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Farah Ali, Visiting Assistant Professor of Spanish

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Abstract

In this Next Page column, Farah Ali, Visiting Assistant Professor of Spanish, shares why she celebrates “the good, the bad, and the weird” in her reading life, which writer’s grocery lists she would read if given the chance, and why it’s important to read outside of your comfort zone.

Keywords

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Disciplines

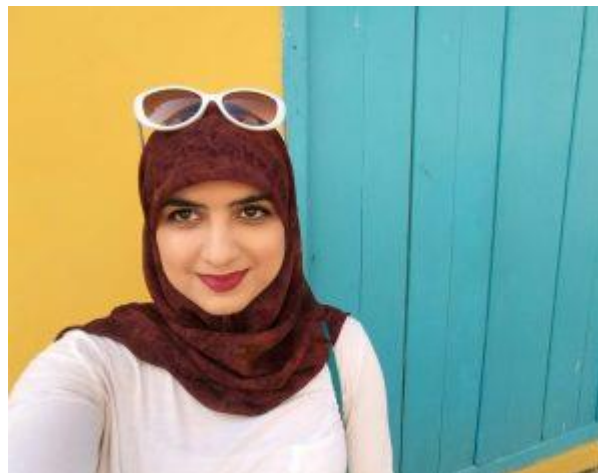
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Next Page

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November 28, 2018

In this Next Page column, Farah Ali, Visiting Assistant Professor of Spanish, shares why she celebrates “the good, the bad, and the weird” in her reading life, which writer’s grocery lists she would read if given the chance, and why it’s important to read outside of your comfort zone.



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Describe your reading habits. Do you mostly buy or borrow? Do you prefer ebooks or print? Do you read one book at a time from start to finish or have multiple started?

When I was younger I used to buy almost all of my books, but my collection got out of control and I had to downsize. Now I mostly borrow, but will sometimes buy a book if I think I’m going to read or refer to it again. I definitely prefer print. I grew up with print and I suppose that physically holding a book and turning its pages is just part of the reading ritual for me. I tend to stick to one book at a time, otherwise it takes me forever to get through multiple books.

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

I love using [goodreads.com](https://www.goodreads.com) for all three. (it’s social media for book lovers, for anyone who is not familiar with it) I also like using it to set myself annual reading goals, undoubtedly the result of extensive childhood conditioning through Pizza Hut’s [Book It](#) program. Sadly, Goodreads doesn’t reward you with free pizza, but you feel a sense of accomplishment when you’ve reached your goal. For the last few years, I’ve consistently set mine to 30 books per year. I don’t always make it (unfortunately, journal articles don’t count. Nor do student compositions), but it’s always fun to try.

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

I'm currently reading [*White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*](#), by Robin DiAngelo. It's a sensitive topic for many people, myself included; admittedly, I felt incredibly self-conscious checking it out from the library! The book is actually written for a white audience; however, I was interested in reading it because in the last few years I've really begun to question my own ideas of what racism is, and have struggled with articulating to others – without being met with defensiveness – how seemingly benign behaviors and attitudes among well-intentioned people can still feel racist and hurtful. I'm only a few chapters in, but I would strongly recommend this book to any and to all. Diversity and inclusion have become a big thing on most college campuses, where the importance of promoting these values is being increasingly emphasized. But I think a lot of people see racism, sexism, and other -isms in very black and white terms...the good people who aren't racist/sexist/etc. vs. the bad people who are. This attitude individualizes racism (and other -isms) and ignores the fact that it is deeply ingrained in our social structures, and therefore impacts the way each of us experiences life, often in very disparate ways. I think that in order to have a learning and work environment that truly fosters inclusion, we have to acknowledge and examine our own positions of privilege, and how others might be positioned with less advantage. In doing so, it becomes so much easier to see how we may (though perhaps quite unintentionally) perpetuate inequality in our interactions and attitudes. Reading this book is a great starting point. It might prove to be an uncomfortable read, but as every good educator knows, learning and growing requires that you venture out of your comfort zone.

