



12-4-2013

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Musselman Library and Marschall, Laurence A., "Larry Marschall, Professor of Physics" (2013). *Next Page*. 6.
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Larry Marschall, Professor of Physics

Abstract

In this issue of *Next Page*, Professor of Physics Larry Marschall tells us about the many influential authors (and a musician!) who inspired everything from his career path, to his political involvement and how he raised his children.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Library and Information Science

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In this issue of Next Page, Professor of Physics Larry Marschall tells us about the many influential authors (and a musician!) who inspired everything from his career path, to his political involvement and how he raised his children.

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

I usually have two books going on my night table at any one time, one non-fiction and one novel. The non-fiction I'm reading right now is a biography of the electrical wizard Nikola Tesla, whose reputation as an inventor rivaled Edison during the late 1800's. It's an interesting look at the technology of a century ago and the people who built the electrified society we take for granted today. My current novel is [El Club Dumas](#), by Arturo Pérez-Reverte, a literary mystery in the genre of Dan Brown (but far better written). I like reading mysteries for fun, and reading them in Spanish is a relatively painless way to get a better knowledge of the language. I also just returned to Gettysburg after many miles of auto travel. During the drives I listened to an illuminating [biography of Einstein by Walter Isaacson](#). Einstein, of course was one of the deep thinkers of our civilization, and Isaacson does an excellent job of portraying both the myth and the reality behind the public image.

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

The one book I always recommend to students (and often give them) is Strunk and White's [Elements of Style](#). Writing is an essential skill for scientists, just as it is for everyone else, and a regular shot of Strunk and White is not just a cure for bad writing, but also for sloppy thinking.

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

Keeping track of what I've already read is not a great concern to me. I've always thought that what you read becomes a part your personality, and if there's something that doesn't stick, well that's the way it goes. But since a lot of the reading I do is for a regular column I write for [Natural History](#) magazine, at least some of my reading is a matter of public record. I write at least three short reviews of popular science books from all fields every month, and I've been doing it for almost 30 years, so I've got reviews of probably a thousand books I've read in my files. I don't keep track of other books I've read, however, and so, especially with



Professor of Physics, Larry Marschall tells us about the authors and musician who inspired him to take action.

mysteries by an author I like, I sometimes find myself inadvertently reading a book I've read before. Sometimes I don't discover that I had already known who-did-it until the last chapter. That's also a function--perhaps even a blessing--of getting older.

What book or article has inspired you to take action?

That depends on what action and at what time. For instance, George Gamow's [*One, Two, Three ... Infinity*](#) was one of the books I read in high school that made me want to become a scientist. And reading Scott Nearing's [*Living the Good Life*](#) in the 1970's inspired me to move to a cabin in the woods for a dozen years where we had to haul water from the stream and use a composting toilet. More generally, though, there are many books that have given me perspective on the social and political issues that concern us today and have shaped the way I live my life. Sometimes the insight is historical--reading Doris Kearns Goodwin's [*Team of Rivals*](#), for instance, deepened my understanding of our current governmental dilemmas. And sometimes the insight is more personal--reading Steinbeck's [*Grapes of Wrath*](#), and Emma Goldman's biography [*Living My Life*](#) motivated me to get involved in political movements, influenced how I vote in elections...and probably also how I raised my children. One of the most action-inspiring figures in my life, however, was not primarily an author, but a musician: Pete Seeger--he's influenced both my music (I learned to play the banjo from his instruction book), and my politics.

What is your favorite book to give as a gift?

Anything written by myself or a member of my family. Let me recommend, most recently, *Mi Abuelo Fue Agente Secreto* (My Grandfather Was a Secret Agent) by my son-in-law José Galindo Montelongo.

Who is your favorite writer of all time?

Picking one is impossible, so I'll just free associate: among novelists I've enjoyed, Dostoyevsky, perhaps, or Melville come to mind most quickly. Among essayists, George Orwell and John McPhee. And among genre writers, Elmore Leonard, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Rex Stout.

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

I loved reading stories from a set by Olive Beaupre Miller, *My Book House*, so that quickly comes to mind. But I was a precocious reader, and a voracious one, and I met very few books that I didn't like. I remember bringing home stacks from the local library and finishing them quickly, sometimes overnight. I went on binges--Dr. Doolittle, Freddy the Pig, the Hardy Boys, Enid Blyton, Howard Pease, Andrew Lang's Fairy books, L. Frank Baum...reading every book I could find by a given author ... so it's hard to settle on a single favorite book or writer.

What are you planning to read next?

[*Undiluted Hocus-Pocus*](#), an autobiography of the late skeptic Martin Gardner; and one of several mysteries by Henning Mankell that I have on my night table.

Posted 4th December 2013 by [Musselman Library, Gettysburg College](#)

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