



10-2018

Jim Udden, Professor of Cinema & Media Studies

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Musselman Library and Udden, James N., "Jim Udden, Professor of Cinema & Media Studies" (2018). *Next Page*. 37.
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Jim Udden, Professor of Cinema & Media Studies

Abstract

In this Next Page column, we ask Jim Udden, Professor of Cinema & Media Studies, to talk books instead of films. Find out which authors make him laugh, his go-to source for reading about new books, and what he is planning to read as soon as his end-of-semester grading is complete.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

Disciplines

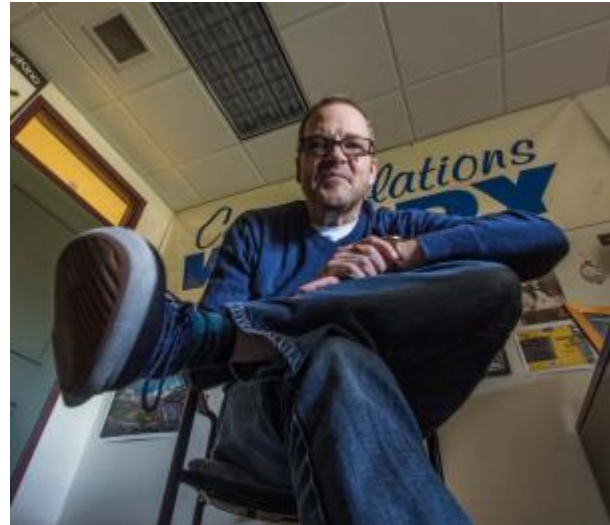
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Next Page

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October 24, 2018

In this Next Page column, we ask Jim Udden, Professor of Cinema & Media Studies, to talk books instead of films. Find out which authors make him laugh, his go-to source for reading about new books, and what he is planning to read as soon as his end-of-semester grading is complete.



Jim Udden, Professor of Cinema & Media Studies

We all love “Udden’s Outtakes” in the [summer reading booklet](#) and look forward to your film recommendations every year. What do you read when not watching films? What are you reading now (or have read recently) that you would recommend?

This is tricky, because how I read today is very different from how I read about 15 years ago before I started watching

TV shows on a regular basis, and before I began using a lot of TV in my courses. Let’s face it, the problem with TV is that it requires a substantial time commitment, and one can commit to a show that seems great, but may not end well or in a timely fashion. Nevertheless, there is so much more great television compared to the past, and it is difficult to keep up with it all. What has therefore suffered for me, reading wise? Novels. I still read a lot of nonfiction.

During graduate school, I remember somehow finding time to read Thomas Pynchon, William Gaddis and some Nabokov ([Pale Fire](#) and [Pnin](#) stood out for me). I have not read any serious novelists like these three in recent years, and even Jonathan Franzen does not quite count because I found his writing easier and funnier to read. [The Corrections](#) is one of my favorite novels from the past decade.

Frankly, my criteria for novels has changed as well: I have enough films, television shows and nonfiction writings to challenge me intellectually, and I get pleasure and mental stimulation as a result. A novel now has to be first and foremost about sheer pleasure above all else. My current favorite

is Gary Shteyngart. Out of all the novels I read this summer, [Absurdistan](#) is arguably the funniest political satire I have ever read. (It is sort of like [VEEP](#) on steroids.)

My preference for nonfiction is anything smart yet lucidly written, aimed for non-academic audiences — books that literally make me look at the world in new, unexpected ways. For example, Jared Diamond's books have had that effect on me, as did Ha-Joon Chang's [Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism](#). These books look at the world in such new ways, and yet are so well written without a lot of jargon, that I have even used parts of both authors in my courses. I also love to read books for lay people about astronomy and quantum mechanics.

You also study and teach about television. In fact, in “Udden’s Outtakes” in recent years you have more TV programs to recommend than films. What should we read to help us make sense of the world of television?

I do not yet feel there is a definitive book out there right now to make sense of it all, but I do have a graduate school colleague, Jason Mittell, who studied television while I studied film, and who has published a lot of readable and compelling academic books about television such as [Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling](#).

Is there a particular book or article that has inspired you to take some sort of action? Or put another way, what book or other piece of writing has had the biggest impact on you?

There are many possibilities, but I think a definitive book for me when I was around 18 years old was Bertrand Russell's [Why I Am Not a Christian](#). I was already having some really deep reservations about the religion I had grown up with (my father was a fundamentalist minister), that were making me miserable, even if I could not admit it at the time. That book pinpointed for me what exactly my misgivings were. It liberated me in the long run, even if it caused great distress in the short run.

Do you have a favorite writer of all time? Or is there a writer that you really enjoy and you look forward to him/her publishing their next book?

In the 1980s, it was (dead) Russian authors. In the 1990s, it was Thomas Pynchon. Today, it is definitely Gary Shteyngart and Bill Bryson simply because no other writers have made me laugh so much. I think I am getting shallower as I age! Besides [Absurdistan](#), I enjoyed Shteyngart's first novel, [The Russian Debutante's Handbook](#). I look forward to reading [A Super Sad True Love Story](#) and he has a recent work that just came out, [Lake Success: A Novel](#).

My top Bill Bryson recommendations are [*A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail*](#), [*Notes from a Small Island*](#) and [*A Short History of Nearly Everything*](#), one of those wonderful books about science written for non-scientists.

What, in general, are your reading habits?

As I mentioned earlier, time is an issue for me because of television. During any semester, I have to read so much for my courses and my research that I have a difficult time setting aside another book to read just for pleasure. I no longer subscribe to a newspaper, and instead read multiple sources online for news and some in-depth articles. But one thing I do subscribe to and cannot live without: [*The New York Review of Books*](#). Since I know I do not have the time to read about so many different things I would love to read about, I can at least read very well-written reviews that tackle the core issues various people are writing about. That may seem like cheating, but I see no other way to keep my mind more active and aware of how little I actually know about the world. I believe one should always be reminded of that.

We know you are interested in photography and have many photos of your own that would make an amazing “coffee table” book. Are there collections of photographers’ works in print that you greatly admire or that inspire you?

Actually, I have made personal coffee table books based on our travels (Istanbul & Italy in 2014, and Belgium in 2015) and they even sit on our coffee table! But now I have shifted more to videos based on our travels which use mostly still images, and are edited to pieces of music I associate with various places.

I am a very visual person, and want to more fully explore this hobby. Editing the videos were the highlight of the summer, outside of the actual travels. What I have not done yet is really explore books of famous photographers which is likely where I will go next. In fact, *The New York Review of Books* often has good reviews of books about well-known photographers. One such review had a real impact on how I shot many of my images this past summer in Europe. A photographer, whose name escapes me, noted that most people shoot straight on at normal eye level, not from well below or high above. It dawned on me that most of my favorite personal photographs were from “unnatural” angles combined with various lens lengths that dramatically alter the perspective and depth relations, using what seems very realistic to actually defamiliarize the world.

What are you planning to read next?

I have a lot of books (more nonfiction than fiction) sitting on my shelves, but I have no idea which one will be next. I am likely to next read a book for my own pleasure during winter break, and given it is right after I complete my grading, I am going to want to laugh as much as possible. So whatever it is, it will have to make me laugh.

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