



25 Favourite Books

During the CIMB-CGS Leadership Talk on 15th December 2020, I was asked what are my favourite books. I did not want to rush and answer then, as I wanted to give it some thought. They asked for five, its impossible to name only 5! So, here is 25:

1. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's magnum opus, **100 Years of Solitude**. I read this in 1982, when the Colombian master had just won the Nobel Prize. Finished the last sentence at an empty Alhambra in Granada, Spain one magical sunny February afternoon. Over the years just did not have time to read literary works of fiction, need to return to this as it gives much more insight into human nature, and is limited only by imagination. Gabo takes it to another level with his “magical realism” style.
2. **The Great Railway Bazaar** by Paul Theroux. A classic in the travel writing genre of his epic train journey in the 1970s from London to China and back via among others India, Malaysia, Trans Siberia and Central Asia. I read it when I was 19, reread at 39, and, alhamdulillah, managed to fulfil a long term dream to do the trip (and more!) before I was 59. My Kembara Kretapi 2019 took 77 days and 77 trains and various ships and other vehicles over 22 countries and 4 continents, from Kajang to Kajang via circumnavigating around the world !
3. **The Glory Game** by Hunter Davies. This is the book that cemented my love for football and one particular club, Tottenham Hotspur FC. It was published in 1972, a behind-the-scenes story of the club and its players, with the writer being given unprecedented access, unknown for that time. I would have borrowed a copy from the British Council as a boy. It's probably correct to say I learned English most of all from reading football comics, magazines and books such as this. Today, sports and football books and Netflix and Amazon documentaries are dime a dozen. The Glory Game remains at or near the top of the genre as a classic. A prized item in my book collection is a first edition of this book, autographed by the current Tottenham Chairman, Daniel Levy
4. **A Malaysian Journey**. A seminal coming-of-age Malaysiana book in the 1980s and early 1990s by the late writer and my MCKK senior, Rehman Rashid. Rehman was the *enfant terrible* of Malaysian journalism in the 1980s and early 1990s. His Scorpion Tales column in the NST and the likes the Lat's cartoons captured the spirit and zeitgeist of that decade. In between leaving Salomon Smith Barney in August 2000 and starting at Cambridge for my masters shortly after, I actually wrote a couple of pieces for a blog site run by a friend, Jeff Ismail, and edited by Rehman. Journey was published in 1993 and

for reasons best known to him, it was not until 2016, 23 years later, did Rehman publish again, with two books, *Peninsula* and *Small Town*, shortly before his untimely death in 2017. My abiding memory of Arwah is a beautiful evening at our home in 2016 when Rehman and a few other MCKK friends came over for dinner and he read from his just published *Peninsula* for us that afternoon – the whirlwind style and anger of *Journey* had much matured into a beautiful atmospheric book in what turned out to be his lasting imprint.

5. **The Future of Economics - an Islamic Perspective** by Dr Umer Chapra. I spent the summer of 2001, after my Masters, studying this book, that juxtaposes classical and development economics with the perspective of Islam and in particular a paradigm for prosperity and equity shaped by the framework left by Ibn Khaldun, the great 14th century Muslim scholar often described as history's earliest social scientist. Dr Chapra's book really helped me to locate and synthesize my own development in trying to understand Western economics in its own traditions of its classical provenance through to latter day conceptions including development economics as well as between Western classical economics within the paradigm of Islamic economics.
6. **The Holy Quran.** This is of course, in many ways, it cannot be put together in the list as it's a book like no other. But to leave it out would also be a material omission so here it is. In my childhood, as like a 8 or 9 year old, in Kg. Tunku Petaling Jaya I was often playing truant skipping *mengaji* classes (Quran reading classes) often to organise our junior housing estate football team called, of course, Kampung Tunku Hotspur ! As a result, I had to relearn how to read the Quran properly in my late 20s and for that I must thank Ustadz Nik Muhammad of Kg. Tunku who patiently took me through the adult class. This is truly the great miracle granted to Prophet Muhammad, the divine word of God, healer, guide, furqan (arbiter between right and wrong), practical manual, fount of wisdom, and our life companion that gives the ultimate rest to our hearts.

A further list of notable mentions

Literary works

7. W. Somerset Maugham's **Of Human Bondage**, supposedly autobiographical, of a young man searching for identity and meaning. Maugham wrote a lot about Malaya incidentally.
8. Pramoedya Ananta Toer's **This Earth of Mankind**, part of his famous Buru quartet that he wrote while in jail. A rendering of the Indonesian struggle for independence and decolonisation.
9. **Love in the Time of Cholera.** Another Garcia Marquez classic. The only romantic novel in this list, and perhaps unsurpassable in the genre. Apparently based on his parents' epic love story over more than six decades, it drips with so much passion and unrequited longing, enough to arouse just about any young or old men and women I would think. You can almost smell the sheets!
10. **Murder on the Orient Express.** Many a long and hot afternoon was spent lying on cooler terrazzo floors (no air conditioning in the late 60s and 70s) reading books by Agatha Christie, Conan Doyle and before that by the likes of Enid Blyton. Could have chosen any of the half a dozen or so of her books, but given my love for trains and travel, I choose this one. Whodunits and thrillers remain an engaging and pleasurable escape in reading.
11. **The Mimic Men** by V.S. Naipaul. A relatively short novel of the story of one Mr Ralph (Ranjit) Singh, a recent arrival to the UK in the 1950s from the Caribbean. A story of cultural displacement, of fitting in, and a colonial in a post-colonial world. Something a

young Malaysian student in the early 1980s, alone in his Muswell Hill bedsit could relate to! Naipaul, who won the Nobel prize in 2001, is a complicated person – such a profoundly brilliant writer, but is, by many accounts, a quite terrible human being in person!

