

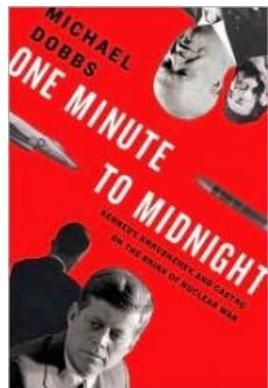
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Books for Guys — Maybe for Dad, Maybe for Son, Maybe for You

Thursday, June 5, 2008

I am repeatedly asked about books that boys and men will want to read. The fact is that many guys just do not read for fun (if much at all) and yet, every now and then, they read a book that captures their attention. This list is for the moms and wives who are looking for a book that just might light that fire.

One reason for low interest in reading among males is the fact that much of the reading they are required to do in school is so uninteresting or demoralizing for boys. I believe that reading is appetitive. Readers develop a more ravenous appetite for books when they discover that they want to read and actually enjoy it. Here are some recent books that men and older teenagers are likely to enjoy.



1. Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (Knopf, 2008).

Spy thrillers and suspense novels attract millions of readers. *One Minute to Midnight* reads like a suspense novel, but it is about events that actually shook the world. The Cuban Missile Crisis is one of those moments in history which could have spelled disaster on a global scale. Michael Dobbs traces the narrative of those crucial days when the world stood on the brink of nuclear war. *One Minute to Midnight* serves to remind us that the crisis could have ended very differently. The story he tells is enriched by solid research and good writing.

Dobbs looks back and argues that the world should be thankful that Kennedy and Khrushchev keep their cool, even as their own aides and advisers took the crisis to the threshold of nuclear war. President John F. Kennedy plays the central role in the narrative and Dobbs clearly sympathizes with the young president. This author might be faulted for understating Kennedy's own role in instigating the crisis (appearing weak to Khrushchev at their summit in Vienna in 1961 and authorizing the Bay of Pigs disaster) but Dobbs cannot be faulted for making the story boring.

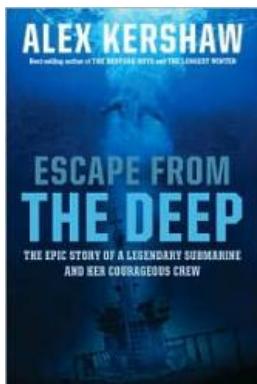
A generation that knows this story through the movie *Thirteen Days* needs to read *One Minute to Midnight*. Read the book, then watch the movie again and see the story in a new light.

An excerpt:

The paradox of the nuclear age was that American power was greater than ever before—but it could all be jeopardized by a single, fatal miscalculation. Mistakes were an inevitable consequence of warfare, but in previous wars they had been easier to rectify. The stakes were much higher now, and the margin for error much narrower. “The possibility of the destruction of mankind” was constantly on Kennedy’s mind, according to Bobby. He knew that war is “rarely intentional.” What troubled him most was the thought that “if we erred, we erred not only for ourselves, our



futures, our hopes, and our country," but for young people all over the world "who had no role, who had no say, who knew nothing even of the confrontation, but whose lives would be snuffed out like everyone else's."



2. Alex Kershaw, Escape from the Deep: The Epic Story of a Legendary Submarine and Her Courageous Crew (Da Capo Press, 2008).

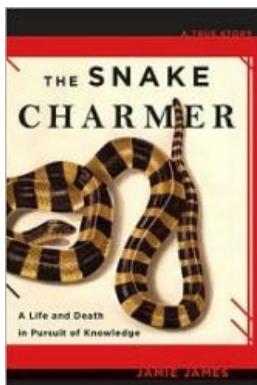
The tragedy of the USS Tang is one of the great but lesser-known stories of World War II. The submarine was one of the deadliest ever to serve in the Pacific theater and her exploits were the stuff of naval legend. In October 1944 the submarine and her crew were poised to complete yet another amazingly successful run when one of her own torpedoes malfunctioned and circled back to sink the submarine.

While most of the officers and crew were lost, a few brave souls escaped from the sunken submarine (at almost 200 feet under the surface) only to be picked up by Japanese ships as prisoners of war. Near death, the survivors had then to survive the deadly treatment they received at the so-called "torture farm."

