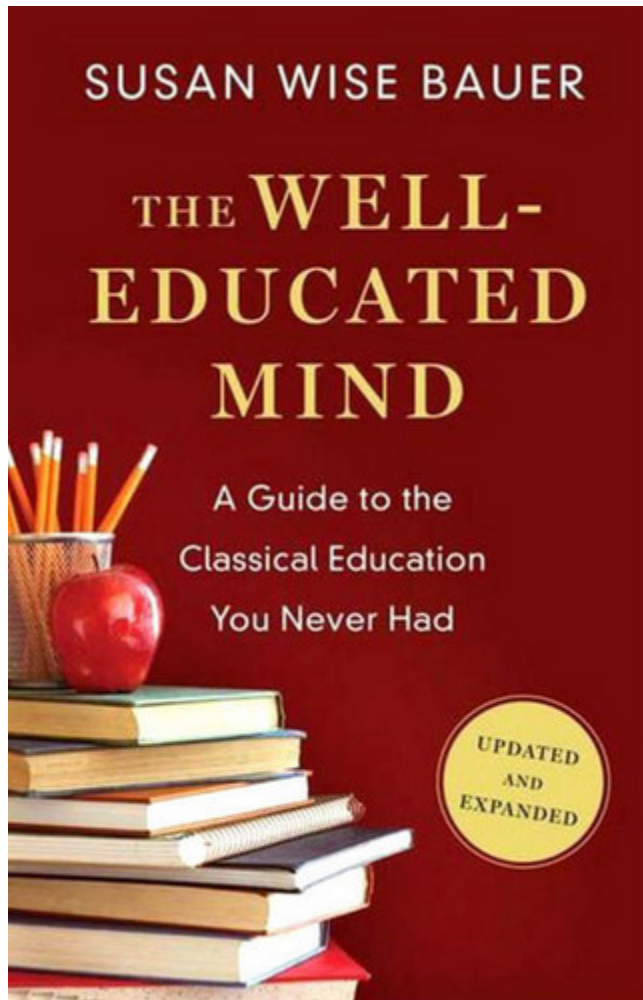


‘Well-Educated Mind’ is phenomenal

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“The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had” by Susan Wise Bauer. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2015, 480 pages, \$35.



“The year I turned 30, I decided to go back to graduate school,” Susan Wise Bauer writes in “Training Your Own Mind,” the inaugural chapter in “The Well-Educated Mind: A Guide to the Classical Education You Never Had,” her phenomenal new treatise on the virtues of an educational philosophy not quite as popular or pervasive as it was in an earlier era. “I’d taken years off from school to write, teach literature as an adjunct lecturer, have four children. Now I was back in the classroom, on the wrong side of the teacher’s desk. All the graduate students looked like teenagers; I was expected to stuff my family into the schedule designed for me by American studies, live off a stipend of \$6,000 per year while forgoing all other gainful employment, and content myself with university-sponsored health insurance, which supplied bare-bones coverage and classified anesthesia during childbirth as a frill.”

I am sure several readers are able to instantly relate to the challenging circumstances Bauer describes as she recounts the quest to complete her doctorate, which is one of the endearing features of this exquisite volume. Make no mistake, the author deals with some fairly heavy-duty content in this intense overview of

many of the greatest ideas ever put to paper (or screen). But it is her style of writing – equal parts profound insight and down-to-earth perspective with always a hint of dry humor – that really captured and held my attention. Over the course of a long and mostly uneventful academic career, I have occasionally been exposed to the classics, primarily during my high school and undergraduate years. Perhaps if Bauer had been my teacher, I would not have approached the “great books” with such an apprehensive and uninspired sense of dread. She seems to have an innate ability to make learning the important ideas encapsulated in archetypal literary works enjoyable and even exhilarating.

In my high school, for example, reading was obviously expected, although it was often presented as an obligation or a duty – something to be endured for the greater good rather than as a way to derive

personal satisfaction. Sure, there were those students who loved to read, but I don't recall any serious effort to explain how we should read or to set the context for really delving into the material beyond a somewhat superficial level. Bauer had me speculating on how compelling the process could have been (and how much more I would have gotten out of it) had the requirement been accompanied by the kind of introduction she provides near the beginning of "The Story of People: Reading through History with the Novel," the fifth chapter and one of my favorites.

"Reading the first words of a novel is like glimpsing the first crack of light along the edge of an opening door," Bauer writes. "What's inside that invisible room? The reader leans forward, waiting for each detail to take its proper place in the whole. The puzzling pattern just inside the door turns out to be the edge of a screen; the odd dark shape on the floor develops into the shadow of an end table. Finally the door swings open. The reader steps over the threshold, into another world." To illustrate this nontrivial point, Bauer then uses the opening lines from two well-known if not quite as well-understood novels. Quick cultural literacy test: See if you can name the two novels by their opening lines before proceeding to the paragraph below:

"A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak and studded with iron spikes."

"Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure."

"Some doors open quickly," Bauer writes. "That soberly clad throng of bearded men and hooded women are clustered around a Boston jail, waiting for Hester Prynne – the heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 tale of festering guilt, 'The Scarlet Letter' – to walk out with her baby in her arms. But other doors creak open more slowly. The narrator of Albert Camus' 1942 novel 'The Stranger' doesn't know exactly when his mother died. The telegram from the Home for the Aged isn't specific. But the matter doesn't occupy his mind for more than a moment or two."

The author pretty much covers the full spectrum of literature, beginning with a short yet remarkably comprehensive primer on how to read and appropriately appreciate the significance and contributions of each particular genre. She then proceeds through the primary categories normally considered at the high end of the literary spectrum, including historical novels, autobiographies and memoirs, historical nonfiction, drama, poetry and those works dedicated to revealing our place in the universe.

Bauer is editor-in-chief and co-owner of Peace Hill Press and a contributing editor for the journal "Books & Culture." She has taught English at The College of William and Mary since 1993. Her previous books include "The Story of Western Science: From the Writings of Aristotle to the Big Bang Theory," "The History of the Renaissance World: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Conquest of Constantinople" and "The Well-Trained Mind: A Guide to Classical Education at Home," which she co-authored with Jessie Wise, her mother.

A featured speaker and workshop presenter at conferences and other professional meetings, Bauer learned Latin at age 10 and went on to study Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Korean. Her husband is a minister at a nondenominational church in rural Virginia. As you may have surmised, I thoroughly enjoyed "The Well-Educated Mind" and have a suspicion many reading this review would also like it immensely.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.