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Abstract

In this new *Next Page* column Jeanne Arnold, Gettysburg College's Chief Diversity Officer, explains how one book provided a deeply emotional sense of connection to her African ancestors.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

Disciplines

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What kinds of books are you drawn to?

As I think back over my reading life, I realize that I've always been drawn to novels about relationships between people or about groups of people that are set in a historical context. I was absolutely fascinated by [A Tale of Two Cities](#). My favorite character was Charles Darnay. He made such an impression on me that when I compiled a list of baby names (around age 14 for my possible future children,) Darnay was at the top of my list for a boy. Then there were the great companion novels set during WWII, [The Winds of War](#) and [War and Remembrance](#) by Herman Wouk. They may be the two longest books I've ever read, but I couldn't put them down.

Later, I fell head over heels for a series of romance novels focused on African-American life in the 19th century by Beverly Jenkins. When I finished one, I couldn't wait for the next one to come out. While these books could be considered light beach reading, they always included interesting facts about the lives of slaves and former slaves in the U.S. Recently, before a trip to Ghana, I read [Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route](#) by Saidiya Hartman. The author used the phrase "lose your mother," and the feelings that accompany such a loss, as a metaphor for the long-lasting negative effect that we as African peoples have experienced as a result of being severed from our homeland and sold into slavery. This book changed my life!

Tell us more about why the Hartman book had such a big impact on you?

I really identified with the author, an African-American woman, who was tracing her lineage back to the slave

trade in Ghana. Like Ms. Hartman, I will never know exactly what tribe or village I originated from or if I have any remaining relatives there, but being on the continent of Africa and actually standing in the castles where slaves were brutalized and then standing in the "door of no return" to America as they did, filled me with my first genuine and deeply emotional sense of connection to my ancestors.

What book are you reading now?

I'm currently reading [*Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Diversity in Global Business*](#) by Alfons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner. As a chief diversity officer, I'm always searching for effective ways to make organizations more inclusive. I would recommend this book to anyone with similar interests. Academic institutions can learn from the diversity strategies utilized in the corporate world and vice versa.

What do you recommend as a diversity "must read" for students?

Students attending traditionally white institutions, particularly majority students, should read [*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? and Other Conversations about Race*](#) by Beverly Daniel Tatum (former president of Spelman College). Other racial or ethnic groups could easily be substituted for black students and the lessons from this book would still be valuable. I don't want to give anything away, but reading this book could help eliminate the misuse of the word self-segregating when referring to underrepresented students on campus. This is one of my many hopes for Gettysburg College.

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