Escape from the Deep is a compelling story and a reminder of the awful price paid by so many during that global war. Read this book and go thank a World War II veteran.

An excerpt:

After the last man had exited, he would bang on the trunk—the signal for the escape door to be closed by a lever from inside the torpedo room. Then the seawater would be allowed to drain into the bilges and another four men would take their place in the escape trunk. Unfortunately, because of the Japanese patrol boats above, banging on the trunk placed the men in a terrible double bind. The only way they could communicate with the men waiting their turn was by banging, and yet the sound was bound to give away the Tang's position to the enemy at some point. It seemed that they were doomed if they didn't and doomed if they did.



3. Jamie James, The Snake Charmer: A Life and Death in Pursuit of Knowledge (Hyperion, 2008).

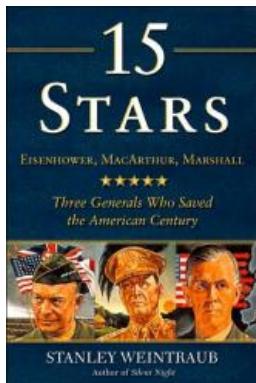
Just show me a male human being who is not fascinated with snakes — some more than others. One of those who as boy and man was on the "more" end of that scale was Dr. Joe Slowinski, one of the world's greatest herpetologists. As Jamie James observes, "Like most people, herpetologists typically take a greater interest in snakes that pose a threat to human life than those that don't." Slowinski was no exception to that rule, but he had an even greater (and earlier) fascination than many others in the field. Even as a boy, he was hunting down and capturing venomous American snakes. (Not an advised activity, dear reader.)

In 2001 Slowinski was in Burma leading an expedition to capture venomous snakes. During the expedition, he was bitten by a many-banded krait, considered the deadliest snake in Asia. Even as he died, he was collecting information on the snake, its venom, and its tragic effect. Slowinski does not appear as a heroic figure in the book, but his life and death became the stuff of legend in the world of herpetology. Readers of *The Snake Charmer* will learn a wealth of background about this man, the world's venomous snakes, and our fascination with creatures that can so easily kill us.

An excerpt:

*As his friends gathered around, Joe calmly explained what was happening to him. No one in the world knew more about the venom of *Bungarus multicinctus* than Joe Slowinski. He described the effects of a slowly deepening paralysis: The snake's venom works on several different parts of the nervous system simultaneously, blocking the nerve impulses that transmit instructions to the muscles, including those required to maintain life. There will be no pain, he told them. "First my eyelids will drop; I won't be able to hold them up." Soon he would lose the ability to speak and move his limbs, he said. Within a few hours, his respiratory system would shut down: The paralyzed central nervous system would be unable to instruct the diaphragm to breathe, causing a swift death by asphyxiation. . . .*

As the morning wore on, Joe's physical condition deteriorated precisely as he had predicted it would. In stark contrast to the hysteria that prevailed after Joe was bitten by the cobra when he was filming with the National Geographic team, the scene at the schoolhouse in Rat Baw was wonderfully calm, even solemn. Joe lay down on his sleeping bag in his tent, with Moe Flannery and Guin Wogan lying next to him to provide human warmth and comfort. The men quietly gathered nearby. Joe asked someone to find an Ace bandage he could wrap around his right forearm to slow the traffic of blood and lymph in his hand, though by now the toxin had passed throughout his body. There was nothing more to be done except wait and see how serious the bite was.



4. Stanley Weintraub, 15 Stars: Eisenhower, MacArthur, Marshall — Three Generals Who Saved the American Century (Free Press, 2007) Also available in paperback edition.

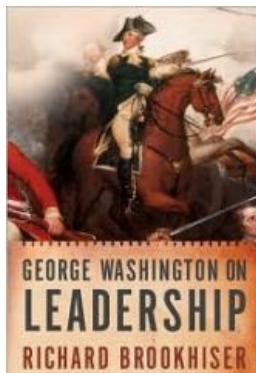
The rank of five-star general (General of the Army) was approved by Congress in the midst of World War II because American generals such as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, and George C. Marshall were leading international forces that included, at least formally, general officers of other nations who outranked them. All told, nine men would wear the five stars — four Army generals, four Navy admirals, and one air force general. When Gen. Omar Bradley died in 1981, the rank was officially retired.

