

My childhood of (not) reading

By [Randall Balmer](#)

August 13, 2014

In our "Books Change" series, historians of religion consider books that have changed us or have themselves been changed.

One of the reasons I was drawn to Jimmy Carter, first as an emerging national politician in the mid-1970s and then as a biographical subject decades later, was the similarity of our backgrounds. Both of us were reared in evangelical households, he in rural southwest Georgia and I in Nebraska, Minnesota, Michigan, and Iowa. We are both the oldest in our families: Carter had three younger siblings, and I have four younger brothers. We had “born-again” experiences at an early age, Carter at age 11 and me initially at, well, three years old—but that is another story.

There is one element of our childhoods, however, that couldn’t be more different: our relationship with books and reading. The Carter household was enamored of books. Jimmy Carter recalls that his parents encouraged their children to read, and they did. Even at mealtime, each family member was buried in a book, and family conversations often centered around what individuals were reading.

The teacher who exerted the most formative influence on Jimmy Carter was Julia Coleman, who frequently remarked that one of the students in her classes might one day become president of the United States. Coleman spent her summers at the venerable Chautauqua Institution in upstate New York. When she returned to Georgia one autumn to resume her teaching, she started a book club, likely modeled on the Chautauqua Scientific and Literary Circle, which claims to be the oldest book club in the nation.

Coleman challenged young Carter to read Leo Tolstoy’s classic *War and Peace*, which, depending on the edition, weighs in somewhere north of 1,200 pages. Carter accepted the challenge, thinking that *War and Peace* was a book about cowboys and Indians. Undeterred by both the scale and the subject, Carter completed the assignment, an achievement that speaks volumes about Carter’s determination. Once he sets his mind on a task, he sees it through.

In my childhood home, the Bible was our only book, and we were enjoined to read it daily. My father, who grew up on a farm in Nebraska and became a successful evangelical minister, had a fairly substantial library in his church study, and I know that he at least occasionally consulted commentaries in the course of preparing his sermons. Other than the newspaper, however (my father read it daily, the rest of us sporadically, if at all), reading was simply not part of our lives.

Nor was television a diversion for the first decade of my life; we didn’t own one, which I now consider an unalloyed blessing. There were other things to do, even surrounded by cornfields: the garden, bicycles, and baseball, even if that meant throwing the ball against a brick wall and catching it in my Sears & Roebuck baseball mitt.

To the best of my knowledge, the first book I read in its entirety was *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, by William Styron. I was in ninth grade, we had just moved from Bay City, Michigan, to Des Moines, Iowa, and my English teacher (for some reason) suggested that I read it. I did, and I was mightily impressed; Styron remains one of my favorite authors.

I wish I could report that the experience opened my eyes to the wonders of literature. It did, I suppose, to some degree, but I was always more interested in doing rather than being, to borrow Thomas Merton's categories.

I also suspect that those of us who grew up fundamentalist have an aversion to fiction. A literalistic approach to the Bible makes the reader tone deaf to allegory and thereby blocks the avenues to larger truth. If, for example, you insist that the creation accounts at the beginning of Genesis constitute history or science, you miss the big picture, namely that the stories are meant to convey larger lessons about the nature of God, humanity, and the created order. The approach in which the plainest, most ordinary interpretation is the correct one is hardly conducive to the development of a literary imagination. More to the point, fiction represents a diversion from reading the Bible itself.

Although I very nearly didn't attend college, my first year was a challenge for me. I remember purchasing the required textbooks and reading the words but struggling with comprehension. The fall semester of my senior year, however, was a turning point. There, at the Oregon Extension, I discovered the delights of the life of the mind, including books.

All these years later, my favorite genres include travel literature and especially *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*, by William Least Heat-Moon. *Blue Highways* provided the inspiration for my second book, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*.

Although I am a convert to reading, I suspect that I am one of the few people who would rather be writing a book than reading one. I have a lot of catching up to do, most of which, I'm guessing, will have to wait for when (and if) I retire.

I approach every summer with the vague aspiration that I will read several classics and thereby redress my educational deficiencies. But invariably I gravitate toward more contemporary novels, the most recent being *The Risk of Returning*, by Shirley and Rudy Nelson. And the demands of my own writing and requests for blurbs, recommendations, tenure letters, and reviews impede progress on literature.

The Ides of August is fast approaching. It appears that *War and Peace* will have to wait for another summer.

Our weekly feature *Then and Now* harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [Kate Bowler](#).