

# SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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## Summer Reading

*Ten new titles that won't take you all summer to read (under 500 pages each).*

*1776* by David McCullough. It would be difficult to imagine a more pleasant combination: the stirring history of early America, brought to life by a widely-respected historian gifted at writing for a general readership. You may be familiar with his acclaimed biographies of Harry Truman and John Adams (he won a Pulitzer for each). Here McCullough turns his attention to George Washington.

*The Cube and the Cathedral: Europe, America, and Politics Without God* by George Weigel. Herein lies a penetrating critique of Europe's spiritual crisis, and America's potential future. Along the lines of such historians as Christopher Dawson, Weigel looks at history through a cultural lens (rather than a political or economic lens). Weigel concludes that societies and cultures are only as great as their spiritual aspirations.

*The World is Flat: A Brief History of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* by Thomas Friedman. Traveling the world as a columnist for the New York Times, Friedman pauses occasionally to draw from his research and present his own insights. Here he follows up "The Lexus and the Olive Tree" with a study of globalism, arguing that telecommunications and other technology have largely eliminated barriers for countries wanting to join in the prosperity of the West (hence the "flat" world).

*Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* by Malcolm Gladwell. Quick decision making provides Gladwell with the follow-up to his highly successful book *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell will take you across the map – from Robert E. Lee to Coca-Cola – but will keep you utterly engrossed for the entire journey.

*Real Sex: The Naked Truth About Chastity* by Lauren Winner. One of the best books in recent years on the difficulty – and importance – of sexual chastity. Winner confronts the cultural lies about sex, and brings fresh challenge to Christians and churches on the subject. Do not be misled

– this is no mere moral treatise. It is an engaging and thoughtful cultural, spiritual and theological essay that reads with the ease of a memoir.

*Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* by Jared Diamond. While these ten books were billed as all being under 500 pages, this is one exception – but just barely (525 before endnotes). Diamond won the Pulitzer Prize for his earlier work, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, which took the reader on a tour of 15,000 years of human history. Here the journey continues with an exploration which details why past societies succeeded or failed (hint: the answer is found not in natural disasters, but in the title's most provocative idea – that of choice).

*Four Cultures of the West* by John W. O'Malley. The idea behind this book is that there are four cultures so deeply embedded in Western history that we often fail to identify them. Each began in the ancient world, took on Christian forms, and now manifest themselves in secular forms. The four cultures are: the prophetic culture that proclaims the need for radical change in the structures of society (Jeremiah, Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr.); the academic culture that seeks to understand those structures (Aristotle, Aquinas, the modern university); the humanistic culture that addresses fundamental human issues and words for the common good of society (Cicero, Erasmus, and Eleanor Roosevelt); and the culture of art and performance that celebrates the mystery of the human condition (Phidias, Michelangelo, Balanchine). Using the history of Christianity, O'Malley provides penetrating insight into the larger history of the West.

*The Gospel According to America: A Meditation on a God-blessed, Christ-haunted Idea* by David Dark. "Under a broad pop-culture umbrella, using icons from music, literature, film, the media, and politics, David Dark hopes to provide fodder for lively conversation about what it means to be Christian and American in this "weird moment" in which we live. It is a moment when we are increasingly polarized along political and religious lines, a moment when we are too busy forming our response to listen to the one who is speaking. And yet we claim more than ever to be one nation under God. What does all this mean? The end result, he hopes, will be a better understanding that "there is a reality more important, more lasting, and more infinite than the cultures to which we belong," the reality of the Kingdom of God." (from the back cover)

*Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. Winner of this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction, Marilynne Robinson's novel tells of an elderly Iowa pastor, seventy-seven year-old John Ames – a truly good and virtuous character, yet one that is still engaging (not an easy feat to pull off). The story is told as a letter from Ames to his son, written in 1956, passing on family history and life lessons the son will need to know. The novel invites reflection on all father-child relationships, and perhaps more importantly, what they *can* be like. But more than anything, Robinson gives us a grace-filled novel that embodies the best of writing.

*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton. What is going on in the religious and spiritual lives of teenagers? *Soul Searching* answers, reporting the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, the largest and most detailed study of teenagers and religion ever undertaken. Headlines: Yes, they are religious and open to spirituality. No, it isn't a particularly coherent spirituality (they need a course in "Christianity 101").

Bonus Track (from the "Shameless Commerce Division"):

*Just released:*

*The Prayer God Longs For* by James Emery White (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

### About Serious Times

Launched in conjunction with the release of the book, *Serious Times* (InterVarsity Press, 2004), the aim of this site is to serve the vision of the book in an ongoing manner. At [serioustimessite.com](http://serioustimessite.com) you will find reading lists and book reviews, "whitepapers" on critical issues and strategic links to other sites, small group resources and homeschooling curriculum, tapes/cd's and study guides. You can even sign-up for this bi-weekly "Serious Times Update."