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Emelio Betances, Professor of Sociology and Latin American Studies

Abstract

In this new Next Page column, Emelio Betances, Professor of Sociology and Latin American Studies, talks about how growing up during turbulent political times in the Dominican Republic sparked his passion for reading and why he's such a fan of authors J.M. Coetzee and Orhan Pamuk.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

Disciplines

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Next Page

Emelio Betances, Professor of Sociology and Latin American Studies

In this new Next Page column, Emelio Betances, Professor of Sociology and Latin American Studies, talks about how growing up during turbulent political times in the Dominican Republic sparked his passion for reading and why he's such a fan of authors J.M. Coetzee and Orhan Pamuk.

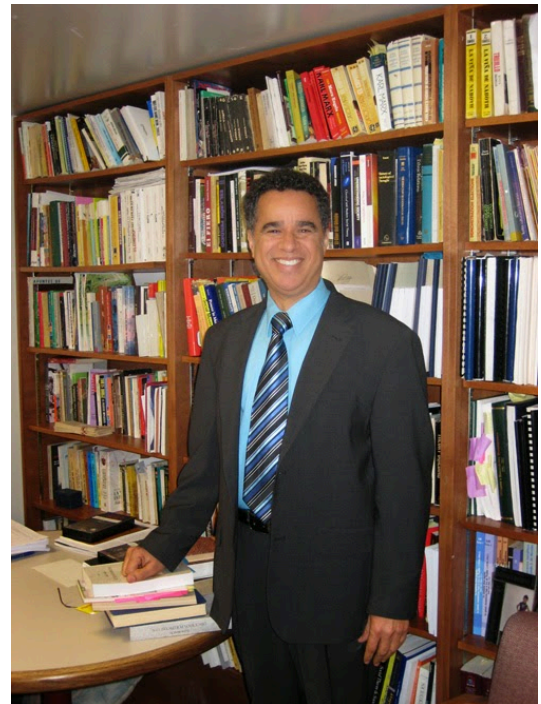
Which author has influenced you the most?

Juan Bosch, a short story writer and politician from the Dominican Republic. I grew up there in a rural area during the turbulent years that followed the collapse of the Trujillo dictatorship (1931-1961). There were no libraries or bookstores, so we depended on the radio. Bosch gave speeches to the nation and told stories to educate the Dominican population. At the time, I was eight years old, and his speeches sparked my interest in cultural and political activities. I began asking my parents to buy me books whenever they went to the city and, eventually, I joined a political party. As a result of his influence, I read all his literary and political works, motivating me to study sociology, history, political science and literature.

What are you reading now that you would recommend?

I am reading a novel *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass. The main character, Oscar, chooses to stop physically growing at the age of three and causes all sorts of problems for his family. In a way, he steps "outside" time and history and nature from the moment of birth. It is interesting to see how he interprets the world around him and how society wants him to conform. I also am fascinated by how Oscar manipulates adults to get what he wants.

The second book is *The Arabian Nights: Tales from a Thousand and One Nights*. This is a fantastic book that collects the stories that Scheherazade used to enchant the Sultan and save her life. I enjoyed seeing how, through her imaginative tales, she eventually turns the Sultan into a man who is



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under her control. This is an amazing way of using soft power to save your own life.

What books have you recommended to students?

The Sociological Imagination by C.W. Mills which is a classic in American sociology that introduces the basic sociological interpretation of modern societies and shows how individual biographies and society interact. It helps readers make sense of the complexity of the modern world. I also recommend *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, which takes the reader to an imagined, fantastic, world.

Is there a particular book that made a lasting impression?

Don Quijote de la Mancha by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. It makes me think about having a meaningful purpose in life and being critical about one's actions. I go back and reread sections to enlighten me when I become somewhat pessimistic.

In the library's 2014 booklet of summer reading suggestions you recommended two books by J.M. Coetzee. What is about J.M. Coetzee that you enjoy?

Coetzee's novels push the reader to think about life's circumstances and why we should be careful when making decisions. What captivated me in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is his addressing the tradition in the West of thinking of *others* as barbarians. We are taught that the Spanish and Portuguese brought "civilization" to the New World; the French took it to Africa; the English to India, but we rarely look at ourselves from the point of view of the "other." In Coetzee's narrative, we see that the real "barbarians" were those who claimed to promote a "superior" culture. It forces us to think about the relationship between the powerful and the powerless.

You are also a big fan of Orhan Pamuk. Tell us about your interest in his writing.

Pamuk places himself between the West and the East, trying to show both perspectives. Istanbul, the place where most of his novels occur, is located between those two cultural regions. In *Snow*, he looks at the actions of Islamic militants and their struggles against the secular Turkish state. In *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, he talks about how the city, Turkish history, literature and art shaped his life and work. *The Museum of Innocence* tells the story of Istanbul from the 1950s to the 1980s against the backdrop of a romance. The main character, Kemal Bey, collects items touched by the woman he loves and later develops a museum in her memory. Subsequent to the publication of the novel, Pamuk opened a museum in Istanbul called The Museum of Innocence. I visited there in 2013 and it impressed me greatly, because it captures the obsession of Kemal Bey with the love of his life.

What is your favorite Pamuk novel?

My Name is Red which is about Istanbul in the late 1590s. I would also recommend *The Naive and the Sentimental Novelist* because it not only summarizes some of Pamuk's ideas about literature and art, but helps readers understand great novels.

What are you planning to read next?

Peeling the Onion , the autobiography Günter Grass and *A Mind at Peace* by Ahmet Hamdi Tampinar [1949, first translated into English in 2008]. According to Pamuk, Tampinar's work is "The greatest novel ever written about Istanbul."

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