In 15 Stars, Stanley Weintraub recasts the story of World War II through the experiences and lenses of three of these rare leaders — Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Marshall. These men's lives often intersected each other and each became instrumental in the effort to win World War II and, as Weintraub describes, "save the American century" and far more. This is a compelling read, combining biography with a fast-paced account of the war and its times.

An excerpt:

MacArthur's date of rank would precede Ike's by two days. Pleased with the star, and that he would outrank Eisenhower if only fractionally, MacArthur rushed a saccharine radiogram to Roosevelt, "My grateful thanks for the promotion you have just given me. My pleasure in receiving it is greatly enhanced because it was made by you." Unwilling in Leyte to wait for official insignia, he had a circle of five small stars crafted for him by a Filipino silversmith in Tacloban, using American, Australian, Dutch and Philippine coins to symbolize the national elements of his command. Two of his generals ceremoniously pinned the circlets on his lapels.

Marshall wrote a laconic two-sentence appreciation of the president's "confidence." Eisenhower cabled Marshall to thank Roosevelt for him, but the real trust in Ike's capacities came from the intentions of Marshall, Stimson, and the president to leave Eisenhower free from nagging by Washington. "I shall merely say now," Marshall cabled, "that you have our complete confidence."



5. Richard Brookhiser, George Washington on Leadership (Basic Books, 2008).

Many books with the words "on leadership" are disappointments — written by those who merely ransack a biography of a great leader for superficial and often saccharine insights. George Washington on Leadership is an exception to this pattern. Richard Brookhiser knows George Washington, having written biographical and historical works on Washington and his fellow founders.

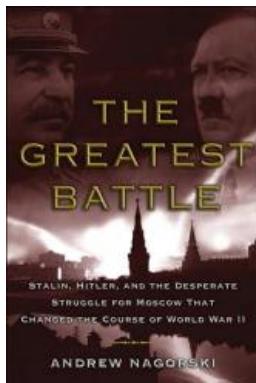
In George Washington on Leadership, Brookhiser writes insightfully about what we can learn from the "indispensable man" and his model of leadership as man, general, and the nation's first president. Brookhiser also writes honestly about Washington's "learning curve" from his teenage years to his exit from the world stage upon his death. This book is both interesting and stimulating, and this generation of young men can use all the good models of leadership they can find.

An excerpt:

If a leader leads in the forest, and no one hears him, is he really leading? A great part of any leader's time is spent in making himself known, by communicating to others: to his organization, to his public. He tells the organization what to

do, and the public how to think about what was done. Both target audiences, of course, are at liberty to ignore what they are told, which obliges the leader to be skillful.

Our notions of those who lived before the invention of photography and recording are formed almost entirely by the written words they have left us—a fact that favors the literary. As a result, Washington, whose writing was clear and solid but rarely sparkling, has faded a bit. If it were not for his image on Mount Rushmore and the money in our pockets, he might have faded a bit more. But in his lifetime he was very present, and a master of communication.



6. Andrew Nagorski, *The Greatest Battle: Stalin, Hitler, and the Desperate Struggle for Moscow that Changed the Course of World War II* (Simon and Schuster, 2007).

Moscow turned the tide of World War II on the Eastern Front, even as Moscow had reversed the course of Napoleon's army and ambitions. Most Americans are probably generally aware that the Soviet Union was (eventually) a major ally in World War II. Fewer know that what Russians still call the "Great Patriotic War" led to the deaths of millions upon millions of Russians, both soldiers and civilians.

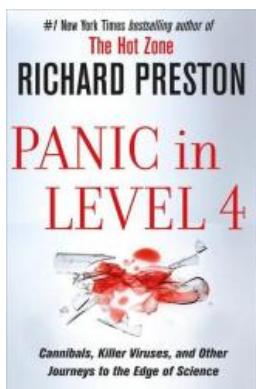
In retrospect, it is easy to see that Adolf Hitler's decision to launch "Operation Barbarossa" and invade Russia eventually spelled the end of the Third Reich. Hitler's armies simply could not sustain a two-front war against strengthening allies.

