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Reading Log, June 15, 2009

Monday, June 15, 2009

I appreciate the fact that many people have found my [2009 Summer Reading List](#) to be helpful. The list is just a start, of course, and it was intended from the beginning to be helpful also for Father's Day. Thus, it is long in history and military history — which is no coincidence given my own enjoyment of these reading fields. There will be more to come this summer.

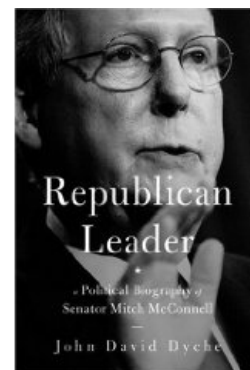
A few comments have raised issues or questions. Why no fiction? Well, that is a horribly difficult genre to recommend in the same sense that I can recommend many non-fiction titles. I will mention a recent novel below, but a recommendation is something else. I find recommending fiction to be excruciatingly difficult. I read several dozen novels a year, enjoy many of them, and would gladly recommend a few of them . . . if I knew what kind of fiction you like to read. I like many forms of fiction and have a collection of favored authors. I probably learn more by reading fiction than by reading much non-fiction. Still, the great challenge vexes.

With Fathers Day looming, I read *Home Game: An Accidental Guide to Fatherhood* by Michael Lewis. Lewis is a well-known author who, like others before him, decided to reflect on fatherhood. Nothing very profound appears here, but Lewis's secular bemusement about what he is supposed to feel toward his young offspring is often fun to read. His language is bracing, but he is onto something when he asserts, "Maternal love may be instinctive, but paternal love is learned behavior." Sadly, it is a behavior some men never learn.

Home Game is often funny, and the diary Lewis keeps after the birth of each of his three children is never boring. He affirms the fact that the experience of parenthood makes a man grow up (something many men are reluctant to do). My favorite line in the book, and one I know will be appreciated by my colleague Russell Moore: "School-age children are the rats of our time." His reference is to the fact that rats supposedly carried the Bubonic Plague and the Black Death. As Lewis continued: "After a day of happily swapping germs with their peers, my children apparently returned home with what felt to them like a mild cold, and kissed their baby brother — who promptly lost his ability to breathe." Don't worry; he regained it.

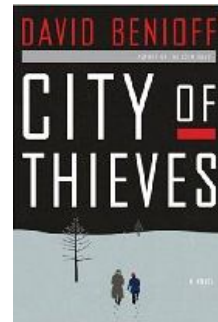


In *Republican Leader*, John David Dyche offers the only significant biography of Sen. Mitch McConnell yet to appear. Dyche does a good job of capturing McConnell in his essence — a master politician. The most interesting part of the book for me was his recounting of McConnell's boyhood and years as a college student. The author's account of McConnell's political rise — and especially his campaigns for the U.S. Senate — is riveting. *Republican Leader* will be of particular interest to Republicans (what a brilliant observation) and Kentuckians, but anyone interested in contemporary American politics will find the book both interesting and useful. I wonder, would a biography of Sen. Harry Reid be as interesting? I'll be on the lookout. In the meantime, I am on the hunt for a really good biography of Speaker Nancy Pelosi.



Reading *Republican Leader* also reminded me what a lousy politician I would have made. While every position of leadership is political in some sense, electoral politics requires what we might call a certain "flexibility" on the issues that I would find impossible.

In *City of Thieves*, novelist David Benioff has written a masterful work of contemporary fiction. The plot of the book is absolutely brilliant, his characters are so authentic that they seem to jump off the pages, and the dialogue is spare. Benioff takes the reader into the heart of despair as the Wehrmacht strangles Leningrad. A 17-year-old Soviet patriot, Len Beniov, finds himself facing execution when he, along with a slightly older young man, are given a choice: Find a dozen eggs for the colonel's daughter's wedding cake, or be shot in the back of the head. So . . . they go after the eggs. Their determined search for the eggs becomes a journey into human depravity and lingering hope. No one reading this novel will escape being moved by the account of horrors within and without Leningrad — and within and without the human heart.



City of Thieves is brutal, and is not for the faint of heart. It glides very close to nihilism, but pulls back. It is one of the most thought-provoking coming-of-age novels I have read in years. I thank the eager salesperson at Borders who recommended it to me. One interesting aspect of the book: Supposedly, it is loosely based on Benioff's own grandfather's experience as a teenager trapped in wartime Leningrad. After spending time with his grandfather (then living in Florida), Benioff told him that he needed clarification of parts of the story. "David," said the grandfather, "You're a writer. Make it up."

So, what are you reading? Please recommend what I otherwise might miss. Disagree with a comment above? Let me hear that, too. Read on.

