

## Books Matter

*By Howie Flomberg*

I have always been a reader. When I was young I remedied the effects of Dick and Jane by reading Tarzan adventures. Teaching children to read by cramming Dick and Jane down their throats should be a capital offense. As I got older I was hooked on the Black Stallion series. The lady at the library used to save the new ones for me. Books are my escape mechanism. They always have been and they always will be.

I enjoyed about 30 years as an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Business of a local college. One of my favorite courses to teach was "Introduction to Business." It's a survey course and I had the freedom to take the course anywhere as long as I covered the topics in the syllabus. I noticed that when I made literary references most of the students stared at me blankly. I decided to bring a novel into the course. I thought the humor and subtlety of Twain's "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court" would be ideal. The novel discusses a direct confrontation between late nineteenth-century industry and medieval superstition. As always Twain's humor makes some fascinating points. I used this novel in class for my last year as a teacher before I was forced to retire.

I assumed that this novel had been a staple of high school literature. How wrong I was. At most one or two students had read the book. Many of them were totally unfamiliar with Mark Twain. I was stunned. I could not imagine getting through High School without reading Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn. In my opinion these two books are the finest in American literature.

Reaction to the book was mixed. I'm sure that many of my students read the Cliff Notes instead of the book. When I discussed the book in class I brought up some subtleties that were only obvious if you had read the book. When I wrote the test I'm sure that the students who relied on Cliff Notes were self-identified.

Two things are obvious when you look at my personal library. I have collection of Twain's books. A couple of shelves down you will note my collection of books about the Arthurian legend. Next to Mallory's classic treatment of the legend I have a book by Steinbeck about the legend. Steinbeck's book is famously unfinished. I disagree. The last section of the book deals with Lancelot and Guinevere. The last line of the book is "And Lancelot wept." Apparently Steinbeck could not get past that point. That relationship marked the end of Chivalry. The relationship destroyed the Round Table and led to the death of Arthur. Just thinking about the power of those three words: "And Lancelot wept" moves me to this day.

There is one other example of the power of books. One semester I had a Russian woman in my class who was an excellent student. I asked her if she had ever read Ayn Rand's autobiography – We the Living. She had not read it so I gave her a copy.

About a week later she came up to me in tears. She had no idea of what happened after the Russian Revolution. The book opened her eyes. *Books matter.*