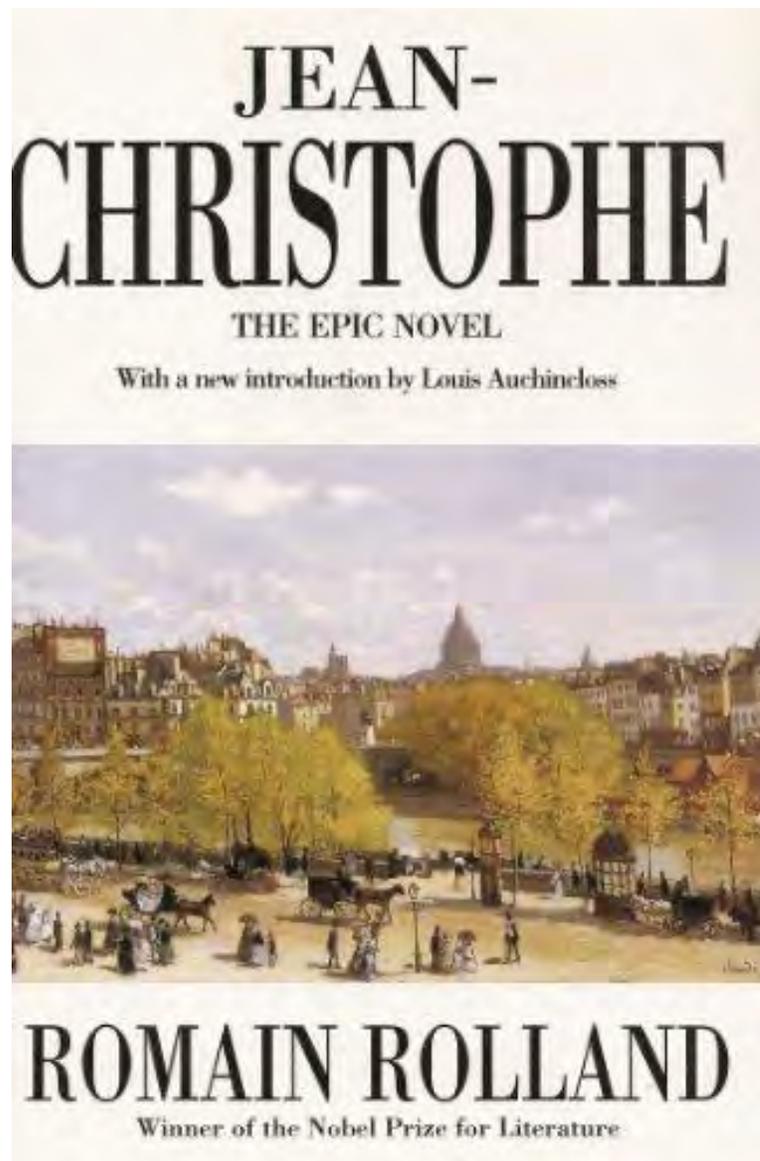
Georges M. Halpern, MD, DSc

## MY LOVE OF BOOKS



One of the first printed opus my father asked me to read slowly and thoroughly was Jean-Christophe by Romain Rolland.

It is a novel in French, composed of 10 volumes, for which Romain Rolland received the Prix Femina in 1905 and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1915. It was translated into English by Gilbert Cannan.



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*The plot can be summarized as follows: The central character, Jean- Christophe Krafft, is a German musician of Belgian extraction, a composer of genius whose life is depicted from cradle to grave. He undergoes great hardships and spiritual struggles, balancing his pride in his own talents with the necessity of earning a living and taking care of those around him. Tormented by injustices against his friends, forced to flee on several occasions as a result of his brushes with authority and his own conscience, he finally finds peace in a remote corner of Switzerland before returning in triumph to Paris a decade later.*

I share the opinion of the reviewer for Wikipedia:

*“Although Rolland first conceived the work in Rome in the spring of 1890, he began in earnest in 1903 after publishing a biography of Beethoven. A letter of 13 September 1902 reveals his plans:*

*My novel is the story of a life, from birth to death. My hero is a great German musician who is forced by circumstances to leave when he is 16-18 years old, living outside of Germany in Paris, Switzerland, etc. The setting is today's Europe [...] To spell it out, the hero is Beethoven in the modern world.*

