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# Jan Powers, Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

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# Jan Powers, Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

## **Abstract**

In this new *Next Page* column, Jan Powers, Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies shares her thoughts on what makes a great novel and where she believes the best literature in the English-speaking world comes from.

## **Keywords**

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

## **Disciplines**

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# Next Page

Jan Powers,  
Professor Emerita of  
Interdisciplinary Studies  
and Women, Gender, and  
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April 15, 2014



Jan Powers, Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, shares her thoughts on what makes a great novel.

*In this new Next Page column, Jan Powers, Professor Emerita of Interdisciplinary Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies shares her thoughts on what makes a great novel and where she believes the best literature in the English-speaking world comes from.*

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## **What are you reading now (or have read recently) that you would recommend? Why?**

Ever since childhood, when I was hooked on the Oz books, I've had several books going simultaneously: fiction by my bed, non-fiction in the living room, and a third on a tape/CD player in the kitchen. Currently at bedtime I'm reading Isabel Allende's [\*Island Beneath the Sea\*](#), which I heartily recommend. She weaves a gripping story of *grand blancs*, *affranchise* (mulattos) and slaves in the 18th century French colony that became Haiti after slaves threw off their colonial yoke. Perhaps because I have a deep interest in Haitian women and visited there in 1999, I also enjoyed Edwidge Danticat's [\*The Dew Breaker\*](#) and look forward to her latest novel, [\*Claire of the Sea Light\*](#).

## **What book have you recently recommended that someone else read? Why?**

Recently I recommended to a friend a very different novel, [\*The Dream of Scipio\*](#), set in Provence, France in three different time periods. Iain Pears' narrative of intellectual mysteries and love stories woven around a single manuscript is absorbingly complex, somewhat reminiscent of Umberto Eco.

## **What makes a good novel?**

For me, a good novel is an exploration of another world, an opportunity to encounter new characters and acquire fresh insights into human nature. Although I write non-fiction, I never value it as highly as fiction, which is indispensable to my life and makes bearable the more humdrum and nasty aspects of this world.

### **You said you were hooked on books from an early age. When did you acquire an interest in non-Western fiction?**

As an undergraduate, I rebelled against the narrow canon of English and American writers required of English majors. I remember the heady experience of discovering Nikos Kazantzakis, who wrote a sequel to *The Odyssey*, as well as *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *Zorba the Greek*. I discovered Raja Rao when I began work in South Asian studies in grad school and eventually wrote my dissertation on his philosophical novels. I particularly recommend [Kanthapura](#), an account of village India during the Gandhian non-violent struggle for Indian independence.

### **Who are your favorite non-Western fiction writers and which of their books would you recommend and why?**

I still maintain that today the best literature in the English-speaking world comes out of South Asia, with its multiplicity of religions, rigid caste and class structures, extended families, and long tradition of storytelling. All the ingredients are there for endlessly varied plots, idiosyncratic characters, and improbable situations. A few that I especially appreciate are Bapsi Sidhwa's [Cracking India](#), about Partition; [The God of Small Things](#) by Arundhati Roy; [Love and Longing in Bombay](#), short stories by Vikram Chandra; and Rani Manicka's [The Rice Mother](#), about an Indian family in Malaysia.

### **When you do dip into nonfiction, what sorts of books do you read?**

I'm reading a book about the mystery religions of the ancient Roman world, [The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries](#) by David Ulansey. Much of the non-fiction on my shelf is there because I review books for the journal [Religion](#). I'm really enjoying [Love's Subtle Magic](#), by Aditya Behl, about medieval Indian Sufi romances, which I've taught. I also found [Saint Francis and the Sultan](#) quite fascinating: John Tolan explores literary and artistic representations of the brief historical encounter between St. Francis of Assisi and the Sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Kāmil, during the Fifth Crusade.

### **If we were to visit your home library, what would we find on your shelves?**

I always have many more books on hand than I can possibly read and confess to being a compulsive book buyer. One author whom I particularly enjoy is Tariq Ali, who writes superb historical novels about the early Muslim world. I also recommend the South African novels of J.M. Coetzee, an admirable stylist, and the remarkable apartheid novel, by Andre Brink, [A Dry White Season](#). Finally, I'm a great fan of Bruce Chatwin, who writes of Australia and Wales in [The Songlines](#) and [On the Black Hill](#), respectively. All of these writers lead the reader to philosophical truths beyond the facts of history and details of daily life.

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