10-11-2017

Allison Singley, Director of Parent Relations

Musselman Library
Gettysburg College

Allison C. Singley
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/nextpage

Part of the Higher Education Administration Commons, and the Library and Information Science Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

This is the publisher's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/nextpage/34

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.
Allison Singley, Director of Parent Relations

Abstract
In our new Next Page column, Allison Singley, Director of Parent Relations, shares with us the three books she is currently reading and why it might take her a while to finish them, her two desert island books (one of which inspired her doctoral dissertation), how she maintains a habit of reading poetry daily, and why she doesn't write in books anymore — or feel the need to finish one!

Keywords
Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

Disciplines
Higher Education Administration | Library and Information Science

This blog post is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/nextpage/34
Allison Singley, Director of Parent Relations

October 11, 2017

In our new Next Page column, Allison Singley, Director of Parent Relations, shares with us the three books she is currently reading and why it might take her a while to finish them, her two desert island books (one of which inspired her doctoral dissertation), how she maintains a habit of reading poetry daily, and why she doesn’t write in books anymore — or feel the need to finish one!

**********

What are you reading now, or have read recently, that you would recommend? What are your reading habits?

I frequently wish that I could spend all day lounging in our hammock or on my bed reading book after book. Seriously – what could be better? As it turns out, my reading time is largely limited to when I go to bed, and, as you might guess, I fall asleep after just a page or two. So frustrating! As a result, it takes me a long time to finish a book these days, but I savor what I read!

I am always reading, and currently I am reading three books: Commonwealth by Ann Patchett (because my book group will discuss it in December and I need to start now if I am going to finish before December!), Travels with My Aunt by Graham Greene (because I saw a hilarious stage adaptation of it in Glasgow, Scotland in 1995 or 96, and I’ve been meaning to read it ever since), and The Last Anniversary by Australian writer Liane Moriarty, who recently has been getting a lot of attention in the U.S. Her novels are smart, funny, and totally contemporary.

Library user or bookstore patron?

Almost everything I read comes from a library and because I take so long to get through a book, I often have to return it before I am finished (invariably there’s a hold placed by another patron) and then check it out again. This is not efficient, but it gives me an excuse to go to the library often – which I love.
**Do you read electronic, or print? Write in the margins, or keep your books clean?**

I read only print books, and I do not write in them because they usually are library books! In addition, writing in books reminds me of the years I spent studying and teaching literature – which is a great thing, but it’s nice now to have the freedom to read without taking notes or marking passages for future discussions, etc. I just go!

**What kind of books are you drawn to? Can you give us some recommendations?**

I am drawn to fiction, especially novels that tell a family story that involves multiple generations, multiple cultures, one or more juicy secrets, and questions of identity (a rich and complex topic for all of us). I also tend to gravitate to contemporary literature. Some of my relatively recent favorites (let’s say the past dozen years or so) that more or less fit this criteria, include *The Namesake* and *The Lowland* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese, *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng, *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Round House* by Louise Erdrich, and *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. I also would like to mention *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie because it has one of the best passages about contemporary United States identity that I have read in a while, and I love this book.

I am also a sucker for what seems to me is a fairly recent niche genre of novels that are about books and the people who love them. Two of my recent favorites are *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry* by Gabrielle Zevin and *The Little Paris Bookshop* by Nina George. And I have a special place in my heart for those books that I think (and pardon my hubris) that I taught well once upon a time. One that leaps to mind is *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien – what an amazing book. Another is *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* by Sherman Alexie. There can be moments in a class when, as the professor, you say to yourself, “I think they get it.” I had a few of those moments when teaching these works.

**What about nonfiction?**

In spite of my love of fiction, I am more than willing to read a good piece of non-fiction, and a couple of years ago I read *The Boys in the Boat* by Daniel James Brown and absolutely loved it. I rowed on my college’s crew team for three years and so appreciated this book because it often carried me back to my own rowing days, but also it was a fantastic story that was well told and, for me, incredibly moving.

**Any other genres you enjoy?**
I also love, love, love graphic novels. *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi is without a doubt one of my favorite reads of the 21st century, and the first graphic novel I read. *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang is another great one. A couple of years ago, I landed on *Relish* by Lucy Knisley and have been reading her other graphic novels here and there. Reading both text and images is a completely different experience, and one that I really enjoy.

I subscribe to *Poem-a-Day* and get a poem delivered to my email every day. This helps to keep me in the habit of reading poetry, which I really enjoy but don’t tend to do without a particular reason or unless someone really motivates me to pick up a volume of poetry. Poem-a-Day sends a fairly wide range of poems, and some I read over and over again, and some I glance at and move on. Again, reading should be an act of freedom! A recent poem called “*Wind*” by James Arthur began this way:

it’s true sometimes I cannot
stop myself from spilling
the recycling

I love this and totally relate!

*Your dissertation is on Caribbean literature and you taught a first year seminar called “Coming of Age: The Caribbean Novel.” Which Caribbean authors/titles would you recommend?*

For me, the piece of Caribbean writing that I recommend to everyone is *A Small Place* by Jamaica Kincaid. It is a departure from my usual attachment to fiction. In this long essay, Kincaid speaks pointedly and without apology to those people who view the Caribbean (or her native Antigua) as a vacation paradise. She debunks myth after myth or misperception after misperception about what it means to travel to the Caribbean as a tourist. Today this essay is as relevant as ever as this region is being pounded by hurricane after hurricane.

