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John Commito, Professor of Environmental Studies

Abstract

In this edition of *Next Page*, Professor of Environmental Studies John Commito reveals his love for all things Maine and why his neighbors don't believe he reads half of what he says he does.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

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John Commito, Professor of Environmental Studies

October 1, 2013

In this edition of Next Page, Professor of Environmental Studies John Commito reveals his love for all things Maine and why his neighbors don't believe he reads half of what he says he does.

We know you are a Maine-i-ac, at least in the summer when you take your students to Maine for a field study. What is the best book you've read or would recommend about Maine?

My favorite Maine book is [The Beans of Egypt, Maine](#), by Carolyn Chute. It's required reading for my summer field course, the Coastal Ecology of Maine, because I expect my Environmental Studies students to analyze our world from every angle. Chute wrote this novel when she was on welfare and living in a broken down trailer. It's a terrific and terrible story about poor white people living hard-scrabble, rural lives. It freaks out many of my students. "Doc, that book was so gross! People don't really DO that stuff!" Well, yes, they do. And my students can see it every day we are in Maine. Maine is not all cutesy L.L. Bean and lobster dinners. Chute could have written [Winter's Bone](#).

Four other great Maine books are [The Country of the Pointed Firs](#), by Sarah Orne Jewett, [High Tide at Noon](#), by Elisabeth Ogilvie (not the Patrick McGoochan movie!), [A Maine Hamlet](#), by Lura (yes, Lura) Beam, and, of course, all of Rachel Carson's seacoast ecology books and [Silent Spring](#). She spent much of her adult life living on the Maine coast (and, interestingly enough, in Beaufort, North Carolina, where I take my students to do research at Duke University Marine Laboratory). Hmm...as a trained scientist, I detect a pattern here: all five authors are women. So let me add the Robert McCloskey books *One Morning in Maine*, *Blueberries for Sal*, and [Time of Wonder](#). Wait! They are all about young girls. The pattern persists! Factoid: my wife once spent a day canoeing down the Pleasant River with McCloskey's grown-up daughter, Sal. Yes, THAT Sal.

Is there anything you read to get you in Maine mode?

The last final exam of the spring semester.

What kind of books do you read while you are in Maine? Scientific or fun? (We know, science IS fun.)



John Commito, Professor of Environmental Studies, enjoying a hike in Maine with his grandson, Soren.

Yes, science IS fun, but still, I read very few science books during the summer in Maine or back here during the rest of the year. Tons and tons of journal articles, but few science books. Ask any scientist and she'll probably say the same thing.

In Maine I read as many trashy novels as I possibly can. OK, not trashy. Semi-trashy. I read half a dozen John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee novels every summer and a similar number of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels, plus a boatload by Elmore Leonard, may he rest in peace. I have complete sets of their books in my cabin, all acquired at flea markets and yard sales. Honestly, Travis McGee and Maine are inextricably linked in my mind. I love Travis McGee. I want to be Travis McGee. I will never, ever, be Travis McGee.

I also read "good" books in Maine, both fiction and non-fiction. No TV, no radio, no Netflix, no cell phone, no iPod, no iPad, no Internet signal, no electronic intrusions of any kind except battery-powered NOAA weather broadcasts. So, guess what! I read all the freakin' time. Who gets to do that? I'm one lucky S.O.B.

What are you reading now that you would recommend to a friend or colleague on campus?

My friends and colleagues on campus couldn't care less about my book recommendations! They're academics! They have good taste! I'm always sending them articles from the [Chronicle of Higher Education](http://chronicle.com). Just today I sent them a lovely little piece on how to be a good teacher: <http://chronicle.com/article/Its-the-Little-Things-That/141489/>

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

Every day I cut out and post on our department's bulletin board interesting newspaper articles related to the environment. A few kids read them. Most don't. Oh, well. I love my students, regardless. Or as they would say, "irregardless."

How do you keep track of what you have already read, are reading currently, or want to read in the future?

For books, I pretty much don't. Well, except for the list of book titles I carry around on a little piece of paper in my wallet. For my professional reading, I use folders of pdf versions of articles for each research project, plus stacks of annotated paper versions, sorted by topic. In addition to my laptop, I lug several boxes of articles with me to Maine every summer because that's where I do most of my writing. It's a very inefficient system. I'm in transition between the paper and electronic worlds. I've been in transition for four decades.

What's the first thing you read in the morning?

The loving look on my wife's face as we wake up at 5:30am. Ha! Ha! Ha! Then the paper versions of the [Washington Post](http://www.washingtonpost.com) and the *Frederick News-Post* while we eat breakfast. We live in Frederick, Maryland, and those are our "home newspapers."