*But in his preface to “Dans la Maison”, published in 1909, Rolland denied that he was writing a novel in the traditional sense, but a “musical novel” in which emotions, not classical action, dictated the course of events. “When you see a man, do you ask yourself whether he is a novel or a poem? [...] Jean-Christophe has always seemed to me to flow like a river; I have said as much from the first pages.” This coined the term “roman-fleuve” (river-novel), which has since been applied to other novel sequences in the same style.*

*Many individual tomes swerve from the story of Krafft to focus on the other characters. Rolland was an admirer of Leo Tolstoy, and, as in “War and Peace”, a very large proportion of the work is devoted to the author's thoughts on various subjects: music, art, literature, feminism, militarism, national character, and social changes in the Third Republic, largely attributed to Krafft, although Rolland denied that he shared many traits with his fictional composer. The didactic aspects of Jean-Christophe have been criticized by many readers. In his heavy use of matter-of-fact detail, Rolland followed the methods of naturalist predecessors with whom he otherwise had little in common.”*

That was a tough task, and it took me time. But at age 10, I had been summoned and

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I did it; that's also when I discovered that I only needed (then!) six hours of sleep, and that I had a great visual memory: I could literally "photograph" mentally page after page.

My reading was made of several compartments:

1. Texts/books assigned by the teacher(s);
2. The comics [*Vaillant* published by *L'Humanité* [and it was excellent!]; *Coq Hardi* [ published by some former *résistants*, most being anarchists];
3. Most books of the *Bibliothèque Verte* [e.g., Jules Verne, Edmond About] but also Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, Honoré de Balzac, Emile Zola, André Malraux, Gustave Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant, Stendhal, Anatole France, Théophile Gautier] Selma Lagerlof, Miguel de Cervantes, George Orwell, Charles Dickens, and many more: my father had been and remained an avid book reader and he had a whole wall (of our dining room) with shelves of books. And I can still - close to my nineties- remember a number of pages of action, drama, love, travels and much more.
4. Later I read newspapers and magazines -but books were my joy, my gratification, my significant pleasure.

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Recently, thanks to my wife, Emiko Oguiss, I discovered Haruki Murakami.

Most of Haruki Murakami's works use first-person narrative in the tradition of the Japanese novel. He states that because family plays a significant role in traditional Japanese literature, any main character who is independent becomes a man who values freedom and solitude over intimacy.



Haruko Murikami

© Wikipedia

Also notable is Murakami's unique humor, as seen in his 2000 short story collection, *After the Quake*. In the story "*Superfrog Saves Tokyo*", the protagonist is confronted with a 6-foot-tall frog that talks about the destruction of Tokyo over a cup of tea.

Despite the story's sober tone, Murakami feels the reader should be entertained once

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the seriousness of a subject has been broached. Another notable feature of Murakami's stories are the comments that come from the main characters as to how strange the story presents itself. Murakami explains that his characters experience what he experiences as he writes, which could be compared to a movie set where the walls and props are all fake. He has further compared the process of writing to movies: "*That is one of the joys of writing fiction—I'm making my own film made just for myself.*"

Some analyses see aspects of shamanism in his writing. In a 2000 article, Susan Fisher connected Shinto or Japanese shamanism with some elements of "*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*," such as a descent into a dry well.

"*Killing Commendatore*" (*Kishidancho Goroshi*) is Murakami's most recent work as of 2018. Published in Japan on February 24, 2017, and in the US in October 2018, the novel is a historical fiction that has caused controversy in Hong Kong.

The novel was labeled under "Class II – indecent" in Hong Kong. This classification led to mass amounts of censorship. The publisher must not distribute the book to people under the age of 18 and must have a warning label printed on the cover.

