

Books that Shaped the World

The importance of books lies in its substance and not its form. Whether on page or in pixel, the ideas perpetuated by books will continue to influence people and communities.

OVER A YEAR AGO, AS PART OF THE LEAD-UP to the first International Summit of the Book in 2012, the Library of Congress embarked on a project to create a list of books, principally titles written by Americans that have shaped America in various crucial ways. The list was intended to spark a national conversation on books that have influenced American lives and society, whether they appeared on this initial list or not. This project was inspired by work the British Museum did a few years ago to identify 100 objects that shaped the world.

For our project, Library of Congress curators identified the books and displayed copies of them in an exhibition. Our list of “Books That Shaped America” generated tremendous reactions from all around the country. People weighed in, as we had hoped, and took part in a discussion of the works that were on our list as well as books that were *not* on our list that they felt ought to be. Through our website, we invited people to send us their comments, including nominations of books that they felt should be on the list. This generated thousands of responses and persuaded us to make additions to the list, which now totals 100 books.

Beyond shaping America, books have created civilisation in a very real sense. When one goes from scrolls to codexes,

books with bound pages with a table of contents and an index, it is possible to use the latter as an introduction to critical thought. It represents a whole new phase that first began with the manuscript way back in the fourth century.

BOOKS THAT HAVE SHAPED US

What we might call the founding books of civilisation are in many ways the books of the great religions. These include the Christian Bible, much of which is based on the Jewish Bible. Then there is the Koran, the last of the great prophetic, monotheistic books. The Chinese and the Indian traditions are also part of the basis of world civilisation. There is the Chinese *Book of Lessons* that contains Confucius’ *Analects*, which was the basis of education in China, and also the basis for the civil service exams taken by Chinese officials for a thousand years. India produced the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the two great

This article, by the staff at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., US, comprises excerpts of an interview with Dr James H. Billington. Dr Billington is the 13th Librarian of Congress and was sworn in in 1987.



(ABOVE) The main reading room of the Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson Building. Image by Jiuguang Wang via Flickr.



Hindu epics and fundamental doctrines originally published in Sanskrit and translated into the many languages of the Indian subcontinent. These great epic poems, in a way, were the basis of much of Hinduism. Also to be considered is either of Saint Augustine's books, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* or *The City of God*, which were the basis of medieval thought and the whole concept of another spiritual world. These are all examples of great founding documents of civilisation.

The great founding epics of the Western tradition, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which are almost as old as the oldest Indian and Chinese works, are not to be forgotten. The first work on actual history is *The History of the Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides. I remember, as an undergraduate in college, hearing former Secretary of State General George C. Marshall give a speech, just before he announced the Marshall Plan (officially known as the European Recovery Pro-

gramme, which lasted from 1948 to 1951), saying he had been reading the aforementioned book and that it gave him guidance about the post-war world. Thus, that work of founding importance in Western history retains its importance even today.

In terms of philosophy, one must consider Aristotle's work. It was the basis of the theology of the Latin Church, which penetrated from Greece into the Islamic world, then into the Christian world and Jewish thought. All kinds of secular thought, and even early governmental thinking in the West, had its roots in the philosophical works of Aristotle. If I had to choose a particular work of Aristotle as being especially influential, I would select the edition of his work that was published in Venice in the early modern period.

When considering the founding books of civilisation, the rise of science must be taken into account. For example, there are the fundamental works of Copernicus, but



perhaps the most important of all, in the history of science, are the principles of natural philosophy by Isaac Newton, who gave us the law of gravity and so much else.

In terms of social science, one has to go to the Muslim world and Ibn Khaldun. Ibn Khaldun was born in what is now southern Spain and ended up being a founding figure in the northern African world. His *Prolegomena* and his longer seven volumes that were associated with it are really the first world history. He wrote a history that was also a treatise on

1750–1800

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (1751)
 BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, *Poor Richard Improved* (1732) and *The Way to Wealth* (1785)
 THOMAS PAINE, *Common Sense* (1776)
 NOAH WEBSTER, *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language* (1783)
The Federalist (1787)
A Curious Hieroglyphick Bible (1788)
 CHRISTOPHER COLLES, *A Survey of the Roads of the United States of America* (1789)
 BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, *The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin, LL.D.* (1793)
 AMELIA SIMMONS, *American Cookery* (1796)

