What the Presidents Read: Childhood Stories and Family Favorites

Elizabeth Goodenough and Marilynn S. Olson, eds.
New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2025. Preface, introduction, afterword, index, about the editors, and contributors. 560 pp. $26.00 cloth. ISBN: 978153817782

As an adolescent, President John Adams was indignant that his teacher neglected mathematics, and he taught himself the subject with the aid of "Cocker's Arithmetick," a text employed by Benjamin Franklin for the same purpose. Millard Fillmore created the first permanent presidential library, donating his substantial private collection. Before him, a succession of more privileged presidents brought their own books with them to the White House, taking them home at the end of their terms. John Tyler urged his young daughter to keep up with her male cousin in her Latin studies and to practice letter writing: "Learn to write exactly as you would speak, since the writing [of] a letter is nothing more than conversing with one who is too far off to hear you" (p. 291).

These are some of the stories on offer in *What the Presidents Read: Childhood Stories and Family Favorites*, edited by Elizabeth Goodenough and Marilynn S. Olson. Their collection serves as an entertaining storehouse of facts and quotations, as well as a reference text recording the reading preferences of presidents, from the more famous to the relatively forgotten. Both editors have contributed essays to the book, which is beautifully produced, with high-quality color illustrations.

Numbering over five hundred pages, the collection is organized around various genres of texts that presidents read and discussed, including history and geography, sports games and play, textbooks and other literature that the presidents studied as children, periodicals, and narrative fiction. Each section begins with comments by various presidents about their reading in the genre and moves on to a series of short essays analyzing how they responded to their favorite texts. In sum, the book offers a cornucopia of facts, engaging trivia, and intriguing analyses related to various presidents' reading habits and attitudes toward literature.

As the editors write, the books read by presidents offer "glimpses into electorates and eras" (p. 436). In both private letters and public statements, American presidents frequently cite the books that influenced them as moral examples of enduring American values or as inspirational works that spurred them to courageous acts. Repeatedly, they suggest that their favorite books have influenced their political careers and personal lives. Discovering this elusive connection between cherished texts and political contexts is, in large part, the appeal of this volume.

Imaginative literature figures prominently in presidential recollections. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson pored over Aesop's fables as boys, later quoting them as examples of commonsense wisdom. Rutherford Hayes, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Benjamin Harrison, and Herbert Hoover were all familiar with the fiction or poetry of Walter Scott, a towering literary figure in the nineteenth century. Harrison encountered Scott's novels as a

boy on his father's Ohio farm and found them so enthralling that, according to an acquaintance, he "went through his volumes from beginning to end, and over and over again" (p. 440). Hoover read Scott's *Ivanhoe* at fifteen after having left school to work as an office boy. The novel "opened a new world" of medieval pageantry, romance, and heroism: "Suddenly I began to see books as living things" (p. 441).

Hoover's excitement at discovering a new novel reminds us that a book could be a scarce commodity for many adolescents in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lincoln lamented that his schoolteachers knew nothing beyond "readin,' writin,' and cipherin'" and that anyone "supposed to understand Latin… was looked upon as a wizard" (p. 315). Besides Lincoln, seven other presidents were born in log cabins; for many of them, becoming a reader was an accomplishment to be prized.

For readers of this journal, the section focusing on the literature of games and play may be of special interest. Abraham Lincoln's sons performed a theatrical on the flat roof of the White House, charging the staff a nickel to hear them sing, "Old Abe Lincoln Came Out of the Wilderness" (p. 88). Eleanor Roosevelt describes going into the woods to play at being Robinson Crusoe (pp. 73–74), an activity recommended as far back as the eighteenth century by Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Reading preferences highlight the wide range of presidential sensibilities. Gerald Ford wrote that he devoured the Horatio Alger series and "marveled over the successes" of poor boys who made good, noting that the books "had a significant impact on my ambition as I matured" (pp. 302–03). In contrast, John Adams took a far more idiosyncratic and eclectic view of reading. As he wrote in a letter to his wife in 1794, "I think I will read Sweedenbourg's works … Any Thing that shows a strong and strange Imagination and is neither melancholy nor stark mad, is Amuzing" (p. 436). As Adams makes clear, he is eager to explore diverse ideas, including those with which he disagrees.

Although an understandable choice for editors dealing with such a profusion of texts and responses to them, organizing the book by different genres of writing is a mixed blessing. Prolific readers like John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt emerge in somewhat fragmentary form as a patchwork of portraits under different genre headings. Similarly, works of fiction appear under a variety of genres, as periodical literature and as works of instruction. Such distinctions can feel arbitrary and distracting. Further, the book eschews discussions of political or partisan issues, another reasonable choice, given the editors' commitment to an objective stance. Still, this can make individual presidents appear detached from their historical context, minimizing the ways in which their reading influenced their political actions.

Nevertheless, this rich and entertaining collection offers insights into how reading shaped the sensibilities of presidents throughout the country's history. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when books were at the heart of cultural life, many presidents discussed their reading with precision and zest. Today, in an era of social media and digital technology, we can speculate whether presidents

will continue to enumerate with pride the texts that they have made their own.

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Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons

Premeet Sidhu, Marcus Carter, and José P. Zagal, eds.
Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2024. Contents, appendix, contributor biographies, index. 372 pp. $35.00 paper.
ISBN: 9780262547604

It has been fifty years since the original version of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) was published in 1974. Authors Sidhu, Carter, and Zagal's interdisciplinary anthology *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons* commemorates this milestone with essays about the game's past, present, and future. The book crosses both academic and industrial boundaries, featuring contributions by scholars, designers, and players. The chapters are organized into four relevant topics: histories, influences, critical play and analyses, and futures. Together, these sections provide a multifaceted yet accessible look into the game and its community.

The first section, "Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons," explores the game's history. The collection first celebrates many years of D&D scholarship with an opening reflection by sociologist Gary Alan Fine, the author of 1983's *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Fine narrates how he began studying a Minneapolis D&D group and how his book came to be published in an environment less welcoming to studies of popular culture. The following chapters examine the influence of war game design and culture on D&D. Jon Peterson continues his ongoing examination of the game's connection with war games, locating its preoccupations with exploration and character progression in the war-gaming tradition. Evan Torner traces D&D's combat focus to its war-gaming origins, arguing that inevitable combat is core to the game's ideological representation of characters, monsters, and even deities as potential combatants. Tony A. Rowe and Zach Howard then present a history of John Eric Holmes's D&D Basic Set, in which D&D's relative inaccessibility, inherited from war games, necessitated an approachable introduction to the game.

The history section goes on to highlight the contributions of designers who have modified the game's rules and settings. Michael Iantorno presents an interview with Ryan Dancey, a former Wizards of the Coast executive who championed the Open Gaming License that has provided a route for external creators to make and distribute content for D&D. Mateusz Felczak then analyzes how players have modified digital adaptations of D&D, working within each version's constraints to achieve different visions of digital D&D. The section ends with a personal history of customization—Stephen Webley outlines his experience returning to D&D during COVID-19 lockdowns with childhood friends. The group's play emphasizes the mundanity of adulthood rather than typical adventure and combat. The histories effectively trace a tension between