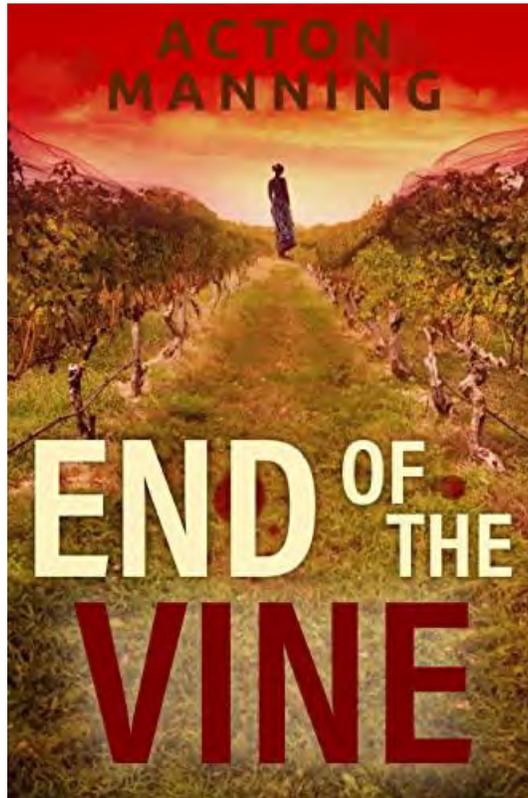
It is also the first novel of Haruki Murakami that I read (in its French translation), and it opened a lot of worlds that I had -so far- ignored...

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Another one that I deeply enjoyed is “*End of the Vine*” by, my friend and colleague (he is an Emergency Medicine reputed specialist), Acton Manning (a pseudonym.)



© Amazon

A doctor and sommelier, he tells the story about a brilliant detective caught in a twisted tale of psychological suspense, eerie coincidence, grief, and the path to redemption - in the #1 Amazon Best Selling Wine novel *End of the Vine*.

Amanda Turner's death is ruled a suicide... Police have closed the case, but San Francisco Detective Daniel Winters disagrees. Dan's rationale is far from conventional: handwoven rope, freshly painted room, and pieces of prosciutto at the scene... all remind him of Friulano, a distinctive Italian white wine. When another death follows, Dan is surprised by the richness of detail and is convinced of foul play. A fatal jump is paired with a distinct sense of place and connects him to the terroir, aromas, and complexity of a sublime Australian Coonawarra Cabernet.

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As a young man, Dan was a rising sommelier with a talent for uncovering worlds of context, subtlety, and complexity in a glass of wine. Fast forward fifteen years, he is a legendary detective solving the most complex of mysteries. Dan's little-known secret? He literally has a nose for crime. Dan savors the rich, layered sensory experiences that become his leads and evidence.

But can a serial killer craft murders with the same complexity that Dan uses to solve them? Can the will and the senses of victims be manipulated? To prevent the next tragedy, Dan embarks on a journey of a lifetime, through remote terroirs and meandering vineyards to arrive where the story began: a cold, dark cellar where a little boy went mad.

If you check the comments/reviews (e.g., on Amazon), you too will sip it with elation!

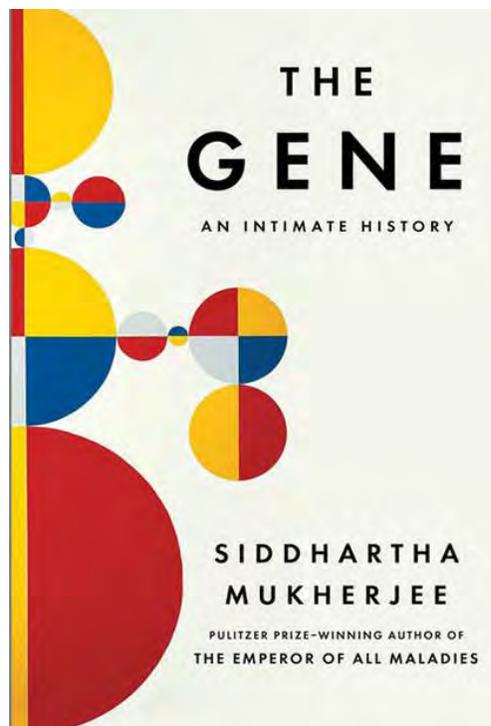
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What remains unique to reading a book (even on a screen) is the versatility it provides. Start it when you're in the mood (preferably moody...), keep reading it until the end, or sip it by chapters, skip pages that do not fit with your expectations -and go back when you feel needing the stuff, or just re-read it later -even years away.

One author I like a lot is also a colleague (a physician in New York): Siddhartha Mukherjee. His "intimate history", "*The Gene*", was more riveting than a crime/detective novel.