1800–1850

New England Primer (1802)
 MERIWETHER LEWIS, *History of the Expedition Under the Command of the Captains Lewis and Clark* (1814)
 WASHINGTON IRVING, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820)
 WILLIAM HOLMES MCGUFFEY, *McGuffey's Newly Revised Eclectic Primer* (1836)
 SAMUEL GOODRICH, *Peter Parley's Universal History* (1837)
 FREDERICK DOUGLASS, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)

1850–1900

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850)
 HERMAN MELVILLE, *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* (1851)
 HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)
 HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853)
 HENRY DAVID THOREAU, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854)
 WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass* (1855)
 LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, *The Mysterious Key* (1867)
 LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, *Little Women, or, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy* (1868)
 HORATIO ALGER JR., *Mark, the Match Boy* (1869)
 CATHARINE E. BEECHER AND HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, *The American Woman's Home* (1869)
 MARK TWAIN, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)
 EMILY DICKINSON, *Poems* (1890)
 EMILY DICKINSON, *Slant of Light = Sesgo de Luz* (1890)
 JACOB RIIS, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)
 STEPHEN CRANE, *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895)

Bks that Shaped America



sociology, geology and an analysis of the movement from rurals to cities. He was the first great world historian. Arnold Toynbee said Khaldun was the greatest world historian of all, but alas he is not very well known. When I was teaching world history, I always began with a reading of *Prolegomena* and students were astonished that anyone could write that way in the 14th century.

Some of the founding great novels have had a hand in influencing the modern world, particularly Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which was beloved not only in Spain but throughout the great Spanish

empire. Another work that helped to define and usher in the modern world was the *Code Napoléon*.

A great founding book that first explained Africa, particularly northern Africa, on a broad scale was *Della Descrittione dell'Africa* by Leo Africanus. Africanus, a convert to Christianity, spent a great deal of time in Timbuktu, a city that is known as a great repository of African, French and Muslim-Arabic cultures, as well as a great centre of learning. Africanus wrote about Timbuktu and other parts of Africa. *Della Descrittione dell'Africa* was called a cosmography and a geog-

raphy. In its original version, it was published in both Italian and Arabic, pointing out the many links in the Mediterranean world among the three great monotheistic religions and also the different languages.

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* highlights the beginning of economics and the idea of a free, uncontrolled economy. And of course, Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, which held a very different view, must be mentioned.

In the world of drama, one might pick something from Sophocles. And one would also have to pick something from Shakespeare. For example, *Hamlet* might be selected because it created the most controversy and discussion, and contains the most psychoanalysis. Furthermore, it has some of the greatest soliloquies in the English language or in any language. In terms of the great novels, I would pick Tolstoy's *War and Peace* because it deals with the great problem of the modern state — war and peace. It also deals with family life and the mystery of history as distinguished from the analysis of history that was received from earlier historians, such as Thucydides or even Khaldun.

In addition to those mentioned so far, there is a whole range of works by other thinkers one would want to include such



L. FRANK BAUM, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900)
 SARAH H. BRADFORD, *Harriet, the Moses of Her People* (1901)
 JACK LONDON, *The Call of the Wild* (1903)
 W. E. B. DU BOIS, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)
 IDA TARBELL, *The History of Standard Oil* (1904)
 UPTON SINCLAIR, *The Jungle* (1906)
 HENRY ADAMS, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907)
 WILLIAM JAMES, *Pragmatism* (1907)
 ZANE GREY, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912)
 EDGAR RICE BURROUGHS, *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914)
 MARGARET SANGER, *Family Limitation* (1914)
 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, *Spring and All* (1923)
 ROBERT FROST, *New Hampshire* (1923)
 F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)
 LANGSTON HUGHES, *The Weary Blues* (1925)
 WILLIAM FAULKNER, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)
 DASHIELL HAMMETT, *Red Harvest* (1929)
 IRMA ROMBAUER, *Joy of Cooking* (1931)
 MARGARET MITCHELL, *Gone With the Wind* (1936)
 DALE CARNEGIE, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936)

