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Temma Berg, Professor of English

Musselman Library
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Temma Berg, Professor of English

Abstract

In this first Next Page column of 2018, Temma Berg, Professor of English, shares which texts have had a lasting influence on her teaching career and scholarship, how a chance meeting created a connection between her and one of her favorite childhood literary characters – Anne of Green Gables, which book she likes to give as a gift to friends who are retiring, and why she might just prefer to open another book rather than host a literary dinner party.

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In this first Next Page column of 2018, Temma Berg, Professor of English, shares which texts have had a lasting influence on her teaching career and scholarship, how a chance meeting created a connection between her and one of her favorite childhood literary characters – Anne of Green Gables, which book she likes to give as a gift to friends who are retiring, and why she might just prefer to open another book rather than host a literary dinner party.



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

There are so many books I would recommend but I will settle on Margaret Drabble's *The Red Queen* for many reasons but, most of all, because one line in it struck me as one of the truest things I have ever read: "We fear those we have injured, even when we retain power over them." Circling around questions of punishment and forgiveness, the frailty of memory and the wonders of the archive, the paradoxes of free will and destiny, the intermingling of hope and despair, the perils of power and redemption, the book moves from eighteenth-century Korea to present-day London and Seoul, from King Lear to King Yōngjo, from past to present to future.

You are retiring at the end of this academic year. In looking back over your teaching career, which book(s) had the biggest impact on you as a teacher or scholar and why?

[Frankenstein](#) had a big impact on my teaching. I taught it in survey classes, in my golem class, in my theories class. Students love it and so do I. The book is always surprising and new no matter how many times you read it. What an amazing woman Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was. I've also loved reading,

teaching, and researching the Brontë sisters. I am currently working on a paper titled “Sexual Harassment and the Sisters Brontë.” They have much to tell us about sexuality, gender, and the paradoxical situation in which we twenty-first-century Americans now find ourselves.

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

[Anne of Green Gables](#). I loved her and read all the books in the series more than once. While visiting Prince Edward Island I met a woman who, when a girl, had actually known Lucy Maud Montgomery. She gave me a book that Montgomery had given her, an edition of [Little Women](#). I used the book in a paper about literary influence, tracing a line from Louisa May Alcott to L.M. Montgomery to Margaret Atwood, and then gave it to Mary Rubio, Montgomery’s biographer, who placed it in the Montgomery archives at the University of Guelph.

If you were planning a literary dinner party, who would you invite?

Having recently read Alan Bennett’s [The Uncommon Reader](#) I would be very careful about whom I invited. As Bennett ruefully suggests, writers are not great dinner guests, not even when invited by the Queen. I might just prefer to sit and read another book.

One of your current areas of research is the Brontë sisters.

Which work(s) of theirs are your favorites? Any film adaptations you are particularly fond of?

Choosing a favorite Brontë text would be like favoring one child over another. I love all their works. And, as the Brontë sisters would surely agree, it is not easy being sister writers. Competition must have been fierce — another reason for not favoring one sister or text over another. But I do feel a special tenderness for [Shirley](#), the least loved of their novels. It is a strange novel but I love things counter and spare, to paraphrase [Gerard Manley Hopkins](#).

As far as Brontë films, I have used them in my Brontë seminars. Films and novels are sister arts and it is important to explore how film uses particular techniques to enhance our appreciation of the novels they adapt. I like all the films I have seen but recommend [The Tenant of Wildfell Hall](#) (a BBC production) and the Juliette Binoche version of [Wuthering Heights](#). Andrea Arnold’s [Wuthering Heights](#) is the most experimental and, for that reason, another favorite of mine. I am so glad she took all the risks she did.

Another area of your research is archival investigation. If you could choose an archive anywhere in the world to visit for research, which one would it be and why? Have there been any gems in Musselman Library's Special Collections and College Archives that you've used for research or a class?

There are so many archives, and they are all full of possibilities, but I am planning to visit [Haworth Parsonage](#) again, which has the largest collection of Brontë materials anywhere, as well as the [Calderdale Archive](#), which houses Anne Lister materials.

Like all archives, there are wonderful treasures and surprises to be found in Musselman Library's [Special Collections and College Archives](#). I have used them over the years in my Theories class. Students enjoy learning about earlier generations of students, and sometimes manage to get in touch with descendants. We need to encourage our current students to deposit materials into the archives. I enjoyed reading about the [AAUP](#) and its supporters in the archives; it was great to know that the College has a long history of activism.

Do you have any favorite contemporary writers whose new works you look forward to reading?

Margaret Drabble and A. S. Byatt (who are sisters), Kazuo Ishiguro, Rebecca Goldstein, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anne Tyler, Toni Morrison, David Liss, etc. etc. etc.

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

I keep reading journals. However, there are gaps in them. Sometimes I just get too busy to write down my thoughts about different texts. Now that I am retiring, gaps should appear less often.

What is your favorite book to give as a gift?

[Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell](#) by Susanna Clarke. I have given it as a retirement gift to friends because now they will have world enough and time to live with and read slowly this wondrous 782-page book.

What are you planning to read next?

The hardest part of reading is deciding what to read next. It takes me a while to select the next book. I've taken to reading at least two books at a time so that I always have something to read. Hopefully, now that I am retiring, I will have time to read all the books I have not yet read and reread others. I remember that moment in the justly famous [The Twilight Zone](#) episode where the henpecked husband finally has the opportunity to read all the books he wants (the world has come to an end but he has found an intact library – the building is gone but the books are there). As the episode draws to an end, he carries a pile of books to a stoop so he can sit down and read, but just as he bends down to sit, he stumbles. His glasses fall and shatter. This has always struck me as the most tragic story of all.

<http://nextpage.musselmanlibrary.org/faculty/temma-berg-professor-of-english/>