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Ed Riggs '77

Musselman Library
Gettysburg College

Edward Riggs
Gettysburg College

Authors

Musselman Library
Edward Riggs, Gettysburg College

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Ed Riggs '77

Abstract

In this *Next Page* contribution, Ed Riggs '77 talks about his adventures on the Appalachian Trail last summer, what he read to prepare for the trip, how he got his trail name, favorite authors to read when he's off the trail, and more.

Keywords

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Ed Riggs '77 talks about his Appalachian Trail hiking adventures in this issue of *Next Page*.

You recently hiked the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. What did you read in advance to prepare for this adventure?

I started hiking the Appalachian Trail on March 18 in Georgia with the intent of walking to Maine. Health issues forced me off the trail in New York on June 26, but I plan to return to NY in June to complete the final 800 miles of the 2,200 mile journey. Before I left, I read everything I had time to read that had to do with the trail. Some books were basically trail journals. Others were more like 'how-to' books. And some were novels with hiking as the vehicle for the story. All were fascinating and all turned out to be useful to me in my preparation.

Perhaps my favorite book was written by Gettysburg alum Leslie Mass. [*In Beauty May She Walk*](#) was Leslie's tale of her thru-hike of the AT when she turned 60. At 58 years old, it was an inspiration to me, and was instrumental in me finally making the decision to hike it myself.

I also read *Long-Distance Hiking: Lessons from the Appalachian Trail* (Roland Mueser), *How to Hike the A.T.* (Michelle Ray) which was very helpful, *A Journey North* (Adrienne Hall), [*Walking the Appalachian Trail*](#) (Larry Luxenberg), *Seeker's Guide to the Spiritual Wilderness* (Craig and Suzy Miles), *White Blaze Fever* (William Schuette) which was a great journal-type account of thru-hiking, *Appalachian Trials* (Zach Davis) which is excellent for mental preparation for a six-month journey, [*Wild*](#) (Cheryl Strayed) which is excellent book club material, *Walking With Spring* (Earl Shaffer) which was written by the first person to hike the trail from end to end in one trip (thru-hike), and of course [*A Walk in the Woods*](#) (Bill Bryson). This is just a fraction of the books I could have read, and I am still reading as much as I can about the trail.

Are there websites devoted to hiking the trail? Which ones were the most useful?

There are some great websites devoted to the Appalachian Trail. I have two favorites that I visit frequently, but I must warn that they are easy to lose yourself in, and I sometimes spend hours on them communicating with fellow hikers and reading advice and travel stories when I have just stopped in for a quick visit. I love www.whiteblaze.net probably more than any other one. That is the go-to website for hikers. Another great one for specific information on the AT is www.appalachiantrail.org. That one is the website for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and has an interactive map of the trail that is wonderful.

Additionally, www.trailplace.com has a great forum for questions and answers about the AT and other trails around the country.

How long did it take to make this trip? Did you read along the way? E-reader (Kindle, iPad, Nook, etc.) or paperbacks?

The average length of a thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail is about six months. I was on the trail for 102 days when I got off after 1,363 miles. I was on pace for a thru-hike of 21 weeks, or just over five months. I did read for the first few weeks, but it got so I didn't like carrying books once I had finished them, and I didn't want to throw them away. I exchanged a few books at hiker hostels, but I found that the extra weight in my pack was not worth it. A Kindle type of device would have been nice, but it was extra weight and had to be charged regularly to be used. I finally just stuck with my crossword puzzles!

What was your trail name? Any favorite stories to share about your experience hiking the trail or people you met along the way?

My trail name is 'Phys Ed'. It is appropriate because I spent my 30-year career coaching and teaching health and physical education. There is nothing like seeing a fellow hiker after not having seen them for weeks, and hearing, "Phys Ed!!!" The hike was great, but the people were amazing. The AT is quite a community, and people quickly become very close. I met people from all over the country. Regardless of one's background, world views, age, or experience, long-distance hikers have so much in common. Everyone has their own pace, own background, own reasons for hiking, own abilities - and we were all in it together doing the same thing. We ate the same foods, slept in the same conditions, climbed the same mountains. I loved it. My brother hiked with me for five days in PA and NJ. One night we got to a shelter and went off to get water. When we returned, a good hiking buddy of mine from my earlier days on the trail was sitting there - we had not seen each other since we were in Tennessee! You never know when you are going to meet up with someone again, and that is a lot of fun!

When not out in the woods what do you like to read?

I like to read all kinds of books, but I must confess that I probably like crime thrillers the most. I enjoy most of the books by John Grisham, James Patterson, and Patricia Cornwell. Besides that, books that take me away to another place emotionally are good escapes for me. Those can be novels or books about hiking somewhere! One of my favorite books of all time is *All Summer Long* by Bob Greene. I was transported into the book, and felt like I was the main character. How did the author know what I was thinking?

What were your favorite books as a child?

When I was a child, my favorite books were similar to the ones I like now! I loved to read the Hardy Boys books, and the Chip Hilton series was great for me, allowing me to dream of sports glory as a kid! I enjoyed the Boxcar Children series as well, as it allowed me to experience independence and self-confidence through the power of words. I also loved biographies of sports stars. And, of course, in my youngest days as a new reader, Dr. Seuss books were the best!

What book or article has inspired you to take action?

Certainly reading the books I mentioned above inspired me to take action and actually get out and hike the AT. I think too, that many characters in books that I have read had certain qualities or characteristics that I found desirable. I may have learned a certain degree of determination from sports biographies. I may have seen how I wanted to be as a person from looking at actions and traits, good or bad, of characters in my favorite books.

What is your favorite book to give as a gift?

I enjoy giving books as gifts. I like to give books that I have enjoyed reading, so that I may share what I have gotten satisfaction from. If I think a person will enjoy the ride, or will benefit in some way from reading it, that is the book I give! You can't go wrong giving *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* to someone who is in one of life's transitions, regardless of their age.

Who is your favorite writer of all time?

I cannot pick a favorite author, but there are a few whose books just flow by, and I feel like I was there in the story. Wally Lamb is a pretty special writer, and I have always enjoyed books by John Irving. Nicholas Sparks is a great writer, but I don't always enjoy his twists at the end! Nonetheless, when I am done with one of his books, I can't stop thinking about it for days.

What are you planning to read next?

Next on my list is [*The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*](#) by Rachel Joyce. I think Harold Fry is going to be one of my book heroes, since the important thing for him is the journey. In sticking with my crime thriller theme, I also want to read *Dark Places* by Gillian Flynn.

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