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)
 FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT, *Idaho: A Guide in Word and Pictures* (1937)
 THORNTON WILDER, *Our Town: A Play* (1938)
 JOHN STEINBECK, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)
Alcoholics Anonymous (1939)
 ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940)
 RICHARD WRIGHT, *Native Son* (1940)
 BETTY SMITH, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943)
 BENJAMIN A. BOTKIN, *A Treasury of American Folklore* (1944)
 GWENDOLYN BROOKS, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945)
 BENJAMIN SPOCK, *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care* (1946)
 EUGENE O'NEILL, *The Iceman Cometh* (1946)
 MARGARET WISE BROWN, *Goodnight Moon* (1947)
 TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)
 ALFRED C. KINSEY, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948)

J. D. SALINGER, *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)
 RALPH ELLISON, *Invisible Man* (1952)
 E. B. WHITE, *Charlotte's Web* (1952)
 RAY BRADBURY, *Fahrenheit 451* (1953)
 ALLEN GINSBERG, *Howl* (1956)
 AYN RAND, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957)
 DR. SEUSS, *The Cat in the Hat* (1957)
 JACK KEROUAC, *On the Road* (1957)
 HARPER LEE, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)
 JOSEPH HELLER, *Catch-22* (1961)
 ROBERT E. HEINLEIN, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961)
 EZRA JACK KEATS, *The Snowy Day* (1962)
 RACHEL CARSON, *Silent Spring* (1962)
 MAURICE SENDAK, *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963)
 JAMES BALDWIN, *The Fire Next Time* (1963)
 BETTY FRIEDAN, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)
 MALCOLM X AND ALEX HALEY, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965)
 RALPH NADER, *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965)
 TRUMAN CAPOTE, *In Cold Blood* (1966)
 JAMES D. WATSON, *The Double Helix* (1968)
 DEE BROWN, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970)
 BOSTON WOMEN'S HEALTH BOOK COLLECTIVE, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971)
 CARL SAGAN, *Cosmos* (1980)
 TONI MORRISON, *Beloved* (1987)
 RANDY SHILTS, *And the Band Played On* (1987)
 CÉSAR CHÁVEZ, *The Words of César Chávez* (2002)



Access the list at: <http://www.loc.gov/bookfest/books-that-shaped-america/>



as Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Indeed, Freudian concepts have become so familiar that we forget how widespread and how important they are.

These are some of the people whose books have shaped the world. It is important to remember that the defining thing about a book is its length, which produces a cumulative impact that is distinguished from a talking point, an argument, or any

other use of language for some small, pointed purpose. The book's length is the important thing, regardless of whether it is read as a codex or on a Kindle.

Now we have the digital universe, but we also have the possibility and the importance of the book-length object. For us at the Library of Congress, the crucial challenge and opportunity is to integrate the old with the new, keeping them all together as different forms of knowledge, creativity and human expression, while retaining the values of the book culture that include the value of dialogue and argument, and the idea of cumulative knowledge.

This is what you get at libraries, which are consolidations of the different forms of creativity and knowledge. And this is what we need in the future, wherever we go: new techniques for holding information to supplement but never supplant the wisdom and power contained in books and the imagination they can create and feed. Nobody can agree completely on the ten, or the hundred, or the thousand books that most defined and shaped our world, but we must always remember how important they are in our own lives, and how important they are in the broader life of humanity. ●

DIALOGIC CULTURE VIA THE BOOK

As the 2013 International Summit of the Book looks to the future of the book culture and its values, it is helpful to examine the unique role of the book in dialogic culture. Simply put, books enable dialogues between readers and writers. They provide us with voices and experiences from other times and places; affect us with their marvellous stories; and make us more humane and civilised. All this is the beginning of the dialogic culture, which is essential for a democracy and helpful for a dynamic economy.

In talking about present and future dialogues, the impact of technology must be part of the discussion. At the Library of Congress, the whole purpose of our investment in new technology is to affirm the importance of the book culture. It is important to ponder the possibilities of the digital revolution in light of previous technological revolutions' impact on our modes of acquiring information, and communicating and sharing knowledge.

I strongly believe that one technological revolution never really cancels out the previous one. For example, manuscripts carried on long after books were introduced. In modern times, movies have not supplanted theatre, and radio is alive and well along with television.

Now as we look to the future, how will new technologies co-exist with existing ones?

(ABOVE) A statue of Ibn Khaldun in Tunis. Image by Kassus, via Wikicommons.