

10 Evergreen paperbacks

Author: Pete van der Walt

I can remember the first book I read – by myself and because I wanted to. There were always books around, at school or at home. Books of all kinds, including magazines. I suddenly felt a tremendous urge to read something.

So I went down to the corner café and picked a paperback with a good front cover: a guy in denim and a leather jacket was holding a badge and frisking a ‘perp’, backed by a partner whose moustache alone meant trouble. The perps, for their part, looked ready to get into it right there.

Detroit PD billed the cover in powerful, silver script, like the title of a movie.

Above it was the sales pitch, in all caps, ‘When Teenagers Become Ruthless Killers, The Streets of Motor City Turn Red’. There were three Detroit PD books on the turnstile that day, next to the bread slicer and the Pac-Man and Double Dragon arcade games. Run, Jack, Run by Tom Logan had the best cover so I picked that one.

It wasn’t what you’d call literature, but Logan understood his market and delivered. The pacing was better and more intense than anything I’ve read since then. And to a 10-or-so-year old, the profanity, explicit new ideas and graphic violence hidden inside the respectable pages was something of a drug. I got a big hit ... and I wanted more. That book – and whatever else it is and was – was the beginning of my lifelong love affair with books.

It took me a while to transcend the prejudice of my upbringing, and it would be years before I discovered anything remotely resembling ‘literature’. By now, I’ve done some classics (and let me tell you, between you and me, a lot of those pompous whiny yarns are way, waaaaaaay overrated). I’ve read a lot of good books. Fiction. Textbooks. Non-fiction. Bestsellers. Weird stuff. I like variety... and I make sure I read around.

But if I could describe what I mean, in my heart and soul and most basic self, when I use the word ‘book’ – there is a class of books that were present like familiar faces to everyone in my generations. Old-friend books.

Maybe your mom had some on her shelf; maybe you bought them yourself down at the second-hand bookstore. Or maybe you saw them when you bought ‘milk and bread’, or found them at your library. Or traded them like contraband in high school (one surly and insufferable Calvinist Afrikaans teacher confiscated my copy of an anthology called Shock Rock because he saw – shock and horror – a CURSE word somewhere on one of the pages. I never got it back).

You’ll know them when you see them, by their covers or their spines. If you’re like me, you’ve read something in all of them. Some failed to deliver on the social contract between author and reader. Others were solid. Those, you may have read several times.

There were hundreds like those. Books that contained adventures, ideas, concepts and dreams unheard of in the mining towns one might have hailed from.

This is not an exhaustive list. But I bet you’ll recognise these. These books are like good friends. They travel with you even if old friends and old flames jump ship. I loved these ten.

Jaws by Peter Benchley

Yup. The animal rights people can have a duck fit for all I care. If they thought it was safe to go into the water, even the public swimming pool's water, after that payload hit my juvenile psyche, then by all means they could swim all they wanted to – but without me.

A suspenseful tale, as much about small town politics and one man trying to shout 'WAKE UP PEOPLE!' while the rest are headed for the train wreck ahead as about that slick, chilling, scary thing that would take you if it could get you. Some good old-fashioned infidelity in there as well.

Benchley used a neat trick. He shifted point of view. First read a piece about a complex character, swimming for some reason. Then a piece about death itself slicing through the water and picking up said character's scent. And then back and forth, in a kind of sadistic staccato.

When that stuff started, you felt as if Benchley had you on his boat... and it was your job to scatter fish guts to attract the sharks.

I read Jaws maybe four times. I discovered something new each time. It's still a fantastic book. It will be one for some time to come.

IT by Stephen King

If you haven't read Stephen King, I'm afraid to tell you, you haven't read. This man was a god to myself and a fun girl I knew (hey, Nick). We collected everything we could find of King's, using a mild dose of competition to ensure that between the two of us, we could get to all the good stuff.

And for anyone from the TV generation, Stephen King has the best of the good stuff.

It's hard to know which of his rides to include; and his fans vary on the verdicts. Some prefer the reality-based stuff, perhaps his most terrifying – blood curdlers like Misery or Cujo. Some prefer the more sciency stuff like The Tommyknockers, or the iconic tales such as the brilliant Christine or Pet Semetary, or The Stand. There are also the downright creepy ones; The Shining and Dolores Claiborne come to mind.

Yes, King has scared me. But Stephen King is powerful because he gets into your head ... and he starts an internal dialogue that feels very familiar. As if those are your thoughts.

He makes you live in his world in ways I have seen very few people duplicate well.

And for this reason, whether you are just a kid or an adult that was once a kid, you will definitely want to read IT. The last remake was a good flick. Tim Curry as Pennywise will always have a special place in my heart. But what Stephen King pulls off in that book rivals what Michelangelo did for the Sistine Chapel. It's King in long-form. And I know those characters as if they are my family.

The Choirboys by Joseph Wambaugh

Joseph Wambaugh sure can take you for a ride. I once read a Joseph Wambaugh that had me laughing on one page, feeling guilty that I laughed on the next page, shocked me enough to have to put the book down on the page after that, laughing again on the next, and then ended with literally making me cry.

It's raw writing. His vocab fools you into thinking it may be more sophisticated than it is, but the picture he paints is phenomenal. He writes cop books, both fiction and non-fiction. I much prefer his novels. Here you get a pure shot of Wambaugh, undiluted by potential litigation.

It's the most cynical humor you'll ever be party to. Rough, but funny. Really funny. Laugh out loud funny. These aren't mysteries; his books are not about the good guys catching the bad guys. His books show you the excesses and vices, the dark fears and the flawed souls, the hurt and the terror and the loneliness of cop life. Wambaugh combines humor and tragedy, and occasionally he punctuates with shock. He has several good ones such as *The Delta Star* and *The Glitter Dome*.

