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by Christopher Caldwell

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Book Review by Mark Bauerlein

Right Reading

13 Novels Conservatives Will Love (but Probably Haven't Read),
by Christopher J. Scalia. Regnery Publishing, 352 pages, $32.99

The most important word in the title of this lively survey of fiction with conservative appeal isn't "novels," "conservatives," or "love." It's "haven't." When novels come up in conservative discussion, the range is narrow. We have *1984*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Brideshead Revisited*, J.R.R. Tolkien's fantasy, Flannery O'Connor's grotesqueries, and a few others—the "same handful of works," Christopher Scalia laments. And yet, the novel is "one of the great achievements of Western culture," a sometimes "astonishing mode of human expression." It gives psychological instruction when it "immerses us in the minds of others" whose motives must be interpreted as the action proceeds. Evocative language and knowledge of human purposes can serve readers well in real life. With the expansion of the Right's reading list overdue, Scalia, a senior fellow of the American Enterprise Institute and former English professor, offers 13 novels as a start, lesser-known gems conservatives probably haven't read.

The first one comes from the 18th century, *Rasselas* by Samuel Johnson, a figure who used to tower over English literary history before multiculturalism broke it down. In his prose works, Johnson understood literature as didactic—in Scalia's words, "focused on educating younger readers about proper moral conduct and certain principles of human nature." People are impressionable, Johnson understood, and literature can corrupt them by raising the wrong role models and presenting fantasy outcomes as if they were real. Good fiction teaches "the means of avoiding the snares which are laid by Treachery for Innocence," as he wrote in one of his essays. It "initiate[s] the youth by mock encounters in the art of necessary defense" and it "increase[s] prudence without impairing virtue." Show the dark side, but don't make it irresistible; teach virtue, but don't get preachy and boring. That alignment of frail, imperfect human beings to universal norms, which is most effectively done through "compelling and credible narrative," is an essentially conservative enterprise.

At the beginning of the story, young Prince Rasselas of Abissinia resides in ignorant bliss in a secluded palace in "Happy Valley." He's unhappy, though, wanting to see the world and make a "choice of life" after observing many options. As he puts it, "that I know not what I want, is the cause of my complaint." His mentor, Imlac, informs him of how good his life is and discourages any further curiosity, to which Rasselas replies, "I shall long to see the miseries of the world, since the sight of them is necessary to happiness." A trip down the Nile ensues, encounters with diverse habitats and people, with Rasselas soaking up experiences and Imlac reflecting upon them. They include a tour of some catacombs that prompts Rasselas's sister to spend more time contemplating eternity, and a meeting with a brilliant astronomer whose isolation from others has freed his energetic mind to imagine he can control the weather (Johnson believed that reason untethered from human contact can slide into madness). Rasselas ends up envying the monks he encounters, in spite of their hardships, for they work and pray in the prospect of an eternal perfection.

The youths in the book are restless; they don't select their respective aims and focus until the end of their travels. Rasselas wants to become a ruler in full with benevolent control of his government, his sister to study the sciences and run a women's college. Their run through the world, however, assisted by Imlac's counsel, has shown them the limits of ambition. Just because you want it doesn't mean it will happen. Readers close the book sadder but wiser, just as Johnson intended. Is this to say that conservative art always has a touch of melancholy? Perhaps, but that may not be as pessimistic as it sounds if we believe that a curbed enthusiasm makes for less disappointment and catastrophe in life than do uncurbed ones. Besides, for all the novel's staging of sober insight, a fact remains: of those who read *Rasselas*, as I and every other English major at UCLA had to do in 1980, most of them smiled all the way through it. The prose is readable, the episodes entertaining. When Scalia told an eminent political philosopher he planned to include *Rasselas* in his list, the man "recited a line and told me how much he enjoyed the book when he first read it, nearly fifty years before."

Twelve more books follow. I focus on *Rasselas* to illustrate the method. Recount the plot, describe characters, and identify themes that reflect conservative insights, from the affirmation of family in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* to the spread of Edmund Burke's ideas by Sir Walter Scott's phenomenally popular *Waverley* novels. We have lesser-known works by famed authors: *The Blithedale Romance* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, which shows the real danger of utopian experiments, and *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh, which can be read, Scalia says, as "a parody of the American press corps' detachment from rural America." Two 21st-century works are here, too: Leif Enger's *Peace Like a River* and Christopher Beha's *The Index of Self-Destructive Acts*. The whole thing is fun, each novel comes off well, and Scalia nicely represents the love in his title.

He is right: the conservative movement needs to be more literary. Not long ago leftist intellectuals assumed that they should know Melville and Whitman as well as they did Marx and Engels. That expectation helped make the Left in midcentury interesting. Russell Kirk and William F. Buckley understood this. The National Endowment for the Arts has a few programs that select novels and poems for students to read and study. It would be a great move for the Trump Administration to fund those programs and redo the list with just the kind of works Christopher Scalia and other cultural conservatives favor.

Mark Bauerlein is professor emeritus of English at Emory University and a senior editor of First Things.