I also really enjoyed teaching the novels *Beka Lamb* by Zee Edgell about a girl in Belize and *Annie John* also by Jamaica Kincaid about a girl in Antigua. *Miguel Street* by Caribbean literary giant V.S. Naipaul is also wonderful. Each of these novels is fairly slender and about a child in the colonial or postcolonial Caribbean. Another favorite is *In the Time of the Butterflies* by Julia Alvarez. Although this is by the Sri Lankan author Romesh Gunesekra, the novel *Reef* is also one of my all-time favorites. Again, it is another slender coming of age novel that deftly presents a child’s coming of age in concert with a nation’s (or colony’s) growing pains.

I must admit that it’s been quite a while since I’ve read any of these, but I remember vividly engaging characters and learning a lot about each of these novel’s settings – the history, the contemporary political situation during the present of the novel, the education system, the land and seascapes, etc. Another classic Caribbean novel that I recommend is *In the Castle of My Skin* by George Lamming.
We understand you have been a longstanding member (decades!) of a local book group but that you sometimes don’t finish the book, yet still manage to make insightful comments. How does that work?

Yes, I have been a member of the same book group since I moved to Gettysburg 20 years ago. Over the years, I have been exposed to many books that I never would have read on my own – a wonderful thing. One that leaps to mind is *In the Absence of Sun* by Helie Lee – a true account of a family’s experiences helping the author’s uncle to escape from North Korea. Riveting and powerful. But I am definitely not an ideal book group participant because I usually read only 3 or 4 of the 11 books that my group discusses each year. Mostly, this is because I run out of time, but several years ago I also gave myself permission to stop reading a book if it is not engaging me. There’s just too much out there, and I don’t want to spend time reading something that I don’t particularly like or find interesting.

Whether or not I’ve finished the book, I love attending book group because the discussion is always fascinating and I appreciate hearing a range of opinions, thoughts, questions, etc. It’s kind of you to say that I make “insightful” comments even if I haven’t finished the book – primarily, I think I ask a lot of questions and I always try to figure out if I should read whatever we’re discussing.

Participating in this book group has been great fun for me, and one of my favorite topics of conversation with others who are in their own book groups is discussing what they are reading. I find this fascinating. In fact, I had a terrific conversation several years ago with a Gettysburg College parent about a book group that he and his wife had been a part of for 36 years. The parent later emailed me one of the best book group stories I’ve heard. The group had read *A Spy Among Friends*, and the Gettysburg parent decided to be cheeky and went to the house where Kim Philby had lived, and knocked on the door. The upshot is that the current residents invited the book group to have dinner and the book discussion in their home. At dinner, one of the hosts – a Georgetown professor, gave his “Freudian interpretation of why Philby was such a liar and had no qualms about sending hundreds or maybe thousands to their deaths in his role as a double agent.” Book groups are fantastic!

What book has had the biggest impact on you and why?

The two books that have had the biggest impact on me are *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner. These definitely would be two of my desert island books. I first read *Beloved* in my junior year of college not long after it was published. I remember distinctly that the professor said it was a ghost story. Oh, man, is it a ghost story and so much more. *Beloved* was the first book that I can remember that had a profound impact on the way that I thought – the way that I thought about reading, about literature, about telling a story, about myself, about slavery, about sacrifice, about history, and so on. I am certain that I wrote a terrible paper in that class, but I loved and still do love this book for many reasons, and it is one significant contributing factor for why I went to graduate school in English. I had the opportunity to meet Toni Morrison in the spring of 1994 at a celebration for her at St.
John the Divine. It was a remarkable experience. By the way, I cannot recommend highly enough listening to Toni Morrison read *Beloved* – it’s available through Musselman Library.

I read *Absalom, Absalom!* for the first time when I was in graduate school. This book rocked my world. I think that this was the first time that I understood what it meant really to read – it was sort of a continuation on a more mature level of what happened when I first read *Beloved*. You can’t be sloppy when reading this novel and I think it’s fair to say that everything in it relates to something else – even hundreds of pages away. It’s the reader’s task to understand and figure out the complexity of the amazing story being told.

My interest in the Caribbean began when I was sixteen and went to Haiti for ten days. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Thomas Sutpen spends time in Haiti (the description takes only a few pages in the novel), but what happens there is critical to the entire story. My understanding of this brief episode in Sutpen’s life became the genesis of my doctoral dissertation and thus consumed my life for the five (yes, five – yikes!) years it took me to write my dissertation. But I have no regrets. Poring over *Absalom, Absalom!* was a deeply satisfying intellectual endeavor, and I argue this book gives a compelling and completely relevant explanation for the state of race relations in the U.S. today.

Do you have a favorite book or literary character from your childhood? What did you like to read as a child?

*Charlotte’s Web*. There’s no question. The final paragraph gets me every time, especially the last two sentences: “It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.” And I adore Wilbur. I never tire of reading this book, and it’s another of my desert island books. I also was a huge fan of Ramona Quimby. One of my favorite scenes from *Beezus and Ramona*, I believe, is of Ramona sitting in her basement with a crate of apples, taking one bite from an apple and then tossing it before taking a bite from the next apple because “the first bite always tastes best.” I loved all *Little House* books, although, *On the Banks of Plum Creek* was my favorite.

What are you planning to read next?

*Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi seems to fit the criteria for novels that I like. I am also interested in getting my hands on Celeste Ng’s new novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, and the highly-praised YA novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. I recently heard someone quote from Dag Hammarskjöld’s *Markings*, and I plan to delve into this. But first, I am determined to finish the three books I mentioned above!