

Five Books Room to Read Co-Founder Would Bring to a Desert Island

Literature can be the window that transports us to new realities, allowing us to wrestle with a new truth or alternative view of the world. Books have the power to change our minds, and with that our world.

Long before he collected 3,000 books from friends and family to bring to a remote village in Nepal and sparked a movement that would span the globe and benefit millions, reading played a big role in the life of Room to Read co-founder John Wood. Here, he shares some of the books he wouldn't want to live without.



Any Human Heart

By William Boyd

I read this about 10 years ago and soon afterwards spotted it on the bookshelf of Amy, the woman who would become my wife. It made me think, "Maybe this is the one." The book is about a writer who travels around the world, becomes a spy and eventually an art dealer, and lives an interesting, peripatetic life. It's written in the form of journals, some of which are missing, so you read the story knowing that some parts of his life will not be revealed.

The Seventh Day

By Yu Hua

When Amy and I moved from New York to Hong Kong, I felt I hadn't read enough Chinese novels. I'd read books by Chinese-American writers, such as Ha Jin, but not by Chinese writers living in China. This book is about Yang Fei, who is born on a train, lost by his mother and adopted by a railway worker. He never finds his place in the world and dies in poverty. Because he's not able to pay for a burial plot, his spirit roams the earth. Over seven days he meets interesting people who share the same fate. It's an interesting meditation on life and death which could be read again every year.

The Art of Happiness

By the Dalai Lama

This is an incredibly important book for me. I carried it in my backpack on my first trip to Nepal in 1998 at a time I was thinking about life and what it means. I'd been at Microsoft for seven years, was fortunate enough to have made a decent amount of money by a young age and was wondering if I should do something else with my life. In Nepal I met the headmaster of a school who asked me to help get books for his school. This book made me realize that it's not money that makes you happy - it's serving others. I've traveled the world during the past 18 years and some of the happiest people I've met are those in the service of others, doing good in the world.

Blindness

By José Saramago

I've always both loved and been intimidated by Jose Saramago. I tried reading *All the Names* (1997) and found it difficult to follow. Then I picked up *Blindness* and was sucked in. The novel is based around the idea of what life would be like if blindness was an epidemic and people could catch it. Saramago doesn't use quotation marks so the reader needs to pay close attention to follow who is speaking. This is interesting

because it mimics what it might be like to be blind and he doesn't give his characters names, he just describes them. Saramago wrote a sequel to this book, titled *Seeing* (2004).

On Writing Well

By William Zinsser

My book *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World* started off as a series of vignettes to my parents. I'd been living overseas and traveling so much, but felt I'd never told my parents about what I'd done and seen. My mother liked the stories, but of course she did - she's my mom. The idea for a book came from Time journalist Andrew Perrin. A friend in San Francisco gave me William Zinsser's *On Writing Well* and whenever I had writer's block I'd read a few pages and it would get me unstuck. If I was on a desert island I'd have a lot of time on my hands and would want to write another book - or books. Zinsser was a professor at Yale and it would be good to have his professorial voice on a desert island.

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