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# Time to finish some unfinished literature

## | Opinion

*Social distancing forced upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic has put us indoors for weeks. I suggest we finish these literary works any way we please.*

**Mark D. Harmon** Guest columnist

Published 5:00 p.m. ET Apr. 6, 2020

### Story Highlights

Mark D. Harmon is a professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of Tennessee.

PBS recently gave us "Sanditon," Jane Austen's satire of manners and class set in a seaside resort. She had finished 11 chapters at the time of her death. The producers crafted a seamless ending. What a shame. I would have opted for aliens destroying the resort.

One unintended function of unfinished works is that they offer readers the chance to conclude the work using their own imaginations. Social distancing forced upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic has put us indoors for weeks. After we tire of our own projects, I suggest we finish these literary works any way we please.

Here are my efforts. If you are worried that a journalism professor could not possibly do justice to the canon, rest assured I certainly will not.

## 'The Aeneid'

Virgil died in 19 B.C.E. without completing "The Aeneid," an epic poem set after the end of the Trojan War. Currently it ends with the hero Aeneas plunging a sword through his greatest mortal rival, Turnus. My final chapter has the ghost of Turnus hiring the underworld's most evil lawyers to sue Aeneas in a wrongful-death lawsuit.

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Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" has 24 tales, plus prologues, told by pilgrims as part of a storytelling contest on their way to Canterbury Cathedral. Scholarly evidence suggests additional planned tales were never written. One likely entry is the Critic's Tale, one of constant complaints about lodging, food and even the color of clothing. It ends with the Critic etching into a post (the medieval equivalent of Yelp) a series of jibes at fellow travelers. They, in turn, tie the Critic to that post and enjoy many pints of ale.

## **Love, laughter and gender equality**

"The Mystery of Edwin Drood" was a Charles Dickens serialized work planned for 12 installments, but Dickens died after six. We know Drood has disappeared and likely has been killed. The new ending reveals that Drood faked his own death and is living with several Jane Austen heroines in a Scottish commune filled with love, laughter and gender equality.

Franz Kafka specialized in dark tales. He left three of them -- "The Trial," "The Castle" and "Amerika" -- unfinished when he died. All of them now, quite curiously, end when a minor character crushes a talking cockroach.

Vladimir Nabokov died in 1977, leaving behind an unfinished manuscript, "The Original of Laura." The book follows the interactions of a scholar and a nubile 24-year old. It sounds like a carbon copy of his "Lolita," updated to avoid the Mann Act, but now with a #MeToo ending that seeks justice for the 24-year-old.

## **Bill and Ted and Harold and Kumar**

"Bouvard and Pécuchet" is a Gustave Flaubert half-finished work, a precursor to "Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure" and "Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle." It's the story of two middle-aged Parisian clerks. When one inherits some money, they dedicate themselves to intellectual pursuits, only to bumble their way through several scientific disciplines. In the new ending, they invent time travel and become Cabinet secretaries in the Trump administration, only to get fired for not taking bribes.

Russian writer Nikolai Gogol never finished the second part of his masterwork, "Dead Souls." In fact, the story ends mid-sentence. My approach would be to finish the sentence with the striking revelation that ...

*Mark D. Harmon is a professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of*

*Tennessee.*

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# During the pandemic, treasure and nurture your unlikely friendships | Opinion

*Ben Bates, my best friend, has been dead two years, but his life and his work resonate around academia and in the fond memories of many scholars.*

**Mark D. Harmon** Guest columnist

Published 6:02 a.m. ET Nov. 3, 2020

## Story Highlights

Mark Harmon is a professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of Tennessee, and a member of the Tennessee Democratic Party Executive Committee.

My best friend's name came up a few weeks ago in a note about research I should read. I got a bit melancholy seeing it was written by Ben. Ben Bates has been dead two years, but his life and his work resonate around academia and in the fond memories of many scholars. Though most readers of this column likely never knew him, let me tell you about his life. I believe by the end of this column you'll understand the reasons why I've done so.

## A libertarian and a liberal

I met Ben sometime around 1989 or 1990 when we both were recent hires at Texas Tech University in Lubbock. Frequently we'd gather colleagues for a quick lunch on campus or a slightly longer meal off campus. Ben could be painfully shy, but in that setting he was comfortable. The two of us could drift into a political argument, and the others attending often would lean back and watch us try to outdo each other. Ben spouted libertarian arguments. I took liberal/progressive positions. No one ever took it personally. We used to joke that every graduate student should be required to attend a final exam lunch. We'd start an argument. It didn't matter which side the graduate student took to pass, only that he or she had the courage to take a stand.

Ben's specialty was media economics. He not only did research but also did a lot of service work, reviewing research articles and proposed books. At one lunch, I mentioned an exhaustive anonymous review I'd received years earlier. It was encouraging but had a long list of needed improvements. Ben sheepishly said, "I think I remember writing that one."

Ben was tall and heavy. His beard initially made him look like a cross between the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia and Santa Claus. As he aged, the Santa look was stronger, especially when he removed his glasses to reveal his piercing blue eyes. He loved books, jazz, scholarship and foreign travel. Fulbright grants and conferences left him standing out in crowds in Hong Kong, Helsinki, Salzburg, Istanbul and New Zealand. Ben also enjoyed mentoring graduate students and often would have a Thanksgiving dinner at his house for our international students left on campus during that holiday break.

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columns.

Our research interests sometimes overlapped. We collaborated on work about TV news call-in polls. When the newsroom where I was working part time did one, I'd call Ben with the question so he could use his research lab to do a traditional phone poll in the same community on the same question.

