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Darren Glass, Associate Professor of Mathematics

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Darren B. Glass
Gettysburg College

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Darren Glass, Associate Professor of Mathematics

Abstract

In this new *Next Page* column, Darren Glass, Associate Professor of Mathematics, shares where he discovers new fiction to read (it includes a tournament and a live rooster!) and which work of foodie fiction he considers to be the gold standard.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

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Next Page

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

I just finished reading [Data and Goliath](#) by Bruce Schneier, which is all about the many ways in which we create a data trail with everything we do in the modern era, and about all of the ways this data can be used to help -- or harm -- us. I plan to have students in my Cryptography FYS read an excerpt from it this fall. While I generally prefer fiction to nonfiction, I haven't read many novels this summer that really stuck with me. One of the exceptions was Nick Hornby's [Funny Girl](#) about a woman trying to break into the television business in 1960's Britain. As with Hornby's other novels, it was smart, funny, and very readable.

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

One book that I have found myself recommending again and again over the past year is Jordan Ellenberg's [How Not To Be Wrong: The Power of Mathematical Thinking](#). Jordan is a friend of mine, but even if he wasn't I am sure that I would have loved his stories about how using mathematics, statistics, and logical thinking has helped everyone from gamblers to airline pilots. It's funny, it's smart, and everyone should read it.

How do you discover new books to read?

When it comes to mathy books, I work with one of the committees of the Mathematical Association of America that maintains a database of book reviews, so I get to see what books are being published through that. For fiction, I try to keep up with the book review section on several blogs and newspapers, but the best source I have for discovering new fiction is the [Tournament of Books](#) that is run by the blog [The Morning](#)

[News](#). Each March they choose 16 novels and pit them against each other in a March Madness-style bracket, and at each stage a critic writes an essay choosing one of the two books as their favorite, by whatever criteria they want. At the end, the author of the winning book is awarded a live rooster. This is a fun way to read lots of smart and funny commentary on lots of good novels, and the winners in recent years have included some books I loved but might not have discovered otherwise ([Station Eleven](#) by Emily St. John Mandel, [The Sisters Brothers](#) by Patrick deWitt, and [The Orphan Master's Son](#) by Adam Johnson, to name a few).

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

I use [goodreads.com](#) to keep track of what I have already read and what my friends are reading. All things being equal, I still prefer the feel of a paper book, but as a busy parent I often have to squeeze my reading in where I can (at the gym, at a little league practice, etc.) so I often end up reading e-books on my phone or Nook.

What book or article has inspired you to take action? (i.e., books/articles that might have inspired change in career path, travel to a new place, activism, etc.)

Reading Simon Singh's [The Code Book](#) when I was a graduate student convinced me that playing with secret codes and ciphers was something I could do as a serious mathematician and not just something for kids. And similarly the writings of Bill James on baseball statistics helped add a depth to my appreciation of the game. While it hasn't affected my career in the same way, reading Jeffrey Pilcher's book [Que Vivan Los Tamales!](#) about the history of Mexican food made me think much more seriously about culinary history and what it says about the culture it comes from. So I guess the theme is that I like books that make me think more seriously and critically about things I already love.

What do you read for fun?

Almost all of the reading I do is fun -- especially the math reading! But when I am looking for something light to read, I tend to go for mysteries and thrillers, especially those that also have a sense of humor. Some of my favorite authors in this genre include Lawrence Block, Donald Westlake, and Duane Swierczynski.

Who is your favorite writer of all time?

There's no way I could choose just one! At various points in my life I would have answered this question with Neil Gaiman, Margaret Atwood, Lawrence Block, Douglas Coupland, Philip Roth, Nick Hornby, and Bill James. I could write paragraphs about each of these if time and space allowed.

What are you planning to read next?

I'm excited that Jonathan Franzen has a new novel coming out this fall, as despite all the backlash I have loved each of his novels. I also have [Genius At Play](#), a biography of the mathematician John Conway, sitting on my bedside table right now.

In your new role as the Director of the First-Year Seminar Program, you've been part of a group advocating to start an annual campus-wide theme that would connect with courses and co-curricular activities. The theme proposed for 2016-17 is the Year of Food. What are your favorite books about food?

I've already mentioned Jeffrey Pilcher's writings, which bring an anthropological and historical lens to discussions of Mexican and Mexican-American food in a very readable way, and there are other authors that do similar things for other kinds of cuisines. Another favorite is Jeffrey Steingarten, the food critic for *Vogue* (and *Iron Chef* judge), who writes very witty essays (collected in books like *The Man Who Ate Everything* and *It Must Have Been Something I Ate*) about different aspects of food -- I often find myself referring to his essays about trying to learn to like all of the foods he disliked because he thought that being a food critic who didn't like Korean food is like being "an art critic who becomes nauseated by the color yellow."

As far as foodie fiction goes, there are lots of great choices but the gold standard has to be Laura Esquivel's [*Like Water For Chocolate*](#) (or, if you prefer the Spanish version, *Como Agua Para Chocolate*), which combines magical realism with authentic Mexican recipes in a story that is funny, romantic, and delicious.

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