

Living with Limits

The promise of possibility within one's life can illuminate paths to follow and offer hope. As citizens of this nation, the old concept of progress and the openness of the future have long been kernel elements within the American Dream. But what happens when each of us realizes that factors can call into question this optimistic perspective, when each of us comes up against obstacles within our personal heritage or life events in our culture? These might be genetic, socioeconomic, religious, gender-based, political, geographical, or racial. Even sexual orientation divergent from static cultural norms may be a factor. Ultimately, we are all time bound by death, too, and the reality that illness or accident could end our existence well before a statistically determined average life span. One can't help but give pause to wonder whether such limits represent the bad news about life. And too, how does one live knowing one is diagnosed as terminally ill? How does one live when prejudice, poverty, or trauma thwart our endeavors? In short, how does each of us live within the limits we find in our individual reality? This is the issue this series will focus on.

Whether it be Shakespeare's Lear looking into himself as he holds the body of his daughter Cordelia or Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich questioning the efficacy of his own life as he realizes that he is going to die, great literature has confronted us with our mortality, that not just people in general but each of us individually is defined by one certainty, that we are going to die. A set of outstanding reads will plunge us into the tensions of discovering and living with this fundamental limit as well as the myriad of forms that this reality can also exist in our lives. Perhaps we have to decide whether or not limits are paradoxically the grounds for discovering who we are, the meaning of our life. Do limits provide boundaries to rub up against issues within ourselves and our world that challenge our understanding of who we are? Are they blocks or challenges? How do we negotiate them? Is genuine hope possible only when we turn from determinism, either optimistic or pessimistic, and realize we can be free in how we respond to the limits we find in our lives? We can deny obstacles or rage with anger, refuse to embrace what change requires, or accept limitations as the grounds for transcending what limits us. Change isn't always easy, for it requires us to move beyond our comfort zone to freely face a future without certitude, with no guarantees for success. In this process, though, we can try to live with hope in spite of or because of our limits.

The five books in this series reflect variety in genre, from memoir to short story to novel, as well as in the gender of the protagonist and author. Different ethnicities and nationalities are represented. The list includes Pulitzer Prize winners and a Nobel

Laureate, older and newer works, and authors from different arenas of life. Characters confronting limits bind these books together though. Each challenges us to dive into the series' issues and find points of connection with our human condition. Each book offers us the possibility to develop empathy for characters living with challenges that can approximate the ones we live with. As with any area of literature, the best books are the ones that depict life honestly and accurately, present characters that evoke understanding or even self-identification, and offer insights into experiences both familiar and unknown.

East Indian American Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* launches the series. Plunging us into the ultimate limit of mortality, Kalanithi, a young neurosurgeon, wonders what makes a life worth living. Facing a diagnosis of stage IV lung cancer, he wrestles with impending death and a desire to find meaning. Amidst uncertainty, he grapples with how he can apportion his time and energy to complete his residency, renew his marriage, and struggle with wanting to live while learning how to die. This unsentimental memoir, a Pulitzer Prize finalist and best seller, is compelling and moving. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a tragicomic work of black humor, cult icon Kurt Vonnegut approaches confrontation with mortality through fiction or metafiction. Billy Pilgrim, a survivor like Vonnegut of the World War II firebombing of Dresden, gets "unstuck in time" and wanders through universes seemingly unable to live with the trauma he has experienced. Today, we would describe him suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. To what degree can trauma paralyze a person, limiting their ability to function again in any world beyond fantasy? In a different vein, widely admired Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* unfolds the story of an aging minister perhaps also metaphorically paralyzed in the rural Midwest. He is writing a diary in the 1960s to his young son whom he will not see grow up because of the age difference between them. The minister tries to work through theological issues, his own past since his father and grandfather were also ministers, and the provincial views of people who have lived in the same place almost all of their lives. He seems trapped by his age as well as a vocation he may no longer find meaningful; he seems cut off from new ideas and alternative ways of understanding God and himself.

