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## Chuck Wessell, Assistant Professor of Mathematics

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## Chuck Wessell, Assistant Professor of Mathematics

### **Abstract**

In this newest *Next Page* column, Chuck Wessell, Assistant Professor of Mathematics, shares what he and his cat, George, read first thing in the morning; his affinity for books with colons in the title; must-read math books for the non-mathematician; and much more.

### **Keywords**

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

### **Disciplines**

English Language and Literature | Library and Information Science

# Next Page

## Chuck Wessell, Assistant Professor of Mathematics

October 6, 2016

*In this newest **Next Page** column, Chuck Wessell, Assistant Professor of Mathematics, shares what he and his cat, George, read first thing in the morning; his affinity for books with colons in the title; must-read math books for the non-mathematician; and much more.*

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*Chuck Wessell, Assistant Professor of Mathematics*

### *What's the first thing you read in the morning?*

[The Gettysburg Times](#). My cat George typically wakes me up between 4 and 6 with some loving head butts, and I take the opportunity to read “The Times” on whichever electronic device is closest.

### *What/who is a must read for anyone interested in a great book about math?*

Modern mathematics is such a broad subject that I find myself disappointed in any book that tries to survey “all of math”. I much prefer slim volumes that examine a single mathematical idea. Many students of mine have enjoyed [Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea](#) by Charles Seife. Both Amir Aczel and Simon Singh have written multiple accessible books. I enjoyed [Everything and More](#) by David Foster Wallace, though you have to have a high tolerance for footnotes and Wallace’s frequent invoking of knowledge “you learned in high school” that he may have learned then, but I sure didn’t. Finally, anyone who likes mathematical puzzles and games should pick up anything by Martin Gardner.

### *What are you reading now (or have read recently) that you would recommend to a friend or colleague on campus and why?*

As you will see, I love books with colons in the title:

- [\*Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution\*](#) by Kathleen DuVal. I never knew that Revolutionary War battles were fought in the then British colony of West Florida. DuVal tells the story through the viewpoints of African-American slaves; Native American leaders; British, Spanish, and French settlers (the latter Acadians who the English had resettled in Louisiana).
- *Today We Die A Little! The Inimitable Emil Zátopek, the Greatest Olympic Runner of All Time* by Richard Askwith. Zátopek has always been one of my running heroes, and this book does an excellent job of showing how he trained and competed under repressive political regimes (first the Nazis, then the Communists). The result is a portrait of a real, flawed human being who is now even more heroic in my eyes.
- [\*Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking\*](#) by Susan Cain. Must read for all teachers. Explores how introverts don't quite fit into our modern world. I recognized myself on every page.
- [\*Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town\*](#) by John Krakauer. Sexual assault and Title IX in the context of a football mad college town.

*You hiked all 2,175+ miles of the Appalachian Trail. When did you complete it and what did you read to prepare yourself for it?*

I hiked part of the trail each year from 1997 to 2007. Since it gave me a sense of completion, each year I tried to complete the trail in one or two states. Because of logistics and hiking partner's preferences the first two states I completed were Connecticut and Georgia. I then realized that these were the first two of the AT states in alphabetical order. Yes, I did the rest of the states in alphabetical order.

I read a lot of trail journals online and a few books — [\*A Walk in the Woods\*](#) by Bill Bryson came out in 1998. I learned that reading about hiking is poor preparation when compared to actually hiking. The one source I used extensively was a slim booklet with lots of checklists for what to bring on a hike. Whenever I didn't use that book I always forgot something.

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

[\*Math With Bad Drawings\*](#) is a blog I often point my students to. It's funny, but you have to have some level of mathematical understanding to get the jokes.

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

I use the [\*Goodreads\*](#) website, though I am pretty bad at remembering to update my list. Also my to-read list keeps getting longer and longer.

*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.)*

I try to read everything that Ta-Nehisi Coates writes. Though [Between the World and Me](#) rightfully received a tremendous amount of acclaim, I was moved more by his memoir of growing up in Baltimore, [The Beautiful Struggle](#). James Baldwin's [The Fire Next Time](#) is incredibly powerful.

*What is your favorite book to give as a gift?*

[Walden](#).

*Who is your favorite writer of all time?*

Thoreau. While rereading [Walden](#) a few years ago, I realized how funny Thoreau can be. He writes these long sentences that are perfectly punctuated and beg to be read two or three times over. And with each reading more knowledge and wisdom oozes from the sentence.

*Do you have a favorite book or literary character from your childhood?*

Hmm. Not really.

*What are you planning to read next?*

I have bookmarks in five books right now. I try hard not to do this to myself, but it happens. I'm just about to finish [Reasons to Stay Alive](#) by Matt Haig, a memoir of his life with anxiety and depression. His experiences and his recounting of things that helped him uncannily mapped onto my history. It's been a great and helpful read. I'm working hardest right now on finishing [The History of White People](#) by Nell Irvin Painter. On the lighter side, *Guards! Guards!* by Terry Pratchett, *Men with Balls* and *The Hike* both by Drew Magary are also partially read.

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