Jocelyn Swigger, Associate Professor of Music

Authors
Musselman Library

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Abstract
In this new Next Page column, Jocelyn Swigger, Associate Professor of Music, shares with us which authors and books are her “comfort foods,” how she has introduced meditation to her daily practice as a musician, and one of the few things she likes about Twitter.
Jocelyn Swigger, Associate Professor of Music
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In this new Next Page column, Jocelyn Swigger, Associate Professor of Music, shares with us which authors and books are her "comfort foods," how she has introduced meditation to her daily practice as a musician, and one of the few things she likes about Twitter.

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What are you reading now (or have read recently) that you would recommend and why?

I just started Want Not by Jonathan Miles; I can’t tell yet whether the plot is going to cohere in a satisfying way, but I’m enjoying the characters (especially the freegan squatters in Manhattan), and it’s fun to think about the extremes of commercialism and anti-commercialism.

Recently I read Lexicon by Max Barry, about training people to persuade with magical words—it had a really fun plot and a very satisfying strong female lead. A while ago I read The Magicians and The Magician King by Lev Grossman, which I think work really beautifully as a pair—the first is a darker, grownup Harry Potter (wizarding college), but the second one brings the plot into much larger spheres, including religion and redemption. I especially appreciate how well Grossman writes about the experience—and costs—of learning a skill at a high level.

One of the most enjoyable books I read last year was A River of No Return by Bee Ridgway—beautifully written, thought-provoking, time-travel novel between now and the 19th century (an Austen-ish hero, living in our time, goes back to his).

What book, article, or blog have you recently recommended to a student to read? Why?

I often forward articles from The Bulletproof Musician, which has terrific tips on effective practicing and getting to the right performance mindset. Over the winter break I had all my piano students read Pedro de Alcantara’s Indirect Procedures: A Musician’s Guide to the Alexander Technique, which beautifully describes the kind of physical awareness we all need at the piano. I especially like the Alexander Technique idea of using yourself at the instrument, rather than using the instrument.

What book or article has inspired you to take action?
A couple of years ago, the *Art of Practicing* by Madeline Bruser got me to try meditating for two minutes at the beginning of every practice session. I liked it so much I started making my students do it at the beginning of every class (both piano studio class and my FYS about harnessing stage fright). They love it—many say it’s their favorite part of the week. In the past few months, I’ve gotten more serious (though I would certainly not claim more skilled) about meditation, and I now do 20 minutes a day. I don’t know where that journey will take me, but I can tell it’s one of the most important things in my development right now as a musician and teacher.

**What is the first thing you read in the morning?**

*The Gettysburg Times*. Then nothing (except composer’s markings) till after I’ve practiced piano.

**What is the best book you’ve ever received as a gift?**

I collect a few of the authors whose books are my comfort food (I read and re-read them), and my husband often finds me their used paperbacks: Terry Pratchett, P.G. Wodehouse, Rex Stout, Dorothy L. Sayers, Daniel Pinkwater. He just completed my collection of Flavia de Luce novels.

**If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know?**

In a way, I feel like I do meet the writers, by reading them. I mostly want to know what they choose to tell me in their books, and I like the idea of them getting to keep to themselves. I’d like to be able to let them know, though, without bothering them, how grateful I am for their books. I wish I had written to some authors to thank them while they were alive—especially Douglas Adams, David Foster Wallace, Anne McCaffrey, and Robertson Davies. One of the things I like about twitter, which I kind of hold my nose and use at arm’s length, is that I can tweet to authors that I love their books.

**Do you have a favorite book or literary character from your childhood?**

Absolutely *Anne of Green Gables*. I still reread those books every few years—Anne was a terrific role model for me when I was growing up.

**What are you planning to read next?**

In addition to some readings on Chopin and piano playing, I’m looking forward to armfuls of fiction from the library this summer—anything that catches my eye. I’ve got *Boy, Snow, Bird* (a retelling of Snow White) by Helen Oyeyemi on hold, and I’ll also probably re-read the Robertson Davies Cornish trilogy, and catch up on the last couple of Oliver Sacks books that I’ve missed. There’s a prequel out to *A River of No Return* by Bee Ridgway, so I’ll definitely read that, and probably re-read *A River of No Return* afterwards.