© Amazon

Siddhartha Mukherjee has written a biography of the gene as deft, brilliant, and illuminating as his extraordinarily successful biography of cancer *The Emperor of All Maladies*. Weaving science, social history, and personal narrative to tell us the story of one of the most important conceptual breakthroughs of modern times, Mukherjee animates the quest to understand human heredity and its surprising influence on our lives, personalities, identities, fates, and choices.

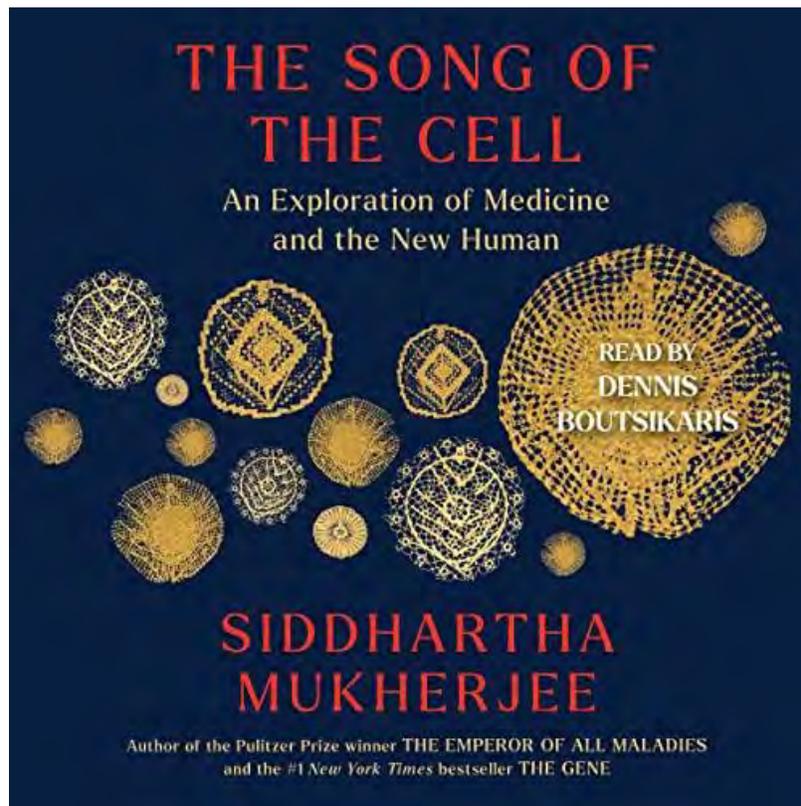
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As *The New Yorker* said of *"The Emperor of All Maladies,"*: "It's hard to think of many books for a general audience that have rendered any area of modern science and technology with such intelligence, accessibility, and compassion.... An extraordinary achievement."

A riveting, revelatory, and magisterial history of a scientific idea coming to life and an essential preparation for the moral complexity introduced by our ability to create or "write" the human genome, *"The Gene"* is the most crucial science of our time, intimately explained by a master.

And now a brand-new superb saga: *"The Song of the Cell"*!



© Amazon

Mukherjee begins this magnificent story in the late 1600s, when a distinguished English polymath, Robert Hooke, and an eccentric Dutch cloth-merchant, Antonie van Leeuwenhoek looked down their handmade microscopes. What they saw

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introduced a radical concept that swept through biology and medicine, touching virtually every aspect of the two sciences, and altering both forever. It was the fact that complex living organisms are assemblages of tiny, self-contained, self-regulating units. Our organs, our physiology, our selves—hearts, blood, brains—are built from these compartments. Hooke christened them “*cells*”.

The discovery of cells—and the reframing of the human body as a cellular ecosystem—announced the birth of a new kind of medicine based on the therapeutic manipulations of cells. A hip fracture, a cardiac arrest, Alzheimer’s dementia, AIDS, pneumonia, lung cancer, kidney failure, arthritis, COVID pneumonia—all could be reconceived as the results of cells, or systems of cells, functioning abnormally. And all could be perceived as loci of cellular therapies.

In *The Song of the Cell*, Mukherjee tells the story of how scientists discovered cells, began to understand them, and are now using that knowledge to create new humans. He seduces you with writing so vivid, lucid, and suspenseful that complex science becomes thrilling. Told in six parts, laced with Mukherjee’s own experience as a researcher, a doctor, and a prolific reader, *The Song of the Cell* is both panoramic and intimate—a masterpiece!

