Stewart Brand’s Reading List: 76 Books to Sustain and Rebuild Humanity

by Maria Popova

From Homer to home health, by way of Shakespeare, conceptual physics, and a gender-imbalance lament.

UPDATE: The folks at the Long Now kindly invited me to contribute my own reading list — see it here.

On the heels of Brian Eno’s reading list comes another installment in the Long Now Foundation’s effort to assemble 3,500 books most essential for sustaining or rebuilding humanity, as part of their collaboratively curated library for long-term thinking, the Manual for Civilization. Here, futurist, environmentalist, and Long Now co-founder Stewart Brand — best-known for authoring the era-defining Whole Earth Catalog and originating the commonly (mis-)quoted aphorism that “information wants to be free” — offers his 76-book contribution to the cumulative library of 3,500, including Brain Pickings favorites like Nobel-winning behavioral economist Daniel Kahneman’s Thinking, Fast and Slow, Bill Bryson’s magnificent illustrated edition of A Short History of Nearly Everything, and Lewis Hyde’s modern manifesto for the creative life, The Gift.
1. *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations* by David R. Montgomery
2. *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius
3. *The Odyssey* by Homer translated by Robert Fagles
4. *The Iliad* by Homer translated by Robert Fagles
5. *The Memory of the World: The Treasures That Record Our History from 1700 BC to the Present Day* by UNESCO
11. *The Nature of Things* by Lucretius
14. *Venice, A Maritime Republic* by Frederic Chapin Lane
15. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* by Harold Bloom
16. *The Map Book* by Peter Barber
17. *Conceptual Physics* by Paul G. Hewitt

19. **The Foundation Trilogy** by Isaac Asimov

20. **Star Maker** by Olaf Stapledon


22. **Powers of Ten: About the Relative Size of Things in the Universe** by Philip Morrison and Phylis Morrison

23. **The Elements: A Visual Exploration of Every Known Atom in the Universe** by Theodore Gray

24. **The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (6 Volumes)** by Edward Gibbon

25. **The Complete Guide to Trail Building and Maintenance** by Carl Demrow and David Salisbury

26. **Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed** by Jared Diamond

27. **A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction** by Christopher Alexander, Sara Ishikawa and Murray Silverstein

28. **Thinking, Fast and Slow** by Daniel Kahneman

29. **The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined** by Steven Pinker

30. **Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier** by Edward L. Glaeser

31. **The Causes of War** by Geoffrey Blainey

32. **Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War** by Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch

33. **A Short History of Nearly Everything: Special Illustrated Edition** by Bill Bryson

34. **The Past From Above: Aerial Photographs of Archaeological Sites** edited by Charlotte Trümpler

35. **Turing’s Cathedral: The Origins of the Digital Universe** by George Dyson

36. **Why the West Rules—for Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future** by Ian Morris


38. **A History of Civilizations** by Fernand Braudel

39. **The Pattern on the Stone: The Simple Ideas that Make Computers Work** by Daniel Hillis

40. **Imagined Worlds** by Freeman Dyson

41. **The Story of Writing: Alphabets, Hieroglyphs & Pictograms** by Andrew Robinson
42. **Brave New World (The Folio Society)** by Aldous Huxley and illustrated by Leonard Rosoman

43. **Dune** by Frank Herbert

44. **The Singularity is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology** by Ray Kurzweil

45. **Infinite in All Directions: Gifford Lectures Given at Aberdeen, Scotland April–November 1985** by Freeman J. Dyson

46. **What Technology Wants** by Kevin Kelly

47. **The Player of Games** by Iain M. Banks

48. **Consider Phlebas** by Iain M. Banks

49. **Look to Windward** by Iain M. Banks

50. **State of the Art** by Iain M. Banks

51. **Use of Weapons** by Iain M. Banks

52. **Excession** by Iain M. Banks

53. **Across Realtime** by Vernor Vinge

54. **The Discoverers: Volumes I and II Deluxe Illustrated Set** by Daniel J. Boorstin

55. **Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action** by Elinor Ostrom

56. **The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order** by Samuel P. Huntington

57. **The Idea of Decline in Western History** by Arthur Herman

58. **Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers** by Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May

59. **Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility** by James P. Carse

60. **One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism** by Rodney Stark

61. **The Future of Life** by Edward O. Wilson

62. **The Coming Population Crash: And Our Planet’s Surprising Future** by Fred Pearce

63. **Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth** by James Lovelock

64. **The Long Summer: How Climate Changed Civilization** by Brian Fagan

65. **Medieval Civilization** by Jacques Le Goff

66. **The Civilization of the Middle Ages: A Completely Revised and Expanded Edition of Medieval History** by Norman F. Cantor

67. **Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies** by Jared Diamond

68. **The Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History of North America and Its Peoples** by Tim Flannery
must-reads

69. **The Epic of Gilgamesh** translated by Andrew George

70. **Beowulf: A New Verse Translation** by Seamus Heaney

71. **How Buildings Learn: What Happens After They're Built** by Stewart Brand

72. **Grand Design: The Earth from Above** by Georg Gerster

73. **The Complete Oxford Shakespeare: Histories, Comedies, Tragedies (Three volume set)**

74. **The Merck Manual Home Health Handbook** by Robert Porter

75. **Lao Tzu’s Te-Tao Ching — A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts** by Lao Tzu and translated by Robert G. Henricks

76. **The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul’s Conquest of Evil** by Heinrich Zimmer edited by Joseph Campbell

Only one lament: One would’ve hoped that a lens on rebuilding human civilization would transcend the hegemony of the white male slant and would, at minimum, include a more equal gender balance of perspectives — of Brand’s 76 books, only one is written by a woman, one features a female co-author, and one is edited by a woman. It’s rather heartbreaking to see that someone as visionary as Brand doesn’t consider literature by women worthy of representing humanity in the long run. Let’s hope the Long Now balances the equation a bit more fairly as they move forward with the remaining entries in their 3,500-book collaborative library.

Complement with the reading lists of Carl Sagan, Alan Turing, Nick Cave, and David Bowie,* then join me in supporting the Manual for Civilization.

*I realize these are all male reading lists. I have been unable to find a published reading list by a prominent female public figure — if you know of one, please do get in touch.

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Cupid's Conflicted Arrow: Henri-Frédéric Amiel on Love and Its Demons
Cosmic Pastoral: Diane Ackerman's Poems for the Planets, Which Carl Sagan Sent Timothy Leary in Prison

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