Still, it did not look that way at the time. The Wehrmacht marched quickly through Russia toward Moscow — but there it was stopped. Andrew Nagorski tells the story of that epic battle with great skill. The story is brutal, honest, and important.

Nagorski refers to the battle for Moscow as "203 days of unremitting mass murder." As Nagorski explains, Stalin and his generals eventually made fewer mistakes than Hitler and his generals. German General Fabian von Schlabrendorff would one day look back (after joining the conspiracy against Hitler) and say: "This defeat, however, was more than just another lost battle. With it went the myth of the invincibility of the German soldier. It was the beginning of the end." *The Greatest Battle* captures the reader's attention with its honest recounting of this brutal battle.

An excerpt:

By all accounts, Hitler kept changing his mind about the importance of seizing Moscow. He'd predict that a quick victory there would produce the collapse of the Soviet Union, but after encountering more resistance than expected, he'd act as if it wasn't at the top of his list of priorities. One clear reflection of this can be found in Goebbels' diary entry on March 20, 1942. In it he flatly declares: "The Führer had no intention whatever of going to Moscow." Yet a few lines later, he states that Hitler's plans for the coming spring and summer consist of "the Caucasus, Leningrad, and Moscow." For a leader who had scored his first victories by a string of audacious actions, his behavior during the battle for Moscow revealed a new vacillating side to his character, which would become increasingly visible as the war dragged on.



7. Richard Preston, *Panic in Level 4: Cannibals, Killer Viruses, and Other Journeys to the Edge of Science* (Random House, 2008).

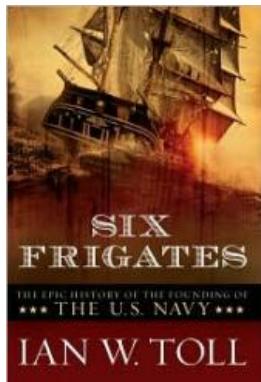
Richard Preston is one of a rare breed — a science writer who knows how to tell a story with danger, suspense, and plenty of excitement. His earlier book, *The Hot Zone*, told the discovery of the deadly Ebola virus and the work of the U.S. military's virus labs. That book was something like what would happen if Stephen King wrote medical reports.

In *Panic in Level 4*, Preston revisits Ebola, along with an eclectic collection of other scientific and medical stories. There is a lot to fascinate here — and a lot to fear. These bugs mean to kill us.

An excerpt:

We know that Ebola virus was one of the more powerful bioweapons in the arsenal of the old Soviet Union. In the years before the Soviet Union broke up, in 1991, bioweaponeers had reportedly been experimenting with aerosol Ebola –powdered, weaponized Ebola that could be dispersed through the air, over a city, for example. The Soviet weaponized Ebola was apparently stable enough that it could drift for distances in the air and still infect people through the lungs when they breathed a few particles of it. This is why the U.S. Army was studying it: the Army researchers were trying to come up with a vaccine or a drug treatment for Ebola, in case of a terrorist or military attack on the United States with Ebola.

Advisory: Language in quotations.



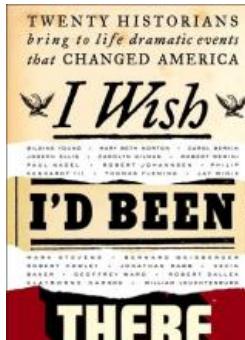
8. Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (Norton, 2006).

Americans invest legitimate and hard-earned pride in the U.S. Navy. Most citizens could not imagine the United States without a globe-spanning navy. It was not always so. Indeed, the young nation had so little expectation of being a naval power that it gave France its best vessel after the war and resigned itself to land-based forces.

It was not to last. President George Washington saw the need for a navy, and he signed the legislation of 1794 that called for the construction of six frigates. Those six vessels became the nucleus of what became the mightiest navy the world has ever seen. The young nation has no such ambitions, but the challenge posed by the Barbary pirates taught Americans that they would be a navel power, or no power. In *Six Frigates*, author Ian W. Toll recounts the founding era of the U.S. Navy and tells the story well.