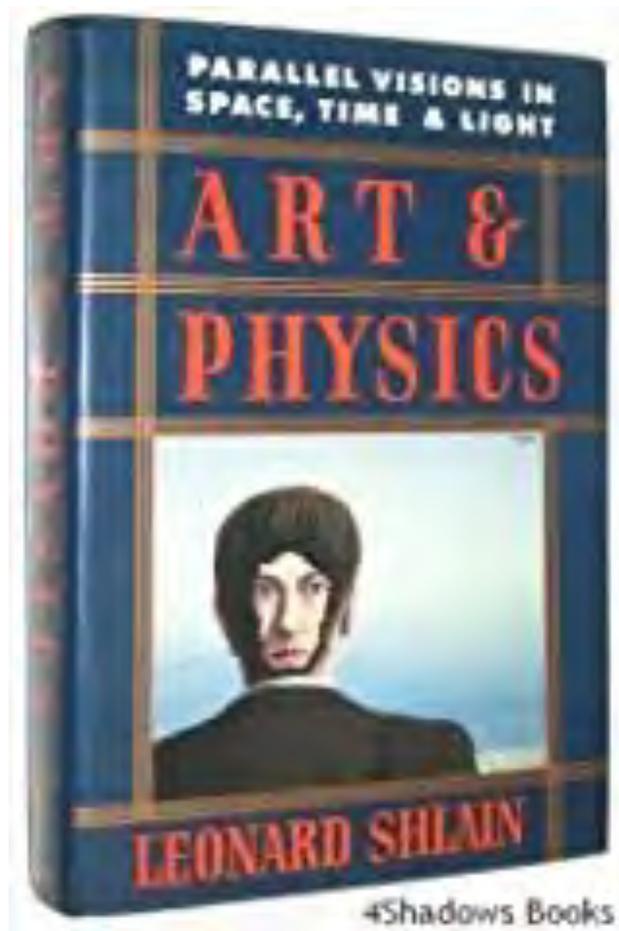
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And in the same field, but in a very different style, “*Arts and Physics*” of my late friend Leonard Shlain, MD. I return to it, opening at random and catching up during the flow, with renewed intact delight.

He studies the way science has influenced the artistic imagination throughout history, such as the parallel between Einstein's theory of relativity and the work of Cezanne, Monet, and the other Impressionists. Fascinating....



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At times I feel uneasy: books are printed on paper; and paper is produced by harvesting trees, slaughtering forests. However, I was told recently that, in fact, most trees grown for paper do not impact the earth biomass and the production of oxygen.

Having written totally or in part 36 books (see [www.drgeorges.net](http://www.drgeorges.net) for a short list of the most relevant) I felt relieved!

Brian Greene -with whom I sailed to Antarctica- is a perfect example of “my” writer: brilliant, accurate, thorough, funny at times, gripping, knowledgeable, modest, and more. His lectures, and books (of course!) are pure jewels. “*The Elegant Universe*,” “*The Fabric of the Cosmos*,” “*The Hidden Reality*,” “*Until the End of Time: Mind, Matter and Our Search for Meaning in an Evolving Universe*,” “*Icarus at the Edge of Time*,” “*Light Falls: Space, Time, and an Obsession of Einstein*” are just some of his books that I can re-read at random with intact joy of discovery.



