

Mark Zuckerberg's "A Year of Books" Without Any Classics

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO and founder of Facebook, made an announcement in January that he was launching a book club. He is calling 2015 "A Year of Books," and he has invited Facebook users to join him in discussions and participate in author Q&As online. "We will read a new book every two weeks and discuss it here," Mr. Zuckerberg explains on the book club's Facebook page. "Our books will emphasize learning about new cultures, beliefs, histories and technologies." Approximately 360,000 people so far have joined the community Facebook page and hundreds, following Zuckerberg's request, have added their suggestions for future books.

Not a single classic shows up in a quick perusal of these suggestions.

And that is fine. Zombie novels and Malcolm Gladwell books are a lot of fun. But if Mr. Zuckerberg's list does not include at least one classic, it is not living up to its potential. The classics are the books that really challenge us and can help us strengthen our careers. The classics—and especially those from long ago—make you work hard and climb outside your comfort zone. That is something our civilization seems to be forgetting how to do.

The average American reads five books a year, according to the [latest Pew report](#) on reading trends. And many people seem to have a reading niche (for example, true crime or romance), so all five of those books will be very much alike. But especially for top executives who need to exercise their minds, it is important to be just as innovative at choosing reading materials as at choosing creative work methods.

"If you're just reading business school texts or history,

which a lot of leaders say they read, that's very limited," says Rob Mass, senior compliance officer at Goldman Sachs. I know Mr. Mass because he and some other people you are about to hear from are long-term participants in seminars organized by my colleagues at St. John's. He likens reading to mental workouts—creating “muscle confusion” by reading a variety of books is better training for your brain. “From an educational perspective, if you work through something [difficult] and understand it, you're going to own it.”

This is why the classics are good choices for busy professionals who need to stretch as leaders. There are hundreds of classics that ask the big questions in life regarding relationships, loyalty, leadership, and morality.

Mr. Mass, who has been in the workplace for thirty-fave [sic] years as a compliance officer, corporate lawyer, and prosecutor, says he takes a bit of time every day to read classics. Recently, he has read [Don Quixote](#) (1605) by Miguel de Cervantes, [The Prince](#) (1532) by Niccolò Machiavelli and the [Nicomachean Ethics](#) by Aristotle. “The great books give you a sense of perspective and distance from the petty problems arising day to day,” he says. “When I spend time thinking about the big issues in books, somehow the problems I'm dealing with at work don't loom as the biggest problems in life. This perspective leads to calmness and success at work.”

“At the same time,” he continues, “they encourage you to ask yourself questions about the quality of your own life. For example, *Don Quixote* led me to identify the narrative that I had constructed about my own life over my decades in the workforce—the story I told myself that gave my life purpose—and to question that story. Reading Aristotle forced me again to ask myself what is the end or purpose of any human life, including my own. I have read the Ethics now three times over forty years—and each time my dialogue with Aristotle has been a different one. Reading the latest Harvard Business School book on management, history of WWII or Presidential

memoir, while certainly worthwhile, isn't nearly as nourishing to the soul."

The great books are enlightening, but you have to be patient to work through them. Sitting down with a book that is hundreds of years old is like challenging yourself with a tough puzzle.

"Plato and Aristotle and Socrates can drive you mad, but [reading them] teaches you the art of patience and sticking with it," says Stephanie Cooper Greenberg, a fundraising consultant. She recommends Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* for first-time classics readers—or for people who last picked up a classic in college. "To read these books as a well-formed person is life changing," she says. "Anyone working in the modern world, whether in science or business or just people trying to learn how to be better managers, reading the classics is the process of discovery. It is about endurance and persistence, and it will serve you in ways you've never imagined."

The classics also can also add variety to your day if, like many people, you are pigeonholed in your career. "The world is so specialized," says Peter Keith, a litigator in Baltimore who says he spends most of his time working in a very narrow corner of the law. He thinks many careers have become so constricted that it is easy to get trapped in a professional bubble. "Being highly specialized is necessary to be successful, but it means you become microscopic," he says. "It's wonderful to lift yourself out of that and ask the bigger questions. One way to do that is to tackle a challenging work like *The Prince* or Plato's [Republic](#), something written at a different time in a different type of prose. It takes time to figure out what is going on, but within it are pearls of wisdom."

Mr. Keith says he recently read *The Melian Dialogue* from the [History of the Peloponnesian War](#) by Thucydides, written in

431 BC. The piece is a debate between Athens, the dominant Greek city-state, and the tiny island of Melos, which resists the prospect of an Athenian siege. “This was about making a significant cultural decision that backfired,” he says. “This interesting piece of ancient history led me to think about how I evaluate difficult decisions.”

The classics can have another effect on modern business leaders. Working in today’s fast-paced society can lead to desperate daydreams of early retirement, as you get overwhelmed with daily emergencies. Taking a “staycation” with a classic can help you appreciate your path, says Ford Rowan, a former attorney who does conflict resolution and volunteer work in prisons. He says the Hebrew Bible gave him a measure of perseverance.

“The Book of Jonah in Hebrew Scripture has an abrupt ending,” he says. “We are left wondering what Jonah would do next. He is left sitting under a withered shade tree, enraged at God for forgiving his enemies, and saying, ‘Take away my life for it is better for me to die than to live.’ Then the story ends. The sudden ending prompts the reader to think about what he or she would do in this situation. For me it strengthened my resolve not to retire and rot away on some sun-soaked beach.”

Mark Zuckerberg does not seem to be ready to retire any time soon. But if he is on a sun-soaked beach somewhere, I hope he is trying to decide between Aristophanes and Montaigne for his next book club pick. That a famous young CEO is encouraging people of all ages to engage with books—any kind of books—is a good thing. It demonstrates that even a busy executive with a household name recognizes the benefits of taking time out of his day to enjoy literature that provides a bit of reflection.

It would be even more encouraging if he would add some classics to his list.?

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