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Abstract
In this last Next Page column of 2017, Ryan Kerney, Assistant Professor of Biology, shares some of his favorite science writers in the field of “evo devo;” his go-to science news sources and podcasts (note: “This Week in Parasitism” is a must-listen!); what he would ask Charles Darwin if given the chance; which books he likes to give as gifts; his favorite author of all time; and where he finds great recommendations for what to read next.

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Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

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Ryan Kerney, Assistant Professor of Biology

November 17, 2017

In this last Next Page column of 2017, Ryan Kerney, Assistant Professor of Biology, shares some of his favorite science writers in the field of “evo devo;” his go-to science news sources and podcasts (note: “This Week in Parasitism” is a must-listen!); what he would ask Charles Darwin if given the chance; which books he likes to give as gifts; his favorite author of all time; and where he finds great recommendations for what to read next.

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

I am currently reading Parasite Rex by Carl Zimmer, which is terrific. He is one of our best modern popular science writers.

I’ve also been slogging through Doris Kearns Goodwin’s A Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln which is mostly about Washington society life during the Civil War and the dazzling debutante Kate Chase. I’m about half way through that one but it is worth it. I need to come up for air every 200 or so pages to read a novel or biology book.

My 10-year-old daughter and I are also reading Where the Mountain Meets the Moon by Grace Lin. It is about a Chinese girl trying to help her poor family with the aid of a talking goldfish and a dragon. It is phenomenal.

You study symbiotic relationships in biology. If you could only recommend one book on this topic to a friend or colleague, which book would you select?

That is easy. Ed Yong’s I Contain Multitudes: The Microbes within Us and a Grander View of Life is jaw dropping. He is a fantastic writer and thorough scholar.
How do you keep up with the latest scientific news? Any favorite magazines, newspapers, blogs, social media, etc. that you read or follow daily?

This question has to be broken down into a few categories:

For primary scientific literature I maintain weekly RSS updates from PubMed on the topics of: “Symbiosis,” “Skeletal Development,” and “Chytridiomycosis.” This gives me email updates on the new studies that are searchable with these keywords. I also use social media including ResearchGate to follow about 250 biologists as they publish new work.

For popular press updates on organismal biology I subscribe to Ed Yong’s weekly listserv “The Ed’s Up.” It links to his favorite weekly science stories, which are always amazing. I also follow a lot of scientists and science journalists on Twitter.

For more general science news I listen to the Nature and Science podcasts every week, and occasionally to the This Week in Parasitism or This Week in Virology podcasts (these are exceptionally nerdy and fun).

Who are your favorite scientists writing today?

There is a long list of modern science writers who are doing excellent work in Biology. Many of these are not practicing scientists but have managed to gain impressive depth within the life sciences in particular.

Of practicing scientist writers I’ve most recently been blown away by The Gene: An Intimate History by Siddhartha Mukherjee. Popular press works by Neil Shubin, Sean Carroll, Armand Leroi, Christiane Nusslein-Volhard, and of course the late Stephen Jay Gould have all been influential in my field of Evolutionary Developmental Biology (Evo Devo).

You’ve just returned from a semester in Sri Lanka. What did you read to prepare for your time there? How has this experience shaped future research interests?

My favorite pre-trip book was The Elephant Complex: Travels in Sri Lanka by John Gimlette. While there I read accounts by or about Victorian biologists and naturalists: Alfred Russell Wallace, Charles Darwin, and Ernst Haeckel. Reading about their pioneering work in the tropics put my own travels into perspective (and gave me a serious inferiority complex).

Being in India and Sri Lanka rekindled a desire to do more tropical field-work. I mostly put that type of research on hold while my children are young(er). It was great exposing them to some real tropical biodiversity during my sabbatical.
What’s your reading style? Do you prefer print or ebooks? Do you read one book at a time or multiple books? What/who are your go-to sources for book recommendations?

I typically read a lot of different books at once and prefer to check out several from the library at any given time. Sometimes I get to all of them or sometimes they are just on deck as I focus on one title. I prefer print, but now use a Kindle Paperwhite, which doesn’t have the internet distraction. Many reading inspirations come from You Gotta Read This or occasionally just asking for suggestions on social media. I’ve also recently enjoyed audiobooks while exercising or on my commute. LibriVox is a terrific free app. It has volunteers read books that are available in the public domain.

What book or article has inspired you to take action? (i.e., books/articles that might have inspired change in career path, travel to a new place, activism, etc.)

While I disagreed with Thomas Friedman on the Iraq War, his book Hot, Flat, and Crowded sparked my desire to do something about climate change. One year after reading his book I did an Energy, Environment & Agriculture Fellowship through the American Association for the Advancement of Science at the Department of Energy’s office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy. I worked with a team of analysts on a wide range of projects that measured federal investments in low carbon technologies. I will be forever amazed by the skill and dedication of our federal workforce many of whom are working with little recognition or even job security to make this world a better place.

What do you read for fun?

I love to read histories, biographies, popular science, books on politics and policy, literature and novels.

For novels, am currently enjoying anything by Haruki Murakami, David Mitchell, Chuck Palahniuk, and George MacDonald Fraser. Recently, I have also been trying to get back into reading classics. I got through Moby Dick during my sabbatical and was delighted to find it both a good book and a “great” book.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know?
Charles Darwin – I’d want to know how he was able to synthesize so much natural history into *On the Origin of the Species*. No other modern book has had such a profound and lasting impact on our view of humanity’s place in nature. We are still reeling from the implications of being just another species of animals.

**What is your favorite book to give as a gift?**

*The Owl and the Pussycat* by Edward Lear (to my young nephews and nieces)

*The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White (to students)

**Who is your favorite writer of all time?**

Fyodor Dostoevsky. He is hands-down the best novelist I’ve ever read. No contest.

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

I’m re-living a literary youth through my own children. My recent favorite book for young readers is *The Twenty-One Balloons* by William Pène du Bois. It was written in 1947 but should survive forever.

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

Steven Pinker’s *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*. There is a lot to get depressed about as we see the rise of despotism and the fraying of democratic norms in this country and around the world. I believe the societal trends outlined by Pinker and in the late Hans Rosling’s [Gapminder.org](http://gapminder.org) are reasons enough to be skeptically hopeful for a better future of our own making.