With a cycle of short stories, *Jump and Other Stories*, 1991 Nobel Laureate and white South African Nadine Gordimer shows characters up against varied limits. Some certainly confront their mortality in direct and indirect ways, but primarily they reflect a world in which the balance of order has collapsed. The stories dramatize the political, social, cultural, racial, and economic limits on human freedom during the long sweep of Apartheid in South Africa. Unlike the three earlier books in the series that focus essentially on a single major character, the protagonists of the sixteen stories represent a variety of South Africans, all of whom experience psychological repercussions from the

racist and colonial foundation of power in the region; blacks and whites, liberals and conservatives--all find their freedom diminished by the forces of history even as those restraints are ending and hope begins to seem possible. The final and most recently written work in the series, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, a 2017 Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner, dramatizes some of the same themes as Gordimer's stories. Like Gordimer, Whitehead focuses on the limitations of racism for all, with focus on the United States in the pre-Civil War era as well as its ongoing legacy. Audaciously, he ingeniously imagines that the Underground Railroad is not a metaphor but a series of subterranean tunnels with tracks and stations spread across the southern and northern states. Central character Cora's odyssey for freedom through the southern states offers a merging of imagination with historical reality to recreate the past in ways that a straightforward historical text could never achieve. In addition, Whitehead expands on Gordimer's stories as well as elements in Robinson's *Gilead* to generate a portrayal of the challenges patriarchal structures impose on women to limit their possibilities and identity as well as the ways a woman can dare to defy.

Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*

Prior to obtaining his medical degree, Kalanithi completed studies in English literature, history, and the philosophy of science. His eclectic Humanities and science background enriches the poetic yet accessible prose he uses to describe the process of moving from finding a job to finding a calling. He refers to using his scalpel in complex brain surgery to remove tumors or repair injuries and yet also using his words to guide "a patient or family to an understanding of death and illness." He realizes that to have a calling, he needs to move beyond life and death decisions to explore with his patients and their families what kind of life for them is worth living. In human relationality, he chooses to find "a means of meeting patients where they are . . . and bringing them as far as you can." In confronting his own mortality, he recalls Samuel Beckett's words from *Waiting for Godot*: "I can't go on, I will go on." From learning how to work with patients to help them find their truth, he then must focus on himself, so that his wife and he know "life was not about avoiding suffering." Rarely will you be moved so deeply and feel such joy through reading.

Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut juxtaposes and merges fantasies and events from his own life, as he says, "more or less." Actually, it took him twenty-five years to come to terms with the disorienting effect of his presence at the fire-bombing of Dresden and be able to write this novel. Like Billy Pilgrim, the narrator, at times named Vonnegut, wants to write about the war without glorifying it, for he also is burdened with the napalm being dropped in Vietnam where his Green Beret son is serving. The Swiftian satiric barbs and humor echo for Vonnegut his view of the glorified rendition of violence in

war, an aberration that subjects people to enormous forces limiting the possibility to be an individual in the blind acceptance of socially acceptable violence. Unable to cope with his history, Billy time-travels to the science fiction world of the Tralfamadorians who are ignorant of the limits of death and finitude; for them, all the moments we think of as making up linear time have always existed before. Vonnegut's refrain of "so it goes" lingers in the psyche of all who read this novel. Rarely has a critically acclaimed work been so deeply engrained in popular culture.

Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

In the Pulitzer Prize and National Critics Book Circle Award winner *Gilead*, Robinson's minister John Ames reflectively penetrates through three generations of family history in his diary as he constructs a long, meditative letter for his young son to read in the future when grown. In a sense, he is doing what Kalanithi may also be trying to do for his young daughter in the closing months of his life. Each father, one with less and one with more leisure, searches for a way to communicate with his child who will one day mature to be able to read what each father has left. As a Congregational minister in a small Iowa town, Ames wanders through memories of his abolitionist grandfather and his pacifist father trying to understand how God and grace work in the world. Since we read this epistolary work, we are a surrogate audience akin to the son he intends to write for. He explores the degree to which he has freely chosen his ministry vocation or been carried along by family expectation. What has been the impact of family history and the provincial views of his community on his identity? Upon the return of his fellow minister and close friend's reprobate adult son, who is also his godson, Ames wrestles with guilt that he has failed to serve as a viable role model to this man in his forties, more the age his son would normally be. His godson's life history alludes to his grandfather's crusade for racial equality, and the novel comes to an end at the dawn of the civil rights movement in the sixties. Fundamentally, Ames, lonely and unsure of whether he has been fair to marry a much younger woman and father a son, agonizes in language charged with spirituality about the transcendent and the material world. Looking out the window, he observes ordinary aspects of existence from watching bubbles pop to his son swinging in the sunlight. As his impending death approaches, he discriminates between doctrine and belief; he continues to waver with faith in the traditional religious doctrine of transfiguration in another life or the spiritual power of the cosmos to endow the finitude of life on the prairie with the sacred.

