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## Buzz Jones, Professor of Music

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## Buzz Jones, Professor of Music

### **Abstract**

In this new *Next Page* column Sunderman Conservatory of Music Professor and composer Buzz Jones explains how reading poetry and plays fires his creative instincts and tells us the last book that made him laugh out loud.

### **Keywords**

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## Buzz Jones, Professor of Music

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*Buzz Jones, Professor of Music*

*You were on sabbatical last fall and did professional reading, writing and composing. But what did you read for fun? What does a musician and composer read for fun?*

Some enjoyable reads included *Twelve Bar Blues* by Patrick Neate, a tale of musical fate that paints a vivid picture of a New Orleans now gone forever, the spectacular *All The Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr, several Lee Child novels (Jack Reacher could be a superb jazz trombonist with attitude!), a Sherlock Holmes adventure, *The House of Silk* by Anthony Horowitz, and LeRoi Jones's *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*.

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

I am working through *A Life in Pursuit of Music and Beauty*, the 600+ page autobiography of composer, performer, and historian Gunther Schuller who died last year at age 89. Schuller was a Renaissance man in every sense of the word. He was a high school dropout who played French horn in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra as a teen, recorded with Miles Davis and Ornette Coleman in the 1950s, coined the term "Third Stream Jazz" (a melding of jazz and classical music), led the New England Conservatory of Music for a decade in the '60s and '70s, befriended Frank

Zappa, won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize in music composition, and wrote two seminal books on early jazz. This tome is a superb travelogue of 20<sup>th</sup> century music and culture written in rich and dynamic language. Through a set of unusual circumstances, I had the good fortune to have a two hour private dinner with Schuller about twenty years ago. I can only describe the conversation with him as intense, at times intimidating, and thoroughly enthralling. Lucky me.

I am also reading Jim Harrison's novella *The Ancient Minstrel*. I get a bit weary of self-indulgent characters like the aging protagonist but there is no denying expert writing and story telling that keeps you wondering page after page. I would highly recommend Andrew Krivak's World War I story, *The Sojourn*. It is a compelling tale of a young boy from Colorado who returns to the homeland of his father, and trains as a sharpshooter while dealing with family tragedy, language barriers, fear, survival, and death.

## *As a composer do you get inspiration from any particular book or genre of literature?*

Poetry often fires my creative instincts. I am partial to American poets like Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg having composed numerous songs on their texts. I am presently reading *The School For Lies* by playwright David Ives that he adapted from Moliere's *Commendia dell'arte* masterpiece, *The Misanthrope*. Chris Kauffman and I are collaborating on a student production of the Ives' play in February 2017. I'll be creating a sound design for the play by composing and adapting incidental music in a broad variety of styles that will include a curtain prologue, incidental music during scene changes, extensive cues and musical gestures to enhance the staging, and postlude/exit music.

## *I know you appreciate all things Welsh. What book or books should we read if we wanted to know more about Wales? Who are your favorite Welsh authors?*

I am a fourth generation Welsh-American and proud of my heritage. My family will attest to my passion for all things Welsh. New Jersey native Sharon Kay Penman is the author that really helped me understand the medieval history of *The Land of Song*. Her trilogy of historical novels about the Princes of Gwynedd are richly textured books that place you firmly in 13<sup>th</sup> century Wales as the Welsh tried – to no avail – to avoid subjugation by the English. *Here Be Dragons* remains one of my favorite books ever. Penman now owns a home in the Welsh hills!

John Bollard's translation of Welsh mythical tales, *The Mabinogi*, is great read with stunning photography by Anthony Griffiths. Welsh poet Tony Curtis's anthology of mining titled *Coal* is full of Welsh poems, stories, and songs from almost three centuries. Medieval bard Dafydd ap Gwilym's verses on love and nature are not to be missed. Welsh outdoorsman Steve Ashton compiled a book of classic Welsh walks that is worth the time if you enjoy hiking. A.J. Cronin's *The Citadel* is a compelling story about an idealistic Scot doctor practicing in a small Welsh mining village.

In 2014, I was inspired to compose a tribute to my ancestral homeland, *Wales: Land of My Fathers*, for a 100-voice choir of Gettysburg College students, a 30-piece brass band, and solo harp that was sung in English, Latin, and Welsh. The three-movement suite included Welsh folk songs, hymn tunes, a Celtic antiphon, and original settings of poems by Welsh poets Dylan Thomas and Lewis Morris.

## *What is the last book that made you laugh?*

Who cannot laugh out loud with Bill Bryson? As a child of the 1950s, *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid* really resonated with me. Suburban Philadelphia was not as tame as Des Moines but his hilarious stories about superheroes, big autos, televisions, and the like were the same for every American boy of that era and it took me back to another time (not necessarily simpler one, I might add).

## *You are hosting one of your B list dinner parties. What writer(s) would you like to have at your table?*

Sharon Penman, David Brooks, Kendrick Lamar, noted Louis Armstrong scholar Gary Giddins, and Julian Fellows. If I could please include a few musicians they would be the happiest bass player on the planet, Verdine White of *Earth, Wind, and Fire* and Caroline Shaw, the youngest ever Pulitzer Prize winner in composition.

## *Do you have a favorite book or literary character from your childhood? What did you like to read as a child?*

The *Hardy Boys* mysteries were a favorite. I particularly loved Aunt Gertrude who possessed a fiery temperament. Trudy did not suffer fools. I think this is where I first understood the immense value of how to solve people-problems. Mystery and suspense was a passion when I was growing up so books by Alistair MacLean, Allen Drury, and Arthur Conan Doyle were littered around my bedroom. And, of course, *Mad Magazine*.

## *What are you planning to read next?*

After 43 years in the classroom, retirement is only a year away so I am compiling a lengthy list for more leisurely days ahead: Oliver Sack's *On the Move: A Life*, Mia Alvar's *In the Country*, M.J. Carter's *The Strangler Vine* and *Infidel Stain*, Bryson's *The Road to Little Dribbling*, John Lawton's *The Unfortunate Englishman*, Matthew Desmond's *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, *Excellent Sheep: the Miseducation of American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* by Bill Deresiewicz, Thomas Cahill's *The Gifts of the Jews*, *The Last Painting of Sara De Vos* by Dominic Smith, and rereading *Guns, Germs, and Steel* by Jared Diamond. I adore maps and musicals so I am compelled to include *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps to Explain Everything About the World* by Tim Marshall and *The Secret Life of the American Musical* by Jack Viertel.

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