The Choirboys was the first of his books that I finished. After that, I read everything else of his I could find, including ones I put down before. It is perhaps one of the most tragic things I have ever read, and I laughed all the way.

The Ninja by Eric van Lustbader

I'm talking about the one with the old cover, before designers got hold of his franchise. A simple white cover. Red title letters: *The Ninja*. Some Asian symbol (VERY exotic). And the deal closer: a flash that read 'Adults Only'.

I was an expert in ninjas as a kid. After all, I spent my summers renting every VHS I could find that had any ninja in it. And every other sort of martial artist as well. And action stars.

I wasn't ready to read *The Ninja* when I first picked it up. I was too young and the first pages felt inaccessible. Good thing too...

Eric van Lustbader told grandiose stories, spanning across time and place. There's a whole bunch of 'the East is so exotic' flowery language, sometimes accurate, sometimes just a little excessive.

Van Lustbader is a slow country drive on a Sunday afternoon, but only in terms of pacing. Along the way, there is some well-described violence, some sinister plots, and a generous amount of deliciously perverse 'love scenes'.

He has written quite a bit about the East, covering Indonesia, Burma, Japan, Korea and China in epic tales of vendetta. *The Ninja* featured ad executive Nicholas Linnear, also a ninja, and a villain that was killing SoCal types with ninja stars and swords.

Van Lustbader offers a curious buffet. It's worth a visit, you may like what's on offer.

Hawaii by James Michener

Begin the story as the continents form. Continue down each generation living in the place, starting with the first human, ending with a contemporary, and you have classic Michener. If you read James Michener, you get the scope of a place. He teaches you geography and history as he sees it. Everything you need to know about a place before you go there, it seems, could potentially be in these sagas. One-word titles, like *Poland* or *Alaska*.

Hawaii was a good one: the Polynesian migrations; early colonization; World War Two ... it's all in there. He describes the many different groups who call Hawaii home with sensitivity and honesty. The Hawaiians, the Japanese, Chinese, Spanish and Anglos.

He describes how specific economic systems had consequences, and tells the tale of several families.

For anyone interested in Hawaii, I recommend this novel. For the record, I've never been to Hawaii, but I know all about Hawaii because I read Michener's book.

Last of the Breed by Louis Lamour

The title says 'Western'. But Last of the Breed departs somewhat from the Grandmaster of Western Novels' usual yarns. It is the story of a Native American US Airforce pilot, shot down over Siberia during the cold war. The Russians send their own Native American tracker to catch him. These two modern 'First People' types get to rely on their ancestral knowledge and skills to play cat and mouse in the Siberian wilderness.

I have no idea how PC a book like this is, these days. I don't really care. It's a really good novel. I enjoyed it.

The Crash of '79 by Paul Erdman

Erdman wrote, I kid you not, financial thrillers. He was good at it too, describing some high holy finance terms in a way even little Dutch kids living in Vaal Reefs could understand. And the plots were good and fast. Think James Bond with billions of dollars. Exotic towns and countries, big scandals with 'current affairs' flavours and boom – you're reading books about international banking, stock markets and financial instruments.

The Crash of '79 was the first Erdman I read. A western adviser begins consulting to the Saudis, because they are getting ripped off. What follows, via the 'authorised financial service provider' channels, is the end of the economy as we know it. Like the Great Depression, but worse.

Helluva book.

Cold Fire by Dean R. Koontz

Yup, I'm old enough to still use the R.

Some people are DC fans, some Marvel. Some prefer PC, some Mac. For a while, it looked like the world was divided between Koontz fans and King fans. I was firmly planted in the King camp. Immovably so.

My sister the heretic, on the other hand, was a Koontz reader. One holiday she read some Cold Fire to me. We spent the rest of the school holiday reading to each other, until we finished that Koontz book.

It was Cold Fire... yet, he still was no King. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't love every moment of it. Chills, thrills, psychic abilities and a sinister windmill.

After Cold Fire, some of my fundamentalism lifted and I was able to read quite a few Koontz books. There were several that were rock and roll.

Rainbow Six by Tom Clancy

I never liked too much sci-fi or fantasy. I always preferred fiction that felt like fact. Grim reality for me, every time. Having said that, my own shelf of second-hands held a disproportionate number of horror books. Sometimes, however, you wanted something military, or something espionage, or whatever.

So you read Day of the Jackal, or anything by Colin Forbes. You also get The Hunt for Red October because the actual, real-life Bill Clinton said he liked it.

But in Rainbow Six, Tom Clancy is on his special forces trip. An international unit. Sniping skills that would put William Tell to shame. Exciting stuff... Of all his books, I liked Rainbow Six the best.

The Seventh Secret by Irving Wallace

Guess what? Hitler lived! And escaped!

And the whole plot is uncovered, with a side of romance and history. It lists evidence and you feel like a cross between a history buff and a detective, connecting dots and following the trail. I have no idea if it has any merit at all (I've heard some rumours on the Internet, so it must be, right?) but the book made you feel that the escape of Adolph Hitler did happen. It was a different read to my usual fare. And truth be told, I only read it because the other work of Irving Wallace's that I owned (which had a FAR more entertaining cover), called The Almighty, was loaned to someone and never returned. Once I got into it, it was pretty interesting.

I'm sure everyone has their favorite old-friend books.

Everyone is 'on Kindle' these days, and the new production values for book covers are far too slick – and a larger number of people than ever before prefer pretentious books they describe as 'literature'.

But if I enter a flat, or a house, or even a barber's and I find one of these old-friend books there, it always brightens my day.