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Susan F. Russell, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts

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Abstract

In this new *Next Page* column, Susan F. Russell, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts, shares plays she recommends for anyone interested in reading plays for the first time and where Amish romance novels fit into her reading repertoire.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

Disciplines

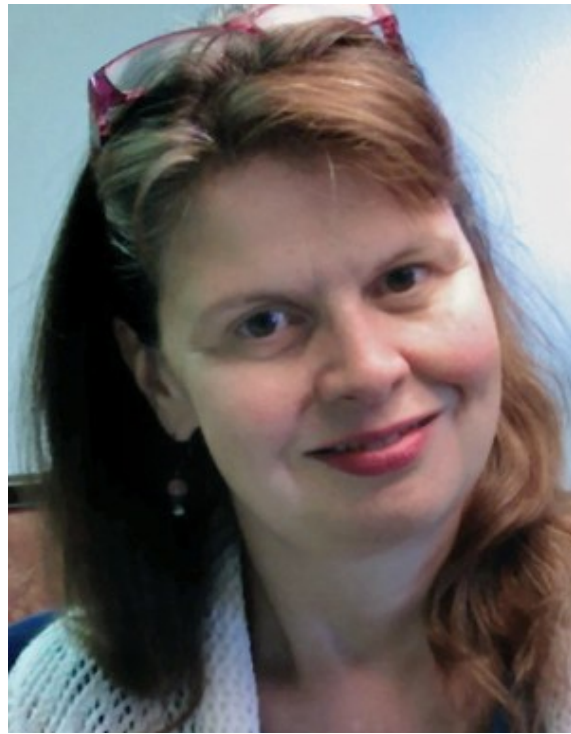
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Next Page

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April 5, 2016

In this new Next Page column, Susan F. Russell, Associate Professor of Theatre Arts, shares plays she recommends for anyone interested in reading plays for the first time and where Amish romance novels fit into her reading repertoire.



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What books changed your life growing up?

I was really fortunate to have grown up in Little Rock, Arkansas and to have attended Little Rock Center High School in the 1980s when the school had an African-American student population of about 65%. I was blessed with many wonderful black teachers so early on, I got a great taste of African-American literature, which really inspired me. I especially remember Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. (Angelou lived in Arkansas when she was a child.) I was also really moved by *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I loved *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables*, since I thought of myself as an author already in kindergarten, and both feature girls who have literary aspirations, too!

Another book I would read every year for many years when I was growing up was T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* because of the beauty of the prose. (I was also really into the musical *Camelot*, and the [Arthurian poems](#) of Alfred, Lord Tennyson!) In college, I fell in love with nineteenth century British novels, especially while studying abroad in England (*Middlemarch!* *Wuthering Heights!* *Vanity Fair!* *Nicholas Nickleby!* *Tess of the D'Urbervilles!*).

What have you recommended recently?

One thing I read recently that I'm embarrassed I hadn't read sooner and that I would recommend is *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. It's a riveting story and also inspiring. I suppose I had unconsciously bought into the stereotype of

Malcolm as “scary,” but the book is a classic. I also highly recommend the book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* by Susan Cain, especially to my friends who identify as introverts and those who love them. It was very liberating to read this fascinating study, and to understand the reasons behind some of my own behaviors and desires!

I believe all educators should read Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, a profound book on why some people are better able to “make it” in our society than others. I also frequently recommend certain books for the sheer beauty of the writing itself, as well as compelling stories and points of view: *The Shadow of the Wind*; *Call It Sleep*; *The Bone People*; *Beloved*; *The Shipping News*; *The Goldfinch*; *The Poisonwood Bible*; *The Last of the Just*; *The God of Small Things*.

What books are you looking forward to reading next?

My family makes fun of me and my big pile of books by the side of my bed! Most of them I've started, but life hit and I had to stop until summertime. Here are some of those titles that continue to sing their siren song until I answer it:

- *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson. This book reads like a novel, telling the story of black folks moving northward after the Civil War.
- *The Color of Christ* by Paul Harvey and Edward J. Blum. Co-authored by my friend, Paul Harvey, whose area of expertise is the history of U.S. religious movements, this book traces the ways in which ideas about white Jesus circulated in the 20th
- *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock* by David Margolick. This book follows the lives of the two girls in that unforgettable photo of the integration of Central High: Elizabeth Eckford, the little black girl who entered the school by herself, and Hazel, the white girl jeering at her. It follows their stories, including the conversations they had with one another as adults, trying to understand the past.
- *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. A postcolonial re-telling of the *Jane Eyre* story from the point of view of the Creole “madwoman in the attic,” Bertha Mason Rochester.
- *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. I also love Russian novels, and this one looks mind-bending! Again, I started it and loved it, but had to put it aside.
- *The Island of Lost Girls* by Manjula Padmanabhan. I directed a play by Manjula last semester, and she came to visit campus. Her short stories are amazing, and this book is newly published sequel to *Escape*, a postcolonial sci-fi novel that I simply couldn't put down. I even bought my son a Kindle so I could read this sequel (it's only available to date on Kindle!!).
- *Slavery by Another Name* by Douglas Blackmon. Blackmon's a college buddy of mine who won the Pulitzer Prize for this book in 2009. It's a fascinating study of ways that black men were forced into labor even after the Civil War.

Do you read plays for fun?

Yes, though usually it's for work—trying to decide what to direct and what to teach, and also as inspiration for my own playwriting. Over the break, I read fifty new plays for a competition sponsored by the O'Neill Center, which is one of the most prominent new play development venues in the United States. It's hard to read plays, and I don't think many people do it much for pleasure. It's easier to go see them, of course, but, as I always remind my students, the reason we like to see them is because other artists have read them dozens or even hundreds of times before they present

performances, so, for us readers, we ought to at least pay the playwright the respect of reading it more than once before we make a judgment on it!

What plays do you recommend for people just starting to read plays?

I think Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a jolly good read. I also recommend *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry for a thought-provoking and moving portrayal of a family's struggles that hasn't lost its timeless, despite having been written in the late 1950s. Another truly powerful play is Athol Fugard's *Master Harold...and the Boys*, an autobiographical play set in apartheid South Africa.

Guilty pleasures?

Amish romance novels. Go ahead and laugh—I'm used to it. But listen to this: "He blushed deeply as he noticed one tiny delicate curl had slipped from under her bonnet." How fun is that??"

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