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Summer Reads

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Summer Reads

Summer is almost here, and with it the prospects of some time off to read. Could you recommend a great book by or about a president?

It surprises people to learn how many of our presidents have been excellent writers. John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, U.S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan -- each had an ear finely tuned to the English language, and each was a notable stylist. For an overview of their literary output, I'd refer you to the [essay](#) -- a Hauenstein Center Exclusive -- about the many engaging speeches and books our presidents have written.



There are so many instructive, engaging books by and about our presidents, but let me here recommend three to get you started.

1. Many historians think that the best autobiography by an American president is the *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*. One reason for the work's excellence is that Mark Twain was involved in the composition, publication, and reception of Grant's memoirs. Twain's influence aside, the manner and matter of Grant's life are perennially fascinating. As a reader, you will be transported to nineteenth-century America as you follow Grant from his boyhood farm in Ohio to the military academy at West Point. You will see his emerging confidence and leadership from the Mexican War to the Civil War. You will encounter the man who struggles to overcome alcoholism as well as the soldier who is determined to beat the Confederates at such evocative places as Shiloh, Vicksburg, Petersburg, and in the Wilderness campaign.

Grant is eminently likeable in his memoirs. No braggart, he never gloats over the CSA's demise. Yet the truth is that he could claim credit for most of the North's major victories in the West and East. Indeed, from 1862-1865 he received the surrender of three entire Confederate armies. Even a cursory reading of the *Personal Memoirs* reveals why his battlefield tactics continue to be studied in war colleges to this day.

Grant's spare prose would also be agreeable to later generations. It did not get dragged down by the Victorian flourishes that were popular in his day. He wrote his memoirs as he wrote his military orders, with clarity and directness. Consider this command to Meade in the spring of 1864: "Lee's army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also."

In earlier times especially, some people called Grant "the Butcher" because of his single-minded pursuit of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. But "Negotiations at Appomattox," one of the last chapters in the *Personal Memoirs*, is an unforgettably poignant account of Lee's surrender to Grant on April 9, 1865, in the Wilmer McLean house. Grant recorded:

"When I went into the house I found General Lee. We greeted each other, and after shaking hands took our seats.... What General Lee's feelings were I do not know. As he was a man of much dignity, with an impassable face, it was impossible to say whether he felt inwardly glad that the end had finally come, or felt sad over the result, and was too manly to show it. Whatever his feelings, they were entirely concealed from my observation; but my own feelings, which had been quite jubilant on the receipt of his letter [agreeing to surrender], were sad and depressed. I felt like anything rather than rejoicing at the downfall of a foe who had fought so long and valiantly, and had suffered so much for a cause...."

About the memoirs, Grant biographer Jean Edward Smith wrote: "U.S. Grant was the first president to write his memoirs, and was by far the most successful. As literature, the *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* are exceptional. As history, they are matchless. And as an example of courage and fortitude in the face of impending death, they are unparalleled."

2. Among the best books about a president is the one-volume edition of James Thomas Flexner's *George Washington: The Indispensable Man*. In Flexner's eyes, Washington is not a marble statue, but a flesh-and-blood man who had faults that he had to overcome to attain greatness.

3. Let us not forget America's first ladies, about whom some excellent books have been written. One of the best is Lynne Withey's *Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams*. Drawing on the correspondence between John and Abigail, Withey paints a vivid portrait of an inimitable woman, a brilliant man, and the remarkable marriage of the two.

Beyond these suggestions, there are active writers whose books about presidents are well worth the read. You cannot go wrong spending time with the work of David McCullough, H. W. Brands, and Joseph Ellis.

(Question from Pamela H. of Santa Cruz, California)