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Abstract

In the latest edition of *Next Page*, Franklin Professor of the Liberal Arts and Professor of History Michael Birkner shares why he connects with Richard Russo's work and which amazing book he has given away as a gift in recent years (hint: it's not an Eisenhower book!).

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

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Next Page

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October 17, 2013

In the latest edition of Next Page, Franklin Professor of the Liberal Arts and Professor of History Michael Birkner shares why he connects with Richard Russo's work and which amazing book he has given away as a gift in recent years (hint: it's not an Eisenhower book!).

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

I just finished David Eisenhower's breezy and insightful [Going Home to Glory](#), an account of his grandfather Dwight D. Eisenhower's retirement years. The book offers rewards to anyone interested in knowing more about the private Eisenhower and his Gettysburg connections. But it also serves as a useful reminder that Ike did not simply play a lot of golf during his retirement (though he did a lot of that). He remained a significant player in American politics to the end of his life.

I'm currently reading Richard Russo's memoir, [Elsewhere](#), a candid account of growing up in a downhill-trending upstate New York town in the 1950s and 1960s and his adult life as well, with emphasis on his complicated relationship with his difficult mother. I've enjoyed other Russo books, most notably his hilarious academic novel, [Straight Man](#). Russo and I are contemporaries, and we share blue-collar backgrounds; that gives the book an added resonance.

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

The book I'm recommending all around—to friends and students alike—is Gilbert King's [Devil in the Grove](#), an absorbing and in some respects horrifying book in its depiction of racial oppression and injustice in Central Florida in the years immediately following World War II. The book works on several levels: as a piece of history "noir," a primer on American constitutional history as related to racial issues, and at the same time as an anthem to the courage of litigators who fought a deeply racist judicial system seeking a measure of justice for black defendants wrongly accused of a rape. One might say that you couldn't write a novel quite as lurid or with quite as many twists and have it be believable. *Devil in the Grove's* plotline resonates with [To Kill a Mockingbird](#), but the story King tells is both more complex and more terrible. It also happens to be true.



Michael Birkner is the Franklin Professor of the Liberal Arts and Professor of History at Gettysburg College.

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

How do I keep track of what I have read? In general, I don't. I read across a wide spectrum of materials and topics. When reading nonfiction books related to my teaching, I usually write chapter summaries and store these on my computer under "Good reading" or subject files. So far as future reading goes, I keep up with book reviews in [The New York Times](#) and the literary sections of current magazines like [The New Republic](#), [The Nation](#), and [The Weekly Standard](#), forever clipping more reviews of books than I could ever possibly read.

What book or article has inspired you to take action?

I cannot say that any single book has inspired me to take action, but it is true that several historians who were engaged meaningfully in politics or civic culture have influenced my thinking and my sensibility. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., John Hope Franklin, and Michael Kazin are prime examples. George Orwell's writing has had an impact on me since I was a college student. I have twice read his collected essays, journalism, and letters (the [four-volume set edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus](#)). I suspect I'll get back to it again before too many years pass.

What is your favorite book to give as a gift?

When I was in my twenties I frequently gave friends Michael Harrington's memoir, [The Accidental Century](#), and also Fred Exley's oddball but to me irresistible novel, *A Fan's Notes*. The only book in recent years that I can recall giving away and insisting a friend read is Michael Chabon's [The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay](#)—a remarkably affecting novel about the holocaust, among other themes. How so young a man wrote this book is almost miraculous to my way of thinking.

Who is your favorite writer of all time?

I don't now and never will have a "favorite writer of all time." At different times in my life I have gravitated towards novelists William Faulkner, David Lodge, and Robert Harris, as well as the polemicist and critic Christopher Hitchens. For the commingling of insight and literary grace, in my view no historian excels the late Edmund S. Morgan.

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

If we're talking pre-teen or early teen years, I'd have to say "Chip Hilton," from the Chip Hilton sports novels by Clair Bee. I must have read two-dozen of them. They doubtless affected my social outlook as much as "Bonanza" did on television. (Chip was an upright All-American kind of fellow.) I wonder how I'd respond to reading those books today!

What are you planning to read next?

Next book on my list is Evan Thomas's [Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World](#). I have to keep up with the Eisenhower literature, and Thomas—former editor of [Newsweek](#)—is a fine writer who has the additional virtue of being a thorough researcher.

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