My Favorite Things

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Return to my homepage. last update: August 2025

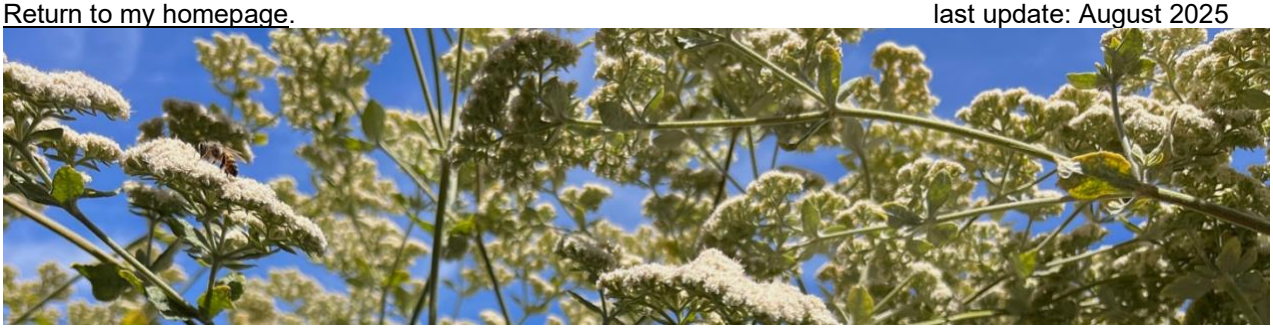


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Reference Books

In an age of thoughtless Googling and “sponsored” content, it's worth remembering the value of reference guides. The best reference books offer a distinct yet reliable perspective. Their content doesn’t vary based on your browser history or on the whims of an advertiser’s algorithm. Instead, you find well-edited wisdom and expertise.

Here are the reference books that I've relied on the most in my life. Pick up a new or used copy and thank me later!

American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language

> I fell in love with this book as a teenager because it included curse words. I keep buying each new edition because of the word histories and usage notes on tricky or controversial words. Googling words might be faster in the short run, but you will learn so much more with a good dictionary like this one.

Videohound's Golden Movie Retriever

The thematic index is a great way to discover movies. Where else can you find an authoritative list of movies about “Killer Bugs” or “Road Trips”, or hundreds of other creative categories? The four-bone review system also provides reliable quality assurance. Any movie that receives four bones is worth your time, and you might enjoy the “woof” movies (ones so bad they don’t receive any bones).

The Universal Self-Instructor: A Facsimile of the 1883 Edition

It's easy to mock the hubris of its title, but this book delivers. If you ever need to send flowers with a specific message, learn the average weight of different chicken breeds (circa 1883), or deliver a clever wedding toast, this book is for you.

What To Drink with What You Eat (Dornenburg and Page)

Did you know that popcorn pairs well with champagne, or that celery soda enhances a pastrami sandwich? I didn't until I got this book. Its ingenious two-way index lets you search by food or by beverage.

History Books

These aren't necessarily the best books I've read (though some are); they are just books that had a powerful effect at the time I read them.

William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*

Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy*

Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream*

John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America*

Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*

Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*

Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*

Tomiko Brown-Nagin*, Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement*

Fiction

Georges Perec: *La vie mode d'emploi* (Life: A User's Manual)
So tedious and yet so good! An unusual reading experience.

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*
Remarkable for its poetic prose and fine-grained detail.

Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*
Changed how I think of snotty noses, decolonization, and nationalism.

Günther Grass, *Tin Drum*
A German version of *Midnight's Children*, with herring instead of mango chutney.

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*
Are we there yet?

JK Rowling, *Harry Potter* series
Go Hufflepuff!

Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
A diplomatic thriller set in a world where humans have no fixed sex or gender.

Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*
Perfectly terrifying reading for a pandemic, or for anytime.

Essay Writing

John L. Casti, *Paradigms Lost: Images of Man in the Mirror of Science*
Great essays on enduring puzzles: How did life start? Why do we have language? What does artificial intelligence really mean?

Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System*
Though smug and elitist, this curmudgeonly 1980s book helped me learn social criticism while growing up in Ronald Reagan's America.

Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*
This 1992 book has a flawed argument, but I still appreciate the clarity with which Fukuyama applied philosophies of human nature to political systems. His thesis was silly, even at the time, but his approach has stayed with me.

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*
There's no handbook for dealing with grief, but this memoir gets close.

Music

Favorite Albums (in rough chronological order)
These albums received lots of playing at the time, or they introduced me to a new genre of music.

Vic Flick, *On Top of Spaghetti and Other Songs That Tickle Your Funnybone*
Depeche Mode, *Some Great Reward*
Dead Kennedys, *Give Me Convenience or Give Me Death*
New Order, *Power, Corruption, and Lies*
Joy Division, *Closer*
The Smiths, *The Smiths*
Public Enemy, *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*
Fairport Convention, *House Full*
Duke Ellington, *Money Jungle*
Laurie Anderson, *Big Science*
Parliament, *Mothership Connection*
Phish, *Junta*
Bill Monroe, *Live at Bean Blossom*
John Coltrane, *First Meditations*
OutKast, *Stankonia*
Yo La Tengo, *And Then Nothing Turned Itself Inside Out*
Café Tacuba, *Re*
Sufjan Stevens, *Come On Feel the Illinoise!*
Janelle Monáe, *The ArchAndroid*
Haruomi Hosono, *Cochin Moon*
Courtney Barnett, *Sometimes I Sit and Think, and Sometimes I Just Sit*
Big Thief, *Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You*

