“What’s it all about, Alfie?” Dionne Warwick posed this question to Alfie and the rest of us in the 1960s. Well, Alfie, this year’s Dean’s List has five new entries that might help you and the rest of us answer that question: “What indeed is it all about?”

Novelists create characters whose experiences often serve to illuminate the human condition. Two novels new to the Dean’s List this year offer a prism through which to view the emigrant experience which often begins with a wrenching departure from the “old country” followed a generation or two later by challenges facing grandchildren in a contemporary America.

Paul Behrens’ *The Law of Dreams* traces the life of young Fergus as he flees famine in 1846 County Clare on through violence in Liverpool, heartbreak in Montreal until he arrives with a modicum of hope on the road to Biddeford, Maine. All this occurs a mere 20 years before Boston College was founded with the intent to educate young men such as Fergus. This story is gripping, the traditional “good read.”

Alice McDermott’s reputation rests on her masterful depiction of the life struggles of those grandchildren of immigration. In *After This*, physical hunger is not the threat facing the Long Island Keane family in the 1960s. This is the era of Alfie, the age of another kind of hunger—manifested in intergenerational conflicts and challenges to the traditional family faith that so often characterized the ’60s and subsequent decades.

If, as has been remarked, philosophy is a series of footnotes to Plato, it may also be said that all economics is an elaboration of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. Two of Smith’s central concepts are economies of scale and the famous “invisible hand” which guides free markets. In a brilliant work of exposition, David Warsh’s *Knowledge and the Wealth of Nations: A Story of Economic Discovery* shows how economists for over two centuries have employed these two concepts in attempting to make sense out of the complexities of economic life. Warsh’s book is an intellectual history of the highest quality.
Human life is bordered by mortality. We all have various strategies to deal with our own mortality or the mortality of those we love. Brian Doyle’s *The Wet Engine* is his beautifully poetic reflection on his son’s mortality made excruciatingly evident by his little heart having only three not the usual four chambers when he came from the hand of God. Now nine years old, Liam, after numerous surgeries and abundant love, faces a bright future. Brian Doyle reminds us again how precious, because so tenuous, this human life of ours should be.

The basic unit in society is the family. We all come from one and perhaps have wondered from time to time what other families are really like from the inside. Probably we can never know for sure.

Tim Russert’s *Wisdom of Our Fathers* may help us peer into other families’ inner sanctum as clearly as we ever will be able. This collection of brief memories — some serious, others humorous but always touching — from daughters and sons needs to be read in snatches. There is no beginning or ending. They are simply heartfelt feelings that may assist Alfie in answering that question — this may be what it is all about.

— Fr. Neenan is vice president and special assistant to the president. He has issued his Dean’s List of recommended reading annually since he was dean of the College of Arts and Sciences in the early 1980s.