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Spine Bending: The Favorite Novels of Law Librarians

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The favorite novels of law librarians

By Stacy Fowler

I recently read an interesting blog post from a fellow librarian. She took 11 "Top 100" book lists and, in order to satisfy her OCD, cross-referenced the lists to find out which books could be found the most frequently.

It is an eye-opening list; you can access it at **www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/1iw3jq/top_books_derived_from_11_top_100_lists**. What caught my attention was that one of the lists she used was compiled by Brodart in 1999, and the title was "The 100 Favorite Novels of Librarians" (available at **www.the-bookman.com/main/Best.books.html**). This made me curious as to how a list compiled of responses from law librarians today would mirror or differ from the Brodart list. I decided to find out by conducting a quick survey.

Short and Simple

We all know that there are few things worse than a seemingly never-ending survey. So I keep it short and to the point by asking one question: "What is your favorite novel?" I thought it might be interesting (to me, at least) to see what types of librarians answered the survey, so I also ended up asking for job title and name (name was designated as optional, but all but one of the respondents gave their name). Simple enough, but now what?

My main hurdle was to figure out how to get the word out that I was conducting this survey. I began with the law-lib listserv, which is how I eventually got about one-third of my responses, but they came in slowly—I ended up posting my question twice. When it did not look like I would get enough responses through that avenue, I got a little more creative. My post on the *AALL Spectrum* Blog didn't generate many responses either.

Finally, I decided to go all out, and I broke out my AALL Membership Directory and began emailing people individually. This was the most helpful, though I know some people found it obtrusive and others wondered if they were being spammed. Most responses I received, however, were supportive, giving a response and saying how interested they were in seeing the final results.

All in all, my unofficial survey received a decent number of responses. Some replies intrigued me more than others. I was surprised by how many people got "upset" about the question, like I had offended them in some way by asking them for one title. Many of them said, "Wow, really? How do people have a favorite (or only one favorite)?" One person even told me that she had never met a librarian who had just one favorite novel, and I actually did have several people list more than one. In those situations, I always used the first one listed—I figured there was something Freudian in it.

Anyway, I did not see my question as a difficult one, but that may be because I have a favorite novel (one shared by a couple of other respondents, as well). It is *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith, and since first reading it at the age of nine, I have read it at least 50 times. Every time I reread it, I feel like I'm reading it for the first time, and every time I reread it, I gain something new. For those of you who have not read this novel, it is a period piece, a coming-of-age story set in pre-WWI New York. There was a movie based on the novel that came out in the '50s, but I only watched it once—I have read this book so many times that I "know" what the characters look like, and, unfortunately, the casting director's choices failed to meet my extremely high expectations.

The Results

I finally amassed a decent number of responses, and, though there were many unique responses, there were also many books that came up repeatedly. As could be expected, many of our responses fell in line with the other lists that are out there. There were some glaring differences, however. For one, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, which made 10 of the 11 lists referenced, was chosen by only one of my respondents. And the author who has been the bane of my existence since my undergrad days, one William Faulkner (whose *The Sound and the Fury* was on nine of those lists), wasn't

mentioned at all. I, therefore, declare my faith in law librarians justified.

Leading the pack was the old standard, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Right behind it, with only one fewer vote, was *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. As a group, it seems that we as law librarians are not so different from any other group, as these novels are near or at the top of most of the lists I perused, including being named the top two on the Brodart list.

These two novels garnered 10 percent of the total votes, the same percentage as the next eight choices combined. So the top 10 responses comprised 20 percent of the total responses, nice round numbers that satisfy my OCD as well. Without further ado, here is the list of the top 10 responses. Also, in case anyone is curious, the number in parentheses following the author's name is the ranking of that book on Brodart's list.

The Top 10:

1. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (No. 1)

2. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (No. 2)

3. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald (No. 10)

4. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (no one would choose just one of the books) by J.R.R. Tolkein (No. 5)

5. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (No. 32)

6. *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez (–)

7. *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas (No. 57)

8. The *Harry Potter* series (again, no one really wanted to narrow this down to any one book!) by J.K. Rowling (–)

9. *Middlemarch* by George Eliot (–)

10. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving (No. 8)

As you can see, there is quite a bit of crossover, but two of the law librarians' top 10 were far down on Brodart's list, and three did not make Brodart's list at all. (In fairness to J.K. Rowling, however, her first *Harry Potter* book had only been

out for a few months in the United States when Brodart's list was compiled.)

As a side note, I also noticed that there were quite a few authors with more than one novel mentioned. For those who might be interested, here is an alphabetical list of those authors who had three or more books mentioned among my responses:

- Jane Austen (*Emma, Persuasion, Pride and Prejudice,* and *Sense and Sensibility*)
- Charles Dickens (*Bleak House, A Christmas Carol, David Copperfield, Great Expectations,* and *A Tale of Two Cities*)
- Gabriel Garcia Marquez (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold, Love in the Time of Cholera,* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*)
- George Orwell (*1984, Animal Farm, Down and Out in Paris and London,* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*)
- Ayn Rand (*Atlas Shrugged, The Fountainhead,* and *We, the Living*)
- Neal Stephenson (*Anathem, Cryptonomican, Quicksilver,* and *Snow Crash*)
- Kurt Vonnegut (*Blue Beard, Cat's Cradle,* and *Slaughterhouse Five*)
- Edith Wharton (*Age of Innocence, Ethan Frome,* and *The House of Mirth*)
- Virginia Woolf (*Mrs. Dalloway, Orlando,* and *To the Lighthouse*)

Favorites, Old and New

Favorites are personal things, and, if everyone liked the same thing, this world would be pretty boring, as would our libraries. That is why I am glad I conducted this survey. There were quite a few books and authors mentioned that I did not know about. I am particularly grateful for those responses as it is always exciting to learn about authors who may soon become new favorites of mine. As a result of this project, I am definitely looking forward to curling up with a few good books. ∎

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