Posternaries: Summer Reading

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**Summer Reading**

Does anyone just relax on the beach anymore? The history of vacations is complicated and apt to depend on location as well as era, but I remember a time, eons ago and far, far away, when a summer vacation unquestionably meant time spent at the beach, and there was no such thing as a winter vacation. And because there is really not very much to do at the beach, there was also a great tradition of recreational reading in those long-lost lazy summertimes. Well, in case any of you have the time to catch up on your reading this fine July, here are a few literary suggestions that have materials research connections.

First, allow me to suggest a book that aroused a minor controversy and murmurings about academic freedom earlier this year, when a charitable foundation provided grants to a number of U.S. universities on the stipulation that they include it as required reading in at least one course. It is also rumored to be in production as a movie, starring Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, but of course you always want to read the book before you see the movie, right? Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* has been controversial ever since it was published, in 1957, but it has also never been out of print, so it must have something going for it. It is certainly the heavy-weight of my three suggestions, both literally and literarily, weighing in at 1,075 pages and packing a blatant political message. This one would justify the purchase of an electronic reader, on weight-saving alone. As far as the message is concerned, well, pay heed to Robert Frost: “Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.” Once in every chapter, the narrative veers off into a speech of 30-or-so pages about the effect of government control on free enterprise, delivered by one of the story’s heroes. These are placed in the story line about as fittingly as an ape to the technical details, but there is a lot of innocent fun in these adventures, and some considerable truth in the descriptions of the properties that the metal men exhibit. It is suggested by some bloggers of the superhero genre that the very successful Marvel *Comics X Men* series (debuting in 1963) was inspired by the Metal Men, which include one woman, first of the superhero genre that the very successful *Marvel Comics X Men* series (debuting in 1963) was inspired by the Metal Men, which include one woman, first of the most delightful satirists of the late 20th century.

Moving on from Vonnegut’s light touch with heavy subject-matter, you can turn to the genre of “illustrated novels,” better known as comic books. We have already seen the release of a summer blockbuster movie, *Iron Man*, based on the classic Marvel comic book character of the same name. Originating in 1963, Iron Man is a mere human who derives his strength and powers from a high-tech armored suit. I would like to draw your attention, however, to the reissue of a collection of the DC Comics classic series: *Metal Men*. The Metal Men, which include one woman, first appeared in 1962, thus pre-dating the Iron Man offering from the rival comic-book publisher. The metal men of the title are six anthropoid robots, each made of, and exhibiting the unique properties of, an elemental metal: gold, iron, lead, mercury, tin, and platinum. These robots are endowed with human-like characters that are also based on their materials properties. At the end of each adventure the metal men always prevail over some threat to the world, although they are usually all destroyed in the process. Their inventor is evidently a master of recycling as well as robotics, though, because they all appear, ready for battle, at the beginning of the next adventure. You can certainly pick at the technical details, but there is a lot of innocent fun in these adventures, and some considerable truth in the descriptions of the properties that the metal men exhibit. It is suggested by some bloggers of the superhero genre that the very successful Marvel *Comics X Men* series (debuting in 1963) was inspired by the Metal Men, even though the *X Men* are biological mutants rather than engineering marvels. If true, that would mark an interesting parallel with real life, in which the United States Steel Corporation (founded by financial superhero J.P. Morgan) mutated into the anonymous USX Corp. in 1991, then back to United States Steel in 2001.

Whatever your choice in literature, use your vacation from the laboratory as an opportunity to kindle or re-kindle a habit of reading. Anthony Trollope observed (somewhat metallurgically) that “the habit of reading is the only enjoyment in which there is no alloy; it lasts when all other pleasures fade.”

ALEX KING