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Abstract

In this issue of *Next Page*, Assistant Professor of German Studies, Henning Wrage reveals the book that caused him to become a vegetarian—for a short time at least, and the unusual reading matter that literally surrounded him as a child.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

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In this issue of Next Page, Assistant Professor of German Studies, Henning Wrage reveals the book that caused him to become a vegetarian—for a short time at least, and the unusual reading matter that literally surrounded him as a child.



Assistant Professor of German Studies, Henning Wrage says,

“I cannot remember a time when I was not reading something.”

What have you read recently that you would recommend to a friend or colleague on campus?

At the moment, I mostly read texts related to the “Violence and Media” course I teach. These include Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Pinker’s *The Better Angels*, Zizek’s *Violence*, Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony* and excerpts from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, all of which I would highly recommend. In different ways, they all discuss the nexus of violence, culture, and society. For my own interest and pleasure I have recently read Adrian McKinty’s *Sean Duffy* novels, Dave Eggers’ *The Circle*, Philip K. Dick’s *The Man in the High Castle*, Bill Bryson’s *One Summer*, and David Sedaris’ *Let’s Explore Diabetes with Owls*.

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

A few months ago, I lent my entire collection of Wolfgang Herrndorf books to a student (I hope I get them back at some point, Signe!). Herrndorf, who initially studied to become a painter, was part of a loose network of digital

bohemians in Berlin. He was a brilliant author of both lighthearted books like *Tschick* (available in English under the title *Why We Took the Car*) and more complex longer novels, every one of them equally thought provoking, sarcastic and funny. In 2010, Herrndorf was diagnosed with a brain tumor and until his death on 2013, he took to writing a blog—and it turned out to be one of the most touching, most inspiring pieces of [autobiography of the 21st century in German](#).



You are the father to one year old twins. What books are you currently reading to them?

Picture books, mostly—such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *Itsy Bitsy Spider* and the like. Occasionally we try to read to them what we read—but this usually leads to Hilda and Konrad trying to literally eat the pages (see images for proof). My wife, Christiane, often tells them stories she invents herself (I am rather bad at this), and we sing to them.

Reading starts early in the Wrage household as books and newspapers nourish the twins!

Do you have a favorite book from your childhood that you are looking forward to having your children read?

I remember that I loved when my mother read fairy tales to me (which we will do with the twins), and I remember being obsessed with novels by Karl May, a German 19th century author of exotic Wild West novels. He actually claimed these books to be autobiographical, which, as we know now, was a blatant lie. I will probably not expose them to medical literature anytime soon (see below).

More formative for me with regards to reading socialization were the books of Hermann Hesse that I started to read as an adolescent. I'm sure the twins will love these at some point (and then, hopefully, grow out of it). One book that blew my mind as a 14-year-old and that I still dearly love is Michail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. But really, I read and read indiscriminately.

As a new parent, how do you find time to read? How do you keep track of what you have already read, are reading currently, or want to read in the future?

I don't, or, I shouldn't, to be precise, but I simply can't imagine not reading. Since I was a child, I cannot remember a time when I was not reading something, even if occasionally it was not really age-appropriate. When I grew up, my parents (both physicians) stored their professional literature—books on all sorts of illnesses and mental disorders—in my room. Magnificent reading material for a 10-year-old! I read it all, understood very little, and soon started diagnosing myself in the best David-Sedaris-style with all kinds of terrible diseases. Wonderful times! But on a more serious note: reading is not a hobby for me; it's a fundamental part of my profession, an addiction, and a very meaningful way to procrastinate.

I don't keep track of what I have read—memory is a means of canonization for a reason—and as probably many do too, I have a steadily growing pile of “next” books, some of them part of future research, some just utterly fascinating (e.g. Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams' *S*) and some gifts.

What book or article has inspired you to take action?

The first text that comes to mind is David Foster Wallace's *Consider the Lobster*, an essay so persuasive that it turned me into a vegetarian (for a short time, at least). But to be honest: I'm not sure if the purpose of books (at least when it comes to fiction) is necessarily to be motivational or inspirational in this way.

There is no denying books can perpetuate or criticize values and beliefs, they might challenge what we are convinced of, make us more aware of what we perceive as normal, etc., but as Heiner Müller put it: "We tend to level the differences between culture and politics, between art and history, between art and life. But the form and time of art is different from the form and time of politics, history and life. If you try to integrate and unify them, the result will be catastrophic, and one will damage the other." That being said, literature might do all this for you (take action, change your career, inspire activism), but it is by no means its primary purpose.

What is your favorite book to give as a gift?

Amos Oz: *Black Box*, and Bulgakov: *The Master and Margarita*.

Who is your favorite writer of all time?

That's an impossible question to answer, but I'll try to name a few that I admire very much: amongst American authors, the early Thomas Pynchon (especially *The Crying of Lot 49*), David Foster Wallace (have a look at his [commencement speech at Kenyon College, for instance](#)), and Philip Roth. Some German authors include E.T.A. Hoffmann, Heinrich von Kleist, Franz Kafka, Franz Fühmann, and recently, Lutz Seiler.

What are you planning to read next?

I need to read Werner Bräunig's *Rummelplatz* for a talk I'll give next month (in Germany, the book has been called the most famous unprinted novel of the post-war era), numerous texts for classes, Lutz Seiler's *Kruso* and I hope there'll be another *Sean Duffy* novel out there soon.

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