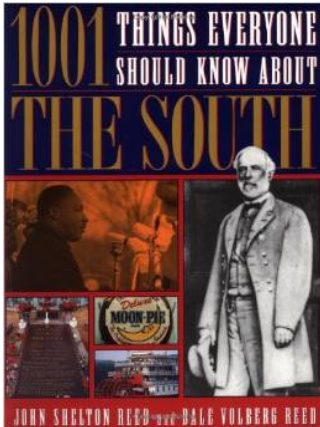




With National Book Month upon us in January, what better time to celebrate some additional terrific selections. Here are more of my favorites...

1001 Things Everyone Should Know About the South (John Shelton Reed and Dale Volberg Reed; Doubleday, 1996)

Ever wonder if you're up to speed on all the good things that make life in the South enjoyable? Well, here's a reference that leaves little in doubt. The authors fondly cover southern agriculture, politics, literature, music, preaching and of course cuisine. Apart from advice on where to find some of the best food and drink and the inside scoop on such essentials as hominy, catfish, and cornpone, we're treated to insider information on vegetables. According to Ben Robertson, "my grandmother said cabbage boiled less than four hours would kill you... Either we boil vegetables or we eat them raw—we have never put much stock in the scalding school of vegetable cooking." Take that, vegans!

Jelly's Blues: The Life, Music, and Redemption of Jelly Roll Morton ([Howard Reich](#) and [William M. Gaines](#) ; Da Capo Press, 2008)

Speaking of the South, before I read this marvelously researched and written book, Jelly Roll Morton was only a jazz name in the back of my mind, not a distinct personality. Listening to some classic Glenn Miller tunes, I noted that one of my favorites, "King Porter Stomp," was written by Morton and arranged by Miller 35 years later.

Another Armful of Great Books

Written by Jack Sparacino

Tuesday, 13 January 2015 10:54

What a remarkable American story! The relentless self-promoter who claimed he *invented jazz* (imagine!) may have done just that. Referring to King Porter, the authors say "In this single composition-- a three minute masterpiece if ever there were one-- a composer at the dawn of the twentieth century was pointing the way for at least two decades of musical evolution to come. Morton had announced his genius." So in this one scrawny man with a gold and diamond-studded smile, a fellow also known as a card shark, hustler and pimp, we had a writing and performing tour de force whose influence on jazz amounted to a virtual Louisiana hurricane that later ripped through Chicago, where he spent his best years, and then California, New York and beyond. Morton was also a tragic man who made endlessly bad business decisions, often due to a rigged and oppressive industry including the pernicious ASCAP.

Near death, Morton in his fifties was ultimately too sick and neglected by the industry and his friends to avoid a penniless decline into oblivion. He is buried in a pauper's grave in LA, a man who ended his transcendent life on society's scrap heap. We can thank the authors for restoring much of Morton's luster and legacy.

Seabiscuit (Laura Hillenbrand, Random House, 2001)

I break one of my cardinal rules in recommending this fabulous book over the glorious 2003 movie starring Jeff Bridges, Toby Maguire and Chris Cooper. If you long for a touching story of what it felt like to find in a spectacular if undersized racehorse a hero in Depression-era America, perhaps even a metaphor for a country trying desperately to climb out of a hole and assert its true greatness, this is your book. We are very fortunate to have master writers like Ms. Hillenbrand among us. She knows what it's like to overcome personal obstacles and how to grab your heart and gallop with it. Her ability to inspire with an enthralling story for the ages is unsurpassed.

Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt
(H. W. Brands; Doubleday, 2008)

Another masterpiece. The research is thorough, the writing is pure Brands—sometimes dry but reassuringly elegant with an occasional spoonful of wry humor. For those of us paying attention to presidential politics, "Traitor" is a grim reminder of how badly the White House and especially Washington has stumbled since FDR left office. Roosevelt was the right man at the right time in American history. Gutsy, stoic, uplifting, savvy, brilliant if sometimes covert when not outright sneaky and able to connect readily with the 99%.

Another Armful of Great Books

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 13 January 2015 10:54

All of us might wonder perhaps where we would be without Roosevelt having been at the helm during the depression and WWII. Brands' most moving prose awaits the reader in the last few pages when he sums up the massive impact that FDR had on our country and the world. If FDR went over the top in the eyes of Winston Churchill, he was the answer to the dreams of many ordinary folks. Though sometimes perceived as stepping on the toes of his fellow aristocrats—the other 1%—Roosevelt was no traitor. We were lucky almost beyond measure to have had him.

Profiles in Courage (Senator John F. Kennedy; Harper, 1956)

Written by the then junior Massachusetts senator, John F. Kennedy's "*Profiles*" still serves as a soul stirring call to Americans. Focused on inspiring true accounts of relatively unsung heroic acts by American patriots at critical junctures in America's history, Kennedy's book became an instant classic. Sixty years later it remains a monument to national spirit and a celebration of political nobility, almost a non sequitur in today's world.

The book accelerated Kennedy's political fortunes. Back in 1956, he was charming, energetic, and well known as a WWII hero. But "Profiles" immediately vaulted him above his Congressional colleagues and established him as something of an intellectual heavyweight, facilitating Kennedy's nomination for president in 1960.

But seldom has a piece of non-fiction generated so much controversy, especially because it won the 1957 Pulitzer Prize for biography. The consensus today is that the book was actually written by committee. JFK provided the inspiration for the work and did some writing, but close aide Ted Sorensen did most of the detailed research and writing. Kennedy was more the executive "editor" than the "author." Sorensen was paid for his assistance, but overlooked when it came to public acknowledgment of his massive contribution. He eventually admitted the truth: he was, indeed, the main author of "

Profiles

.
" All

that said, the book is a stellar accomplishment, one of the finest inside looks at what it takes to stand firm for a greater cause in American politics.

Crime/Thriller Grand Buffet

Another Armful of Great Books

Written by Jack Sparacino

Tuesday, 13 January 2015 10:54

This is a thankfully crowded genre but several prolific writers stand out, including Lee Child, Patricia Cornwell, John Grisham, Robert Ludlum, Robert B. Parker, James Patterson, John Sandford, and Stuart Woods. Reading these authors is like crunching through the best popcorn you've ever eaten... Harry and David good.

Parker may be a tad less well known among these famous artists, which might be like saying Derek Jeter is a slightly less famous shortstop than Ozzie. I learned Parker's name while enjoying his wonderful Jesse Stone TV series starring Tom Selleck as a small town chief of police. Parker died recently, leaving a trail of lean and edgy dramas which include almost no excess dialogue and a slathering of humor to accompany the intrigue. And how can you not love a guy who adores dogs, which punctuate his plots and, no surprise, cover photos? He's waiting for us in the swirling fog, a Stone cold seriously fine crime writer.

OK, neighbors, have at it. These books are great fun and easy to find. Let me know when you discover more really good ones. I'm all ears.