Nadine Gordimer's *Jump and Other Stories*

A master of this genre, Gordimer says that the short story writer "sees by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of—the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens after this point." She writes with a moral urgency of the institutionalized corruption that

leads to personal betrayal and the terrible cost of racism in South Africa and other colonized countries in the region. One essential point she offers to the world is the terrible cost of Apartheid in her country. The cost engulfs black Africans, the white ruling minority, Afrikaners, white liberals—all. All are brutalized in a system that dehumanizes and diminishes the possibilities for human freedom. The rich variety of stories provides a myriad of ways to render the cycle's themes. A fairy tale tone hovers over "Once Upon a Time" in which a white family builds a fortress of protective obstacles to prevent poor black Africans from entering. The impact on their small son, whom they read stories to nightly, dramatizes the reality that inward psychological fears can be more limiting than external economic ones. In another story, "Teraloyna," Gordimer creates a fable of racial experimentation that echoes the allegories of George Orwell. In the title story, "Jump," a white counter-revolutionary becomes trapped in the maze of roles he has played in relation to white and black power. "The Moment Before the Gun Went Off" provides world literature with one of its greatest short stories, one that echoes the fiction of William Faulkner and the American South. An Afrikaner quietly rages against the veneer of his class and race in his traumatic response to the death of a black African. Several stories are set outside of South Africa, suggesting that the collusion of forces that limit human freedom are universal. One set in England, "Some Are Born to Sweet Delight," particularly will resonate with us in our time.

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* dramatizes the series' theme in a historical narrative tracing the arrival of Cora's grandmother from Africa to Cora's epic departure to find an alternative world. Without question, the novel generates a multicultural dimension on how ethnic minority classification can define and limit. The horror of the institution of slavery vividly haunts the world Cora moves through; in one instance, she encounters rotting corpses of slaves hanging from trees, an image akin to ones in the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The genre of the slave narrative can never again be the same, many have said. Often compared to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Whitehead says that this earlier work informed the structure of Cora's journey: "Any kind of adventure story where someone goes from allegorical episode to allegorical episode, and escapes at the last minute, that sort of outlandish series of events actually works for an escaped slave. You are just going from slim refuge to slim refuge trying to make it out." Even though Cora's possibilities seem manifold when she rides the rails yearning for the dearest currency, freedom, Whitehead challenges us, as our other four authors have, to hope for a time when one descends to the depths of the human spirit and emerges transformed. One can then continue the ongoing struggle to work within the limits impending on our choices, to work and dream to move forward beyond what diminishes possibility for all. For all of

the characters in this series and for all of us, shedding the skin to transform and find meaning within our boundaries is never easy.

For Further Reading

Nonfiction

Being Mortal by Atul Gawande, 2014.

The Bright Hour by Nina Riggs, 2017.

Fiction

The Death of Ivan Ilyich by Leo Tolstoy, 1886.

The Farming of Bones by Edwidge Danticat, 1998.

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy, 1997.

The Love of a Good Woman by Alice Munro, 1998.

Sophie's Choice by Styron, William, 1982.

“Living with Limits” was developed by Dr. Harbour Winn, Professor Emeritus of English at Oklahoma City University, where he teaches courses in literature, film studies, and Montessori education. He has been involved in public humanities programs for many years and was the Humanities Scholar on the grant that first brought the “Let’s Talk About It” program to Oklahoma. This is the seventh series theme he has developed. At OCU, he directed the Center for Interpersonal Studies through Film & Literature for its first 19 years and the OCU Film Institute for its first 35 years.

