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Suzanne Flynn, Associate Professor of English

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Suzanne Flynn, Associate Professor of English

Abstract

In this new *Next Page* column, Suzanne Flynn, Associate Professor of English, confesses which of the “classics” she hasn’t read, shares which Victorian poets and novelists are among her favorites, and explains how her students connect with literature from the 19th century.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

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Next Page

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In this new Next Page column, Suzanne Flynn, Associate Professor of English, confesses which of the "classics" she hasn't read, shares which Victorian poets and novelists are among her favorites, and explains how her students connect with literature from the 19th century.



Suzanne Flynn, Associate Professor of English, never tires of reading Thomas Hardy's novels.

What kind of reader were you as a child? What were your favorite childhood books?

Last spring I read [Dan DeNicola's "Next Page" blog](#), and I identified with his story of reading the backs of cereal boxes and then moving on to encyclopedias. I can identify completely! My family's multi-volume encyclopedia was located on the bottom shelf of our living room's built-in bookshelf. That bookshelf and the armchair in front of it formed a little triangle of space where I would sit, pulling out random volumes of the encyclopedia and reading whatever entry hit my eye first. I would be there for hours sometimes.

As a small child, my favorite reading was from a wonderful children's book my grandmother kept in the "children's room" of her house. It was called The Bumper Book, and it contained all sorts of nursery rhymes, short tales, etc. I memorized several of Robert Louis Stevenson's short poems from his [Child's Garden of Verses](#) and Edward Lear's wonderful nonsense poem, "[The Owl and the Pussycat](#)." In a great example of "everything comes around," I'm now teaching a course on "The Golden Age of Children's Literature" in which I teach both Stevenson and Lear.

Your specialty is Victorian writers. Who is your favorite?

The Victorian period is so long and filled with wonderful writers, that it's impossible to choose just one. Among poets, though, I'd have to say my favorite is Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins was a convert to Roman Catholicism; he eventually joined the Jesuit order. Most of his poetry is deeply spiritual, but also filled with a Wordsworthian appreciation for the natural world. His love and deep sympathy with humanity also shines through his poems; he's rather like Whitman in that regard. I rarely teach Hopkins' verse though,

partially because his work is so precious to me that I respond badly to anyone who doesn't share my reverence for the poems.

As for novelists, sorry - it's impossible to choose. As I tell my students, more than 60,000 novels were published during Victoria's reign. Of course, most of them have been deservedly forgotten, but even a very selective list of the finest fictional works of the period is long. Dickens, the *Brontë* sisters, George Eliot - they're all on my "favorites" list. I never tire of reading Thomas Hardy's novels, even though I know some of them (or at least passages from some of them) by heart.

What do you do to have your students fall in love with the Victorians?

Surprisingly, I don't have to work very hard to have students fall in love with the Victorians. Of course, students are intimidated by the length of some Victorian novels - most fall between 500 and 700 pages, sometimes more - but once they "dig in," most of my students find themselves compelled to continue. These novels, or at least most of them, were written in serial form; they were designed to keep readers coming back for more. As for the subject matter, I contend that - despite the obvious differences between the 21st century and the 19th - we are battling with many of the same issues raised during the Victorian period, especially class and gender struggles. When Dickens focuses on the huge divide between the rich and the poor, or when Charlotte *Brontë* exposes the frustration within a young woman's heart, my students can immediately find parallels within their own society and even within themselves.

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

I'm just finishing up [All the Light We Cannot See](#) by Anthony Doerr. What a devastatingly beautiful book! I also read [My Brilliant Friend](#) by Elena Ferrante not too long ago. Ferrante's writing style (of course, I was reading the novel in translation) was not my cup of tea, but I completely related to the narrative of friends who take different paths in life. I actually don't have the chance to read as much contemporary fiction as I'd like, given that I have so much reading to do related to my courses and my research. So when I do have time to read a book for the sheer pleasure of reading - no note-taking, no highlighting - I'm careful to choose one that comes highly recommended. I've actually gotten great ideas from the [You Gotta Read This](#) booklet each summer.

What are you planning to read next?

I've got a long list of books I should've read long ago and haven't - some fairly contemporary, some classics. I'd like to read [The Nightingale](#) (like All the Light, set in WWII France), [The Goldfinch](#), [The Moor's Account](#), and [Wolf Hall](#) (I love historical fiction). I haven't decided yet whether I want to read [Go Set a Watchman](#); [To Kill a Mockingbird](#) was the first novel I read as a child that made a huge impression. Confession time: among classics, I haven't yet read [War and Peace](#), [The Grapes of Wrath](#), or [The Wings of the Dove](#). Even among Victorian novels, I've missed a few: [Little Dorrit](#) by Dickens, [The Tenant of Wildfell Hall](#) by Anne Brontë, and [Cranford](#) by Elizabeth Gaskell. I could go on, but the point is clear: no matter how much time I spend reading, there's always a long, long list of books still to read.

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