

IV. Fiction (and Non) as Career Inspiration: Art & Archeology

“Cat’s Eye” (1988) was Margaret Atwood’s next novel after “The Handmaid’s Tale.” It is not until the 49th chapter of 75 that we learn that the protagonist, Elaine Risley, is in the auditorium of the Royal Ontario Museum attending a survey course in Art and Archeology at the University of Toronto. This is her career turn from a prior path that was bending towards biology. Being able to draw bodily innards with exceptional rendition leads to painting. It is funny sometimes how career paths evolve.

Perhaps “Cat’s Eye” is a book for young adults more so than for teens. The personal story of Elaine gets intense. But Canada’s Grande Dame of literature never disappoints any reader as she opens us to the realities of life, bullying in this novel. She gives us more than a glimpse into the art of the bullied Elaine. You will have to go all the way to the end to capture it fully, to connect the first 48 chapters to the art.

In my professional life, I worked with architects of large commercial projects. At no time did I ever think of them as other than artists foremost. Pre-eminent co-architects of PPG Place in Pittsburgh, Philip Johnson and John Burgee, for example, weighed in seriously over whether the mullions should be matching gray to the solar control curtain wall glass or contrasting white, and required alternate curtain wall mockups at scale at the manufacturing site. It was about the full artistic representation, already made unique in this case by the medieval exterior motif played out in modern terms.

Ayn Rand’s “The Fountainhead”(1943) is a novel about architect Howard Roark, who is the embodiment of Rand’s ever present message about the value of individualism above groupthink. This is a novel with political meaning, as individualism is Rand’s trademark issue for the polity, but it is also a novel that might inspire one for a meaningful career in architecture. At the novel’s core is preservation of individualism in the practice of art.

For archeology, it is hard to mention anything better to read than some of the wonderful adventure and travel nonfiction that has been published. Hiram Bingham of Yale University is the discoverer of the ruins of Machu Picchu in 1911 and then author of “Lost City of the Incas: the Story of Machu Picchu and Its Builders” (1948). It is an archeological accounting of the discovery of that now famous Andes tourist site, freed today of its centuries of vegetative overgrowth. Bingham’s book is a great introduction for the tourist planning to visit Machu Picchu. And also a confirming inspiration for the budding archeologist!

Two other nonfiction books about archeology that I can recommend are: (1) Stephens, John L., “Incidents of Travel in Yucatan,” Vols. I & II, Dover (1963), but first published by Harper & Bros. in 1843; (2) Larsen, Mogens Trolle, “The Conquest of Assyria: Evacuations in an Antique Land,” Routledge (1994). Like “Lost City of the Incas,” these are travel adventures well told as well as lessons in archeology. In case all you want is

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on July 20, 2022.

the career piece, then that can be gotten from a reading of even only a chapter or so. But I am betting that the adventure stories will draw you in all the way.

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