## **Colleagues twice over**

Ben took a job at the University of Tennessee years before me, but when there was an opening that fit my skills he urged me to apply. The job was a great match. I put Lubbock in the rearview mirror and started some glorious personal and professional growth in Knoxville, including meeting and marrying my lovely wife and serving as a county commissioner.

Liver cancer took my friend quickly. Our last lunch together was at UT Medical Center. I cut the chicken off the bone for him, but we still shared stories. Ben in his will created a fund so our graduate students would not be burdened with travel costs when presenting research.

I've had the good fortune to know many other memorable souls now gone. Our North Hills community still calls any strong fruit punch Ann-gria, after the marvelous Anne Woodle, who died suddenly. My church community was blessed by April Burt, a vivacious force for good and beauty. I could list so many more.

My point in writing about Ben is simple — to remind you about those unlikely, oddball friendships that have improved your life. As we live through the distancing of a pandemic, reach out safely to one another by phone, email, text, Facetime, Zoom and old-fashioned letters, and love each day as you have loved them.

*Mark D. Harmon is a professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of Tennessee, and a member of the Tennessee Democratic Party Executive Committee.*

## OPINION

# Empty Knoxville Center Mall perfect for GOP convention I Opinion

Mark D. Harmon, Guest columnist Published 6:00 a.m. ET June 9, 2020

*The media center could be in the Sears area, the satellite trucks in the former auto and truck bays.*

President Donald Trump is angry at Charlotte, North Carolina, because local leadership is balking at cramming people from all over the country together to create a massive crowd bellowing for Trump, something he sorely misses. Social distancing will not suffice when Trump wants renomination regaling.

Thus, Trump looks elsewhere to risk a COVID-19 super spreader, and our own Gov. Bill Lee is eager for the president to [pick Tennessee \(/story/news/politics/2020/06/02/gop-eyes-nashville-convention-tour-city-gov-bill-lee-says/3124016001/\)](#). Nearly all the chat has been about Nashville, and that's a big mistake. The logical choice is right here in our backyard. The Republican National Convention should come to [Knoxville Center Mall \(/story/money/2020/02/01/knoxville-center-mall-aka-east-towne-mall-closes-good/4476110002/\)](#).

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Knoxville Center Mall, formerly known as East Towne Mall, on its final day on Friday, Jan. 31, 2020. (Photo: Brianna Paciorka/News Sentinel)

You'll recall this local landmark, originally known as [East Towne \(/story/money/2020/01/31/knoxville-center-mall-aka-east-towne-mall-closes-walkers-take-last-lap/4623286002/\)](#), opened to much fanfare in 1984 and operated for almost three dozen years before closing this January. The facility has some 964,000 square feet and ample parking that easily could be converted for the RNC.

## No commuting, but plenty of parking

The key to avoid local disease spreading is to make the convention only for campers, trailers and RVs, no commuting to and from local hotels and restaurants. Some distant delegates may not even need to change flight plans. They can fly to Charlotte, rent a camper and head to Knoxville.

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A revitalized food court could serve delegate meals, the workers recruited from the ranks of the armed crazies who have been insisting governors ["reopen the economy," \(/story/news/politics/2020/05/20/knox-county-health-department-under-pressure-accelerate-reopening/5227060002/\)](#) but be wary of the tattooed guy rolling around the Auntie Anne's Pretzels cart. A safer bet is the Mike Pence special, turkey and mayo on white bread.

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## Ivanka, Melania and the MyPillow guy



Mark Harmon, KNS columnist (Photo: Paul Efrid / News Sentinel)

The delegates could stroll the former shops: Spencer Gifts now just selling MAGA paraphernalia, the Kay Jewelers location offering Ivanka handbags, the Victoria's Secret reopened as Melania's Shop (with all the mannequins that look like Melania taken out of storage for the event), and the MyPillow store complete with owner Mike Lindell. The Regal Cinemas could show continuous loops of campaign commercials or be used for big-screen versions of radical-right disinformation sites.

#### DIG DEEPER

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As a nod to health or perhaps to have something to show those annoying reporters, maybe a few delegates will take advantage of the temperature testing at the former Foot Locker location. Most delegates likely will stick to the new convention floor, the numerous chairs arrayed by state in the former Belk location. Overflow space could be in JCPenney. Perhaps the wiring for the store sound systems are still there, making the audio conversion even

the Sears area, the satellite trucks in the former auto and truck bays.



Regal Tuxedo's storefront at Knoxville Center Mall on Tuesday, January 21, 2020. Regal Tuxedo will keep its mall location open until January 31 before opening its Centerline Drive location on February 1. (Photo: Brianna Paciorka/News Sentinel)

Any formal receptions could be handled by the reopened Regal Tuxedo. Game Stop could be open again for any delegates who brought kids on the convention trip. The former site of Mandarin Palace could become a display area for blaming all of Trump's failures on the Chinese.

My suggestion to the Republicans is that they buy, not rent, the Knoxville Center Mall space. Come this fall Trump and his dozen or so remaining supporters may be packing up and looking for a presidential library site. This is a daunting task for a president who famously does not read. A converted mall, replete with Mar-a-Lago Putt Putt, would be an ideal location.

A mall may not initially seem like the best place for the Republican National Convention, but it befits a group who were sold a bill of goods in 2016.

*Mark D. Harmon is a professor of journalism and electronic media at the University of Tennessee and is a regional vice chair of the Tennessee Democratic Party.*

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