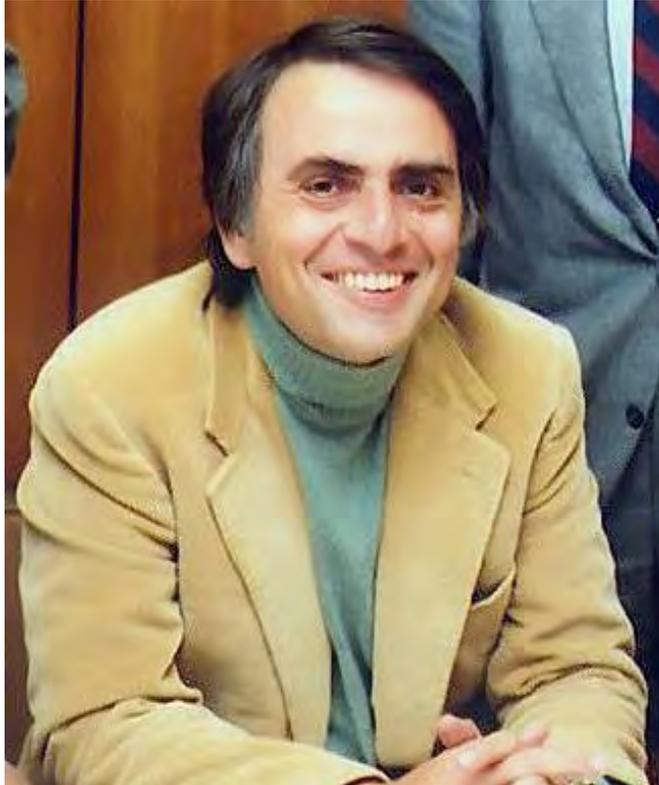
© Brian Greene

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In 1988, I was invited to give a lecture at Cornell, NY. I knew that one my heroes, Carl E. Sagan was there and asked for a short meeting with him. He immediately accepted at a date/time that did fit in our respective agenda.



© Planetary Society

According to Wikipedia (a must-read entry!) Carl Edward Sagan (November 9, 1934 – December 20, 1996) was an American astronomer, planetary scientist, cosmologist, astrophysicist, astrobiologist, author, and science communicator. His best-known scientific contribution is research on extraterrestrial life, including experimental demonstration of the production of amino acids from basic chemicals by radiation. Sagan assembled the first physical messages sent into space, the Pioneer plaque and the Voyager Golden Record, universal messages that could potentially be understood by any extraterrestrial intelligence that might find them. Sagan argued the hypothesis, accepted since, that the high surface temperatures of

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Venus can be attributed to, and calculated using, the greenhouse effect.

Initially an assistant professor at Harvard, Sagan later moved to Cornell where he would spend most of his career. Sagan published more than 600 scientific papers and articles and was author, co-author or editor of more than 20 books.

He wrote many popular science books, such as *“The Dragons of Eden,”* *“Broca’s Brain,”* *“Pale Blue Dot”* (that I read and loved!) and narrated and co-wrote the award-winning 1980 television series *“Cosmos: A Personal Voyage.”*

The most widely watched series in the history of American public television, *Cosmos* has been seen by at least 500 million people in 60 countries. The book *“Cosmos”* was published to accompany the series. He also wrote the 1985 science fiction novel *“Contact,”* the basis for a 1997 film of the same name. His papers, containing 595,000 items, are archived at The Library of Congress.

Sagan advocated scientific skeptical inquiry and the scientific method, pioneered exobiology and promoted the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI). He spent most of his career as a professor of astronomy at Cornell University, where he directed the Laboratory for Planetary Studies. Sagan and his works received numerous awards and honors, including the NASA Distinguished Public Service Medal, the National Academy of Sciences Public Welfare Medal, the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction for his book *“The Dragons of Eden,”* and, regarding *“Cosmos: A Personal Voyage,”* two Emmy Awards, the Peabody Award, and the Hugo Award. He married three times and had five children. After developing myelodysplasia, Sagan died of pneumonia at the age of 62, on December 20, 1996.

He welcomed me in his lab, gave me a quick tour, and then we discussed, chat, babbled for 2 hours in his office. That was -and remains- one the highlights of my life.

Wikipedia has a short side-column that I feel unavoidable: it summarizes better than I could our conversation and my feelings:

*“Science is more than a body of knowledge; it is a way of thinking. I have a foreboding of an America in my children’s or grandchildren’s time – when the United States is a service and information economy; when nearly all the key manufacturing industries have slipped away to other countries; when awesome technological powers are in the hands of a very few, and no one representing the public interest can even grasp the issues; when the people have lost the ability to set their own agendas or knowledgeably*

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*question those in authority; when, clutching our crystals and nervously consulting our horoscopes, our critical faculties in decline, unable to distinguish between what feels good and what's true, we slide, almost without noticing, back into superstition and darkness...The dumbing down of America is most evident in the slow decay of substantive content in the enormously influential media, the 30 second sound bites (now down to 10 seconds or less), lowest common denominator programming, credulous presentations on pseudoscience and superstition, but especially a kind of celebration of ignorance."*