Malaysiana...

12. **Malay College 1905 - 1965.** This is a jubilee book about MCKK on the occasion of its 60th anniversary. A copy was given to every boy who entered in Form 1. I still have my mine, scribbles and all. Very well written. First time it opened my eyes about the ethos of the college which is really about *Khidmat Ku Berikan* (a line from the College anthem).
13. **The Wandering Thoughts of a Dying Man.** A rare book I picked up in a Singapore junk shop by a Malay gentleman who lived in the early 1900s. The first Malay school inspector in the British colonial system. Also the first batch at MCKK in 1905. Very well written and captures well the dignity of those old perfect Malay gentlemen.
14. **The Reluctant Politician.** A portrait of the late Tun Dr. Ismail. Often described as the best Prime Minister we never had, a great statesman and a reminder that politics should be the art of ennoblement, and not the sleazy art of the possible. Written by a Singaporean academic from Arwah's Tun's papers

Economics, Finance, History ...

15. **23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism** by Dr. Ha-Joon Chang. An international bestseller, an iconoclastic view of economics and critique of capitalism by the Cambridge development economist. Ha-Joon was my supervisor when I did my M.Phil and I continue with him now as a Visiting Fellow at the Centre of Development Studies in Cambridge that he heads.
16. **Frontiers of Development Economics** - a collection of seminal essays on this discipline co-edited by Professor Joe Stiglitz, the Economics Nobel laureate, who remains a close friend of Malaysia and whose work remains a source of inspiration
17. **Against the Gods** by Peter Bernstein. A 1990s bestseller on "The Story of Risk" from a Wall Street veteran and writer. Beautifully written, it had a lasting effect on my thinking on risk and return .
18. **The Den of Thieves** by James Stewart. A 1990s Pulitzer Prize winning story on Michael Milken's insider trading case written by a WSJ reporter who covered the story then. Pitting the heroic and underpaid surveillance team of the regulators vs. the junk bond king, the story reads like a racy thriller and indeed the thick book was read over the weekend. Perhaps a precursor in the same genre to 'The Billion Dollar Whale' decades later!
19. **The Last Mughal** by William Dalrymple. An account of the fall of Delhi in 1857 to the British forces bringing an end to more than three centuries of Mughal and Muslim rule of the sub-continent. The writer, a consummate Indophile, gives a sensitive human account of this history. One scene that remains seared to my memory is how the last Mughal emperor was arguing with his courtiers and court poets about which shade of colour was the moon, while the British soldiers stormed the city and his palace. He died in ignominy in a Rangoon prison later. A reminder of how the mighty can and will fall.
20. **Collapse** by Jared Diamond. With apologies, that this is the one book in this list that I have not finished reading (but hope to do so insyaAllah in 2021), but as it's an important genre I thought it merited inclusion. Professor Diamond's thesis is nonetheless well known, and while reading the book, he is also accessible on YouTube. An important message that societies and nations fall or collapse when it becomes unsustainable. At one

level it is about environmental degradation until you realize that that's only the symptom. The real cause of collapse is inevitably the underlying moral decay. This genre of rise and fall of nations is a popular one, with many brilliant books, but Jared Diamond's inter-disciplinary approach using natural and social sciences and written in a style accessible to non-specialists is I think what makes it more satisfying.

Islam

21. **In the Shade of the Quran** by Sayid Qutb. His 18-volume magnum opus, mostly written in prison under torture and persecution, Sayid Qutb was executed by the Nasser regime in Egypt and was a key thinker of Islamic revivalism in the 1960s. One of the founders of Ikhwan, he is unfairly characterized as a founder of terrorist ideology (can't be further from the truth). He was also a poet and the exegesis (*tafsir*) is indeed recognized for its often poetic quality.
22. **Muhammad** by Martin Lings. There are many *seerahs* (biography of the Prophet Muhammad) but this is rated by many as the most eloquent. Lings was an Oxford don specialising in Shakespeare, and it shows.
23. **The Road to Mecca** by Muhammad Asad. A record of his physical and metaphorical journey through the Hijaz in present day Saudi Arabia in the 1920s and 1930s. His journey of how he eventually became a Muslim. And what a journey, considering he started life as a very Jewish descendant of many rabbis and ended life with among others being a founder of Pakistan and the Pakistani ambassador to the UN, via being a reporter for the serious German broadsheet, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung covering the Middle East and a personal friend of the King of Saudi Arabia (before they found oil) .
24. **The Challenge of Islam**, an important collection of essays from a seminal conference on Islam in London in 1976. To me, still one of the best collection of essays in one book, covering all kinds of subjects from ethics, economics, law, sociology, metaphysics, human rights, environment among others. Timeless.
25. **King of the Castle** by Gai Eaton. Subtitled Choice and Responsibility in the Modern World. A reflection on modernity from the lenses of this British revert to Islam, ex public schoolboy, Oxbridge, British foreign service diplomat. Beautifully written and thoughtful. Synthesised East and West and indeed North and South very well.

Azman Hj. Mokhtar

Kajang

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