An excerpt:

Peace with Britain had removed the threat posed by the Royal Navy to American merchant ships, but it had also left them without the umbrella of protection the Royal Navy had provided before 1776. For the first time, the Stars and Stripes were seen on the high seas and in foreign seaports – but the flag was seen flying only on richly laden and defenseless merchant vessels, never on ships of war. Greedy eyes studied the ships of this new nation the way wolves study sheep. The British let it be known that the Americans no longer enjoyed their protection. The wolves were hungry; the sheep were fat, numerous, and slow; and there was not a shepherd in sight.



9. Byron Hollinshead, editor, *I Wish I'd Been There: Twenty Historians Bring to Life Dramatic Events that Changed America* (Doubleday, 2006).

I once had a professor who described some books as “bathtub reading” — the kind of light but informative reading that comes in smaller doses. *I Wish I'd Been There* is the perfect example of bathtub reading material. Editor Byron Hollinshead has brought together twenty capable historians (many of them well-known) and asked each of them to imagine being present at a key event or turning point in American history.

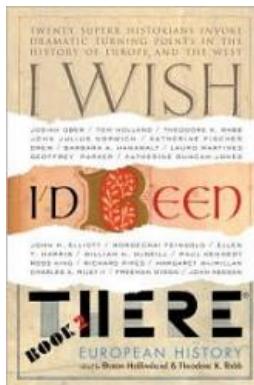
Each chapter can be read as a unit. Carolyn Gilman writes of Meriwether Lewis standing at the Continental Divide, Thomas Fleming writes of John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry, Jay Winik writes of Abraham Lincoln's assassination, and Robert Dallek imagines John and Robert Kennedy in a meeting about the challenge of Viet Nam.

I Wish I'd Been There may start as many arguments as it counts in readers, and that is just fine. Read and join the arguments.

This excerpt is taken from Geoffrey C. Ward's chapter, “The Sick Man in the White House,” about Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Ward is explaining why so many people so close to the President could miss the fact that the man was clearly dying:

Then, too, everything going on around him seemed calculated to keep him in command. Hindsight tides history. Since

we know that FDR died in office and that the Allies went on to win the war without him, it seems self-evident that he could have stepped aside gracefully without affecting that triumph. But that is not how things looked on April 2. As FDR and his doctor talked that morning, the papers that lay scattered across the president's bed made clear that there was nothing foreordained about an Allied victory or the shape of the world that would follow it.



10. Byron Hollinshead and Theodore Rabb, editors, *I Wish I'd Been There: European History* (Doubleday, 2008).

Just like the movies, books often lead to sequels. "Book 2" of *I Wish I'd Been There* is devoted to European history. This volume may be even better than the first. Once again, the book offers twenty chapters, each a complete story. Tom Holland writes of Hannibal crossing the Alps, John Julius Norwich writes of a key event in the rise of Venice, Paul Kennedy writes of the Battle of the Nile, Charles Riley writes of Picasso's visit the ballet, and John Keegan writes of the German surrender to the British in World War II.

An excerpt from Holland's chapter on Hannibal:

Hamilcar, although obliged to return to Africa as commander of a defeated city, had remained confident that Carthage could reclaim her former preeminence. Restlessly, he had scouted about for new horizons. The Carthaginians, by the terms of the peace treaty forced on them by Rome, had undertaken a complete withdrawal from Sicily; and so it was, in 237 B.C., that Hamilcar Barca turned his attentions instead to Spain. Naturally, before leaving Carthage, he had made sure to offer up a sacrifice to Ba'al Hammon, greatest of the city's gods. Accompanying him to the shrine that day had been his eldest son: nine-year-old Hannibal. As the sacrifice reeked before them, Hamilcar asked the boy if he wished to sail for Spain as well. Hannibal nodded eagerly. Hamilcar had then ordered his son to lay his hands upon the bloody viscera of the sacrificial victim and swear a solemn oath. "Never to bear goodwill to the Romans."

Read, ponder, learn, and enjoy. Go ahead, feed that appetite.

Coming soon: "Five Great Missionary Biographies" and "Books for Boys"

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