What newspapers and magazines do you subscribe to or read regularly?

It's funny you should ask this question because it recently came up at a neighbor's dinner party. My answer was "several dozen newspapers and magazines." Nobody believed me. My neighbors never believe a word I say because I'm a pointy-headed liberal, so their response didn't surprise me. Being an empiricist, I put together the list of titles for them. It proves beyond a shadow of a doubt how hopelessly old-fashioned I am (a) for reading this many newspapers and journals, (b) for reading almost all of them in the paper version, and (c) for including *AARP*. Even *Mother Jones* and *Rolling Stone* can't save me from full-on fuddy-

duddyism. As if I cared.

AAA World
AARP Magazine
[Academe](#)
[American Naturalist](#)
[American Scientist](#)
[Audubon](#)
[Bioscience](#)
Chesapeake Quarterly
[Chronicle of Higher Education](#)
Coastal and Estuarine Federation Newsletter
[Consumer Reports](#)
Cornell Magazine
Downeast Coastal Press
Duke Magazine
[Ecological Applications](#)
[Ecosphere](#)
[Ecological Monographs](#)
[Ecology](#)
[Estuaries and Coasts](#)
Frederick Gazette (now defunct)
Frederick News-Post
Frontiers in Ecology and Environment
[Gettysburg Magazine](#)
[Gettysburg Review](#)
Gettysburgian
Journal of the Oughtred Society
La Cucina Italiana
[Mother Jones](#)
[National Geographic](#)
[New Yorker](#)
[Rolling Stone](#)
Save the Bay Newsletter
[Science](#)
[Time](#)
[Washington Post](#)

I didn't include my weekly electronic RSS feed of 50 ecology and marine science journals. I also read Star magazine. I read it religiously, but it would be cheating to include it here because they are my step-mother's back issues.

When we are in Maine during the summer I read the *Bangor Daily News*, *Boston Globe*, *Ellsworth American*, [New York Times](#), and *Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram* once per week. It's so remote where we live that the *NYT* and the *Globe* come only on Sundays, and I have to drive 20 miles round trip to pick them up. Sometimes I fight off the retirees and summer people "from away" to get the last one at 8:01am. Their median age? About 78. That's why I win. Yes, the store opens at 8:00am.

My guess is that most academics read a similar number of titles. At least I hope so. "I'll show you my list if you show me yours."

What book or article has inspired you to take action?

I grew up in the '60's, so take your pick. [Soul on Ice](#), by Eldridge Cleaver. [The Autobiography of Malcolm X](#). [Silent Spring](#). Probably most important were the daily newspaper reports of the Adolph Eichmann trial. My father fought in Europe during WWII, and I was proud of him for it, even though he was completely against glorifying any aspect of the war. He refused to talk about it. I was in junior high school during the trial, and it really opened my eyes to the Holocaust and the origin of my father's attitude. Some of my Jewish relatives and friends had concentration camp ID numbers tattooed on their arms. Reading the details about Eichmann caused a new reality to set in for me, even more than did, say, Anne Frank's [The Diary of a Young Girl](#). It certainly got me to start reading the newspaper every day.

What is your favorite book to give as a gift?

That depends on the person getting the gift! I try to find a book that I think the recipient will appreciate. My wife and I usually give the McCloskey books as baby presents because we love Maine, and those books capture something we have tried to do in raising our own daughters.

Do you have a favorite writer of all time?

That's easy – Vladimir Nabokov. My 10th grade English teacher gave me [Pnin](#) to read, and that started it. [Speak](#), [Memory](#) and [Ada](#) may be my two favorites. I have my ES 400 Senior Seminar students read the section in [Lolita](#) where Humbert Humbert goes on the lam with Lolita by driving across the endless US landscape. The theme of the seminar is the impact of the automobile on American culture and environment. Nabokov's description of the then-modern highways and motels seems quite quaint today.

Then again, I do love my Travis McGee stories. So maybe it's not so easy.

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

By far my favorite book as a kid was Walter Farley's *The Island Stallion*. It was totally awesome. I never got into the whole Black Stallion series, but this book had a tremendous impact on me. Maybe as an adult I WILL get into the whole Black Stallion series! After all, I do indeed enjoy reading entire sets of books by particular authors. Not that I'm OCD or anything.

What are you planning to read next?

I'm in the middle of a big, fat novel right now, but we're going to visit our two-year-old grandson soon, so who knows?

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