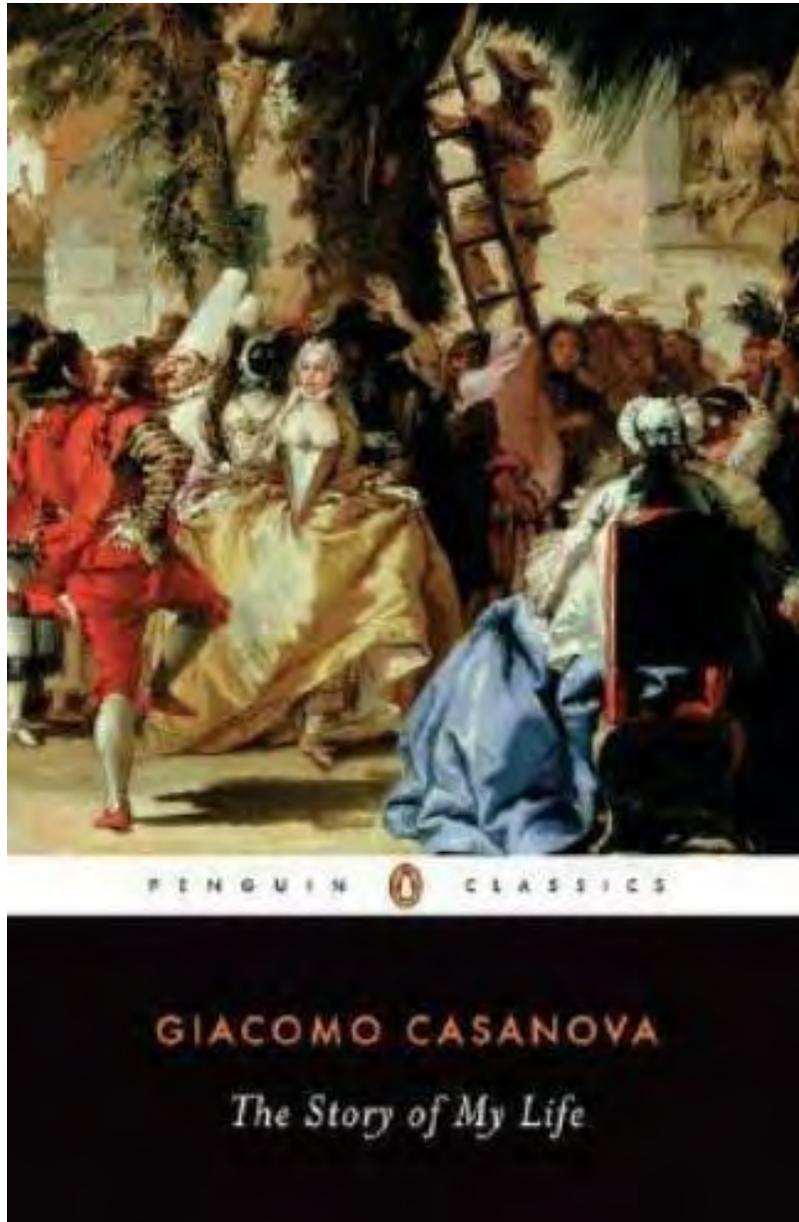
*Carl Sagan, from "Demon-Haunted World" (1995)*

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## MY LOVE OF BOOKS



In my essay “*Memoria e Memorie*” (see the References), I describe how I fell in love at first contact with Venezia (Venice). Venezia was also the epicenter of the life of Giacomo Casanova. And I did read (and am re-reading) “*The Story of My Life.*” I read it in 2017, and it is a loooooong -but fascinating voyage.



© Penguin Books

## MY LOVE OF BOOKS



*"The Story of My Life"* (*"Histoire de ma vie"*) is both the memoir and autobiography of Giacomo Casanova, a famous 18th-century Italian adventurer. A previous, bowdlerized version was originally known in English as *"The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova"* (from the French *"Mémoires de Jacques Casanova"*) until the original version was published between 1960 and 1962. The unexpurgated English translation was published in 1971.

From 1838 to 1960, all the editions of the memoirs were derived from the censored editions produced in German and French in the early nineteenth century. Arthur Machen used one of these inaccurate versions for his English translation published in 1894 which remained the standard English edition for many years.

