READER: Professor Howard Hunter, 59, is the president of the Singapore Management University (SMU).

The former dean of the Emory Law School in Georgia, the United States, is no stranger to scholarly accolades.

A Fulbright Senior Scholar and graduate from Yale University, the American was called to the Georgia state bar in 1971 and practised law in Washington DC and Atlanta before joining the Emory faculty in 1976.

He went on to teach law around the world, including at the University of Hong Kong, and has written several books on law, including Modern Law Of Contracts, a well-known treatise now into its third edition.

He and his wife Susan, 59, an art photographer, have a daughter, Emily, 28, who is a lawyer.

What are you reading now?
I recently finished the novel Heartland (1999) by Daren Shiau, one of the two books in the current ReadSMU programme, the other being The Tipping Point (2000) by Malcolm Gladwell.

ReadSMU is a joint effort by my university students and staff to share thoughts on books of common interest.

I liked Daren’s book very much, and appreciated it more after having lived in Singapore since August last year. If I had read it prior to living here or just after my arrival, I would not have understood all the subtexts about, among other things, HDB culture.

Another book I read recently was War Trash (2004) by Ha Jin, who is remarkable not only for his skill in creating characters and compelling narratives, but also for his eloquence in his adopted language. He is a Chinese version of Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov.

If your house was burning down, which book would you save?
Most books can be replaced and so the ones I would save, which are placed close to one another on the same shelf, would be saved for personal sentiment. They are Leaves Of Grass (1855) by Walt Whitman, a somewhat dog-eared copy that has many marked pages and marginal notes, and The Pleasures Of Philosophy (1972) by Charles Frankel, who's my late father-in-law. He dedicated the book to his daughter, my wife Susan, and me on the occasion of our wedding in 1971.

I think that Whitman is the best of the American poets — not just for his use of language, but for his ability to capture the essence of American character in all its complexities and contradictions.

The particular volume is meaningful to me because of the notes I have made in it and because I read some of the poems in it at a memorial service in New York a few weeks after the events of Sept 11, 2001.

Heartland by Daren Shiau ($18 without GST) is available at major bookstores and online at ethosbooks.com.sg
War Trash by Ha Jin ($17.33 with GST) and Leaves Of Grass by Walt Whitman ($15.64 with GST) are available at Books Kinokuniya. Used copies of The Pleasures Of Philosophy by Charles Frankel are available from www.amazon.com