Your research interests in both sociolinguistics and heritage/second language acquisition focuses on gender and identity. What book/film/article would you recommend for a novice who is interested in learning more?

In both areas I'm interested in looking at how identity is reflected in language use, including but not limited to gendered identity. Much of what I'm interested in stems from Bonny Norton's research that focuses on identity and language learning. Her work aims to show how our daily interactions – specifically in the language classroom context – are governed by power relations based on learners' and instructors' identities, which in turn inform the learning experience. Also, [*Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*](#) (eds. Aneta Pavlenko and Adrian Blackledge) is a great volume that illustrates how identity is constructed, devalued, and/or legitimized across a variety of sociocultural (and specifically multilingual) contexts, and how these processes are manifested through language use. Both sources are scholarly works, but I believe they are accessible to a wider audience.

What do you read for fun?

I read a lot of short story collections. They're convenient for people who tend not to sit and read for long spaces of time, but I also just enjoy them personally as a [short story writer](#). I also love the occasional comic book – [Ms. Marvel](#) in particular. I also like nonfiction a lot more now than compared to when I was younger. But really, I like reading anything and everything, the good, the bad, the weird. I like being exposed to different things, and I think that if you want to expand your horizons, you have to read as much as possible and as diversely as possible. I believe Ray Bradbury summed it up best: “You must read dreadful dumb books and glorious books, and let them wrestle in beautiful fights inside your head...You must lurk in libraries and climb the stacks like ladders to sniff books like perfumes and wear books like hats upon your crazy heads.” Best life advice ever.

What have you recently recommended to a student to read? Why?

[*The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*](#), by Marie Kondo. We were practicing household-related vocabulary (parts of the house, chores, etc.) in my elementary Spanish class and were talking about our favorite and least favorite chores. After going into what was probably a far too detailed explanation of why vacuuming is the most satisfying of chores, I recommended they read Kondo's book. In retrospect, I think they were probably a bit too distracted by my vacuuming monologue to take my recommendation seriously. However, one student added to the discussion and *suggested* [*Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life...and Maybe the World*](#), by William McRaven, and insisted that I would enjoy it (and I did!)

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know?

I would love to meet [Roald Dahl](#). His writing is so witty and magical. Apart from his fictional work, I've also read his autobiographies, and I think he had such an interesting life, especially in having participated in World War II. I would love to ask him about the events that inspired his stories (one that I know of is that the headmistress from *Matilda* was based on his own negative experiences in boarding school).

Who is your favorite writer of all time?

[Vladimir Nabokov](#) is the first name that comes to mind (and in this moment, I feel as though I've betrayed my beloved Jane Austen) and I suppose it's because I love his writing. Loving a writer for their writing sounds a bit axiomatic; let me clarify. Some authors produce wonderful characters (Arthur Conan Doyle gave us Sherlock Holmes) while some produce amazing story lines (Harry Potter series). And then some just have aesthetically pleasing writing, regardless of the story they're telling. I've

always regarded Vladimir Nabokov that way. His writing is so lyrical and rhythmic, I'm convinced I'd enjoy reading his grocery lists had he thought to publish them.

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

My favorite fictional character when I was a child was [Sherlock Holmes](#). I read abridged versions when I was little, and moved on to the original, unabridged stories when I got older. As a child, I'd fantasize about being as clever as him and I would try observing my surroundings to see if I too could master the science of deduction. Sadly, I was never as observant as him, probably owing to the fact that my head is too far up in the clouds to ever notice anything.

What are you planning to read next?

[*Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*](#) by Trevor Noah. My exposure to [*The Daily Show*](#) is essentially limited to 2-3 minute clips that people post on Facebook, but I really appreciate Trevor Noah's ability to be humorous, intelligent and honest about everything he discusses, whether it's current events or his life in South Africa. I'm really looking forward to reading his book, which I expect will be sad, amusing, and thought-provoking.

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