Although Casanova was Venetian (born 2 April 1725, in Venice, died 4 June 1798, in Dux, Bohemia, now Duchcov, Czech Republic), the book is written in French, which was the dominant language in the upper class at the time. The book covers Casanova's life only through 1774, although the full title of the book is *"Histoire de ma vie jusqu'à l'an 1797"* (*"History of my Life until the year 1797"*).

On 18 February 2010, the National Library of France purchased the 3,700-page manuscript of *"Histoire de ma vie"* for approximately \$7 million (£5,750,000). The manuscript is believed to have been given to Casanova's nephew, Carlo Angiolini, in 1798. The manuscript is believed to contain pages not previously read or published. Following this acquisition, a new edition of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, based on the manuscript, was published from 2013 to 2015.

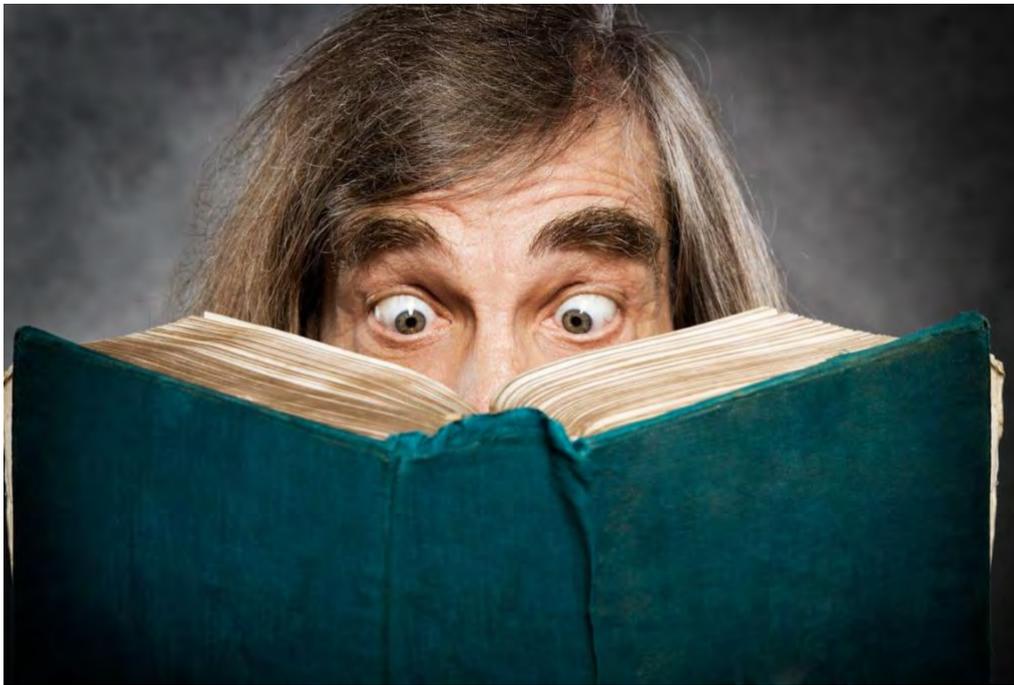
As was common at the time, Casanova, depending on circumstances, used more or less fictitious names, such as baron or count of Farussi (the maiden name of his mother) or Chevalier de Seingalt. He often signed his works as "Jacques Casanova de Seingalt" after he began writing in French following his second exile from Venice.

He has become so famous for his often complicated and elaborate affairs with women that his name is now synonymous with "womanizer". Many of his exploits would be considered predatory by modern standards, however, including affairs with the emotionally vulnerable as well as the underage. He associated with European royalty, popes, and cardinals, along with the artistic figures Voltaire, Goethe, and Mozart. He spent his last years in the Dux Chateau (Bohemia) as a librarian in Count Waldstein's household, where he also wrote the story of his life.

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But these books are just samples. A 2013 analysis estimated 2.2 million new book titles are published worldwide each year. As of November 23rd, 2021, there have been almost 2.5 million new book titles published this year.

Recently, I had to remain at home, not being able to walk safely or to drive without experiencing severe pain. Hence, I turned back to my collection of books, and discovered that my wife Emiko had received and stored lots of 10/18 (a collection directed by my brother-in-law Jean-Claude Zylberstein). A trove of great reads, still unread...

I am digging into it. Stay tuned!



## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Yves P. Huin who corrected and formatted my text to turn it into palatable reading.

## References

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