

A summertime filled with books

Heidi Schlumpf | Jun. 26, 2009

Some of my fondest summer childhood memories involve curling up with a good book -- in the partially finished basement of our Wisconsin ranch-style home, where I could at least escape the 90 percent humidity, if not the heat, of Midwestern summers. Perhaps the free air conditioning at our local public library had something to do with my summertime love of reading. More likely it was the library's summer reading program, in which young overachievers like me could earn stickers and small prizes for reading a certain number of books while on vacation.

Once a week my mother would drive my sister (also an overachiever) and me to the library, then an hour later pick us up, our arms heavy with the maximum allowed number of *Nancy Drews*, *Encyclopedia Browns* and other favorites, which we would whip through in a matter of days.

The Schlumpf girls usually filled their summer reading sticker cards before the end of June.

Not surprisingly, one of those avid readers grew up to be a writer; the other is a librarian (though not a children's one). Much has changed in libraries in the last 30-plus years, but themed summer reading programs (Catch the Reading Bug!? Sail Away with Books!?) live on. Libraries still try to motivate kids to read over the summer, and kids still respond to incentives like stickers and prizes.

Some libraries even offer summer reading programs for adults, with drawings for free golf or restaurant gift certificates. But you hardly have to bribe me to read for pleasure. All I need is a little extra free time, which June, July and August usually afford.

Every summer I try to put together a pile of books (almost as high as my *Nancy Drew* and *Encyclopedia Brown* ones of yore) that I haven't been able to get to over the year. Following the example of the librarian sister, I include some classics as well as new releases and bestsellers.

As usual, this summer's list includes a number of books with spiritual, religious and Catholic angles:

A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop by Rembert G. Weakland (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009): I grew up in the Milwaukee archdiocese and was confirmed by Weakland -- and have admired him ever since. But I was disappointed by the revelations of the payoff to the man he was involved with and would appreciate hearing his side of the story.

A Spiritual Companion to Infertility by Julie Irwin Zimmerman (ACTA, 2009): I met this author at a book signing event and was impressed with her honesty and compassion. This book doesn't avoid the obvious moral issues around reproductive technology, but Zimmerman knows that infertility involves many more spiritual issues than merely whether to do IVF or not.

The Seven Storey Mountain by Thomas Merton (50th anniversary edition, Harcourt, 1998): I'm a little embarrassed to admit that I have never read this Catholic spiritual classic by the famous Trappist monk. Maybe

by announcing it in print, I'll finally be shamed into reading it. And now that Orbis Books has released a revised version of Jim Forest's *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, I can read the a biography along with the autobiography.

To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings by John O'Donahue: I was saddened to hear that the author of the bestselling *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom* died unexpectedly last year. Since I'm currently editing a collection of prayers, I've had his last book on my to-read list for awhile. Apparently O'Donahue was working on a book about the German medieval mystic Meister Eckhart when he died. If it is published posthumously, that'd be on my list too, since Eckhart is another famous Catholic writer I've never gotten around to reading.

Whole Child, Whole Parent: A Spiritual and Practical Guide to Parenthood by Polly Berrien Berends (Harper, 1997): This spiritual parenting classic (first published in 1975) comes highly recommended from a number of parents I respect. In the introduction to the fourth edition, M. Scott Peck says it is the perfect guide "not merely for parents who want to raise their children in the best manner possible, it is for all people, including adults who want to raise themselves." Since it promises spiritual insights into ordinary parenting tasks, I'm hoping to find the deeper meaning of a child who won't sleep through the night!

The Lady in Blue: A Novel by Javier Sierra (Atria, 2007): Since I've sworn off Dan Brown (I just couldn't take the crazy ending of *Angels and Demons*), I thought I'd give Spanish novelist Sierra, who writes similar ecclesiastical whodunits, a try. His *The Secret Supper* about Da Vinci's most famous painting was the first Spanish novel to make *The New York Times* bestseller list. The historically based *Lady in Blue* features a bilocating 17th-century nun, a time travel machine, the Vatican and the U.S. Department of Defense. Oh, dear.

There are number of "secular" books on my summer list too, including *Loving Frank* (Ballantine, 2007), a love story about Frank Lloyd Wright, and some light mysteries like Sue Grafton's *U Is for Undertow* (Putnam, 2009).

What are you planning to read this summer?

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