Albums that helped me get through the Covid-19 pandemic:
Jean Grae and Quelle Chris, *Everything is Fine*
Perfume Genius, *Set My Soul on Fire*
Moses Sumney, *grae*
Sparks, *A Steady Drip, Drip, Drip*
Superchunk, *What A Time to Be Alive*
Fiona Apple, *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*
Toots and the Maytals, *Got To Be Tough*
Lomelda, *Hannah*
Angel Bat Dawid and Tha Brotherhood, *LIVE*

What I am listening to now? You can find me on Spotify at cendy-288.

Movies

Creepy Movies
Pan's Labyrinth
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari
The Orphanage
Spirited Away
Get Out
Us
Nope
Sinners

Creepy/Funny
Blade 2
Shaun of the Dead
What We Do in the Shadows

Funny Movies (Intentionally or Not)
Some Like it Hot
Troy
Pacific Rim
Dr. Strangelove
Playtime (Tati)
Weekend (Godard)
Monty Python and the Holy Grail
O' Brother, Where Art Thou?
Talladega Nights
Thor: Ragnarok
Guardians of the Galaxy, Vol. 2
The Death of Stalin
The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent

Romantic Movies
The Shop Around the Corner
Amélie
Titanic (sob!)
The Princess Bride
Harold and Maude
My Neighbor Totoro

Serious/Dark Movies
Apocalypse Now
The Lives of Others
Grave of the Fireflies (quite possibly the saddest movie ever made)
The Devil and Daniel Johnston
An Inconvenient Truth

The Act of Killing
Lone Star
Parasite

Hard to Categorize
Y tu mamá también
Nashville (Altman)
Garlic Is as Good as Ten Mothers
Tampopo
Everything Everywhere All at Once

TV Shows

These are the shows that I watched faithfully each week as a kid, or that I've binged online. In rough chronological order:

Star Blazers
The A-Team
Monty Python's Flying Circus
120 Minutes (MTV)
The Simpsons
The X-Files
Mad Men
Glee
Community
Stranger Things
The Great British Baking Show
Ted Lasso
Attack on Titan (My kids talked me into this, and I kinda regret it now.)
Abbott Elementary
Fallout

Cheeses

Cheesemakers turn short-lived milk into something complex and lasting. It's a magical mixture of fat, protein, bacteria, and fungi, and it's one of the best things humans have invented.

The best cheese shop I've ever entered is Xavier in Toulouse, France. At Xavier, you will not find the cheeses suffocating in refrigerator cases or plastic wrap. Let your cheese breathe!

Read about two formidable Normandy cheeses here: Pont L'Evêque and Livarot.

California has some pretty good cheese too, such as Red Hawk from Cowgirl Creamery up north in Point Reyes. (But if you buy Red Hawk, make sure it's soft in the center; too

often this cheese gets put on sale when it's rock-hard and under-ripe.) My favorite U.S. cheeses come from Vermont. Besides the classic Vermont sharp cheddar, a soft and ripe cheese from Jasper Hill Farm in Vermont (such as the Harbison) offers a wonderful woodsy, mushroomy aroma.

Last, but not least in my heart, are the "cheese food products" of my childhood: Cheez Whiz (good on cheese steaks) and Easy Cheese (best on hard pretzels or simply consumed from the tube via a straw connected to the nozzle.)

Tips on buying and serving cheese:
-Cheddar cheese (especially "extra sharp") is your best bet for a reliable, affordable cheese. Trader Joe's has a good range of cheddars. Let your cheddar sit outside the fridge for at least three hours before serving. In cool weather, your cheddar can sit outside the fridge at room temperature for up to a week. Just keep it covered and it's flavor will improve each day.
-If your cheddar or other hard cheese develops white or blue flecks of mold, just cut away those parts. The rest of the cheese is fine.
-Soft cheeses like brie are a little trickier to buy. Use your eyes, fingers, and nose. You want to see and feel a little bit of softness and ooze. If your soft cheese looks like a perfectly rigid wedge or hockey puck, it's unlikely to have much flavor. You also want to smell a little bit of mushroomy funk. This is a sign of a cheese with character.
-Soft cheese should sit outside the fridge for about an hour before serving.
-Cheese likes to breath, so remove the plastic wrap and use wax paper instead. Wax paper lets the good bacteria in your cheese breath while avoiding moisture loss.

Soccer Referees

The world needs more referees. You should become one. At minimum, be kind to the ones in your life.

Much of what's below applies to other areas of life. Here's my summary: Show up early. Be prepared. Work hard. Communicate. Realize that it's not all about you. Learn from mistakes. Have fun.

Referees subreddit: Come here for questions and stories about facilitating the beautiful game.

Brigade Hartmut Strampe: This German group attends games with the express purpose of cheering for the poor referee.

Law 5 blog: This is a good resource during World Cups, Euros, and Champions League. Users on this site come treat FIFA referees as celebrities and offer real-time evaluations of their calls during big tournaments. The blog is also fun because it draws users from around the world.

The Watch and the Whistle: Sound advice on running a soccer game.