

## My Golden Treasury of Eyestrain!

Written by Greg Mills

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Greg can be read and/or hired at his [website](#).

Because I'm turning forty this year and I'm not about to take up physical activity, I have set out to read 75 books in 2009.

I've tried to read books that "count", thorny books I've been meaning to read but were intimidated by.

I'm at around 54 right now, and I'm working on two right now, Fooled by Randomness and The Trouble with Testosterone.

Here's everything I've knocked down to date:

A Few Seconds of Panic (A journalist attempts to be a professional placekicker in the NFL)

Polyphemus (Creepy short stories)

Alan's War The Memories of G.I. Alan Cope (Lovely Biographic Graphic Novel)

Burma Chronicles (Graphic Novel the author's experiences living in Burma)

Why Is There Something Rather Than Nothing?: 23 Questions from Great Philosophers (Leszek Kolakowski)

The Wasp Factory (Disturbing novel)

The Beautiful Struggle (Lyrical autobiography of an African American guy who blogs for the Atlantic)

The Spiritual Tourist (British journalist investigates various Gurus)

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The Politics of Chaos in the Middle East (Book about the various factions within Middle Eastern politics)

Understanding Comics (Nice meditation on the art of Comics)

City of Glass The Graphic Novel (Graphic Novel version of Paul Auster's crazy novel)

Cults In Our Midst (Book about scary cults!!)

Rum, Sodomy & the Lash (33 1/3) (Slim little book about the Pogues album)

The Borscht Belt (History and anecdotes from the Borscht Belt from Joey Adams, old school Jewish stand-up comedian and tumbler)

Science, Politics and Gnosticism (Cranky rant from a conservative German political scientist)

Myth and Reality (Mythic vs. reality-based temporal experiences. The author, Mircea Eliade, makes a roman a clefy appearance in Saul Bellows' Ravelstein as a pro-fascist crank)

Every Force Evolves a Form (Really, really good collection of essay written by Guy Davenport. Amazing stylist.)

Feet of Clay (Pathology of Gurus. I was on a cult jag.)

The structure of scientific revolutions (Many people talk about this book. I decided to read it. Painful.)

Wabi-Sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers (Airy Fairy book about Japanese aesthetics. Probably a good bathroom books for homes with an abundance of potpourri and smelly candles)

Nixonland (A doorstep of a book about the rise of Nixon)

Truth About the Irish (Terry Eagleton. Pretty slight but funny)

The Ayatollah Begs to Differ (Really good book about internal Iranian politics by an Iranian American guy)

Moonshine (OH MY GOD. Great book. Author hangs out with a revenue agent, busting moonshiners. Alec Wilkinson is the author)

Noodling for flatheads (Author examines various curiosities of Southern American culture, such as eating squirrel brains. Funny book.)

Something Wonderful Right Away (Oral history of the Compass Players, the forerunner to Second City and various improv comedy troops)

catapult: harry and I build a siege weapon (Two guys build a catapult. Better than it sounds)

The Devil We Know (More Iran. Not as fun to read as the Ayatollah book above)

Your Name Here (POEMTRY, John Ashbury.)

A Childhood: A Biography of Place (Hair raising memoir of a Georgia childhood)

The Wisdom of Doubt (Exhaustive philosophical apologia of religious doubt)

Moral Minority (The Founding Father were children of the Enlightenment and skeptics.)

Patriotism and Other Mistakes (Various essays by George Taleb about various aspects of public life)

Imagined Communities (Benedict Anderson's look at the invention of nationalism)

Marriage, a History (See title)

Boys on the Bus (Journalists are bored and drink a lot during the McGovern campaign in '72)

Jesus Interrupted (Book about inconsistencies in the New Testament)

Being Good: An Introduction to Ethics (See title)

Creationists (Forgettable collection of essays by by E.L. Doctorow)

TWELVE YEARS An American Boyhood in East Germany (Great book by James Agee's son, who grew up in East Germany)

Veeps (Funny survey of American Vice Presidents)

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On Being Certain (Neurologist and physician posits that the feeling of certainty has nothing to do with outward reality)

The Devil's Candy (Book about the film version of Tom Wolfe's "Bonfire of the Vanities")

The Corpse Walker: Real Life Stories: China from the Bottom Up (Great book about misfits in modern CHina. Sort of like a studs terkel book)

Politics of the Governed (Partha Chatterjee's rejoinder to the Benedict Anderson book referred to above. Newly emergent post-colonial democracies are missing an opportunity when they attempt to emulate the institutions of former colonial powers.)

Losing My Religion: How I Lost My Faith Reporting on Religion in America-and Found Unexpected Peace (Believing LA Times reporter covers religion, and is subsequently grossed out.)

Inventing American History (Boston Review Books) (Three slender essays about how popular history is tweaked and glossed over in order to serve national mythologies)

The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture (Okay, I sort of ended up with this one in a roundabout way.

At my last on-site freelance assignment, there is a pretty good little bookstore nearby where'd I'd peruse the shelves during my lunch break.

I was poking around in the philosophy section, looking at shelf after shelf of books whose titles I couldn't understand when I came across something called Slavoj Zizek presents Mao: On Practice and Contradiction. I'm a begrudging fan of Zizek, mainly because he can be funny and he's as pragmatic as a crazed Marxist can get, and I'd imagine he'd have an interesting take on Mao.

I pick up the volume, and I see that all Zizek did was write an introductory essay to Mao's On Practice and Contradiction. And who the hell wants to read Mao?

So I note the title of Zizek's essay "Mao Zedong: The Marxist Lord of Misrule" and decide to Google it when I get back to the office. Sure enough, it's there in its entirety. I print up for the train ride home.

Interesting essay. Lays the foundation for an expensive future visit to Amazon. But one strange little passage sticks with me (Read it. It's long but weird):

"Mao's speculations closely echo the so-called "bio-cosmism," the strange combination of vulgar materialism and Gnostic spirituality which formed occult shadow-ideology, the obscene secret teaching, of the Soviet Marxism. Repressed out of the public sight in the central period of the Soviet state, bio-cosmism was openly propagated only in the first and in the last two decades of the Soviet rule; its main theses are: the goals of religion (collective paradise, overcoming of all suffering, full individual immortality, resurrection of the dead, victory over time and death, conquest of space far beyond the solar system) can be realized in terrestrial life through the development of modern science and technology. In the future, not only will sexual difference be abolished, with the rise of chaste post-humans reproducing themselves through direct bio-technical reproduction; it will also be possible to resurrect all the dead of the past (establishing their biological formula through their remains and then re-engendering them - at that time, DNA was not yet known...), thus even erasing all past injustices, "undoing" past suffering and destruction."

WHAT. THE. FONZI.?

COSMISM! Sound like a worthy candidate for my book buying dollars! Red zombies!

Now, it just so happens about a year ago I went through a Stalinism phase, because who

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hasn't, right? (Note: I was not an actual Stalinist. I was just interested in that period in Russian history, okay?) One of the books I picked up was a strange, very interesting book called *New Myth, New World From Nietzsche to Stalinism*, which made that case that Soviet ideology in the twenties and thirties ripped off a lot of ideas from Nietzsche, while at the same time holding him up as reactionary boogie man. (In the same order I also picked up the excellent *Everyday Stalinism*. If you're interested in Russian or Soviet history, this is a good 'un.)

Amazon very thoughtfully recommended *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* when I was purchasing my crazy Nietzsche book (same author!), and the name stuck with me (I didn't buy it at the time because it seemed creepy and I had yet to stumble across the madness that is Cosmicism).

So I Googled *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture* and did a search of the index, and yep, you got your dang Cosmicism right 'chair. So I bought it

And it's good! It's a multi-disciplinary collection of essays by various scholars and it traces different aspects of Soviet ideology, philosophy of science, and aesthetics to different strains of pre-revolutionary Russian folk mysticism, Theosophy, masonry, Mysticism, etc.

Funny how the mind wanders, isn't it?)

*Cultural Amnesia* (Exhaustive book of biographical essays about various folks, which, in sum, prove that the author Clive James is way smarter than me.)

*Occidentalism* (The "Occident" in this case being liberal democracy and Enlightenment values. The authors trace the history of anti-liberalism through Imperial Japan, Germany, Russia, Zionism and various strains of Islamism. Interesting book.)

*Diaries 1969-1979: The Python Years* (Michael Palin. Duller than one would think)

*The Waste Books* (Many, many aphorisms written by 18th century German person, Georg Lichtenberg)

*In Praise of Barbarians* (Disappointing collection of shrill essays written by Mike Davis, who wrote the excellent *City of Quartz*.)

*Who Hates Whom* (Breezy book about ethnic hatred and modern warfare.)

After January 1st, I think I'm never, ever going to read ever again.