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Caroline Ferraris-Besso, Assistant Professor of French

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Caroline Ferraris-Besso, Assistant Professor of French

Abstract

In this first column of the spring semester, Caroline Ferraris-Besso, Assistant Professor of French, shares which recent novel made her laugh out loud, her favorite cookbooks (and favorite brioche recipe!), and works that have inspired her academic writing.

Keywords

Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, reading, books, interview

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February 1, 2019

In this first column of the spring semester, Caroline Ferraris-Besso, Assistant Professor of French, shares which recent novel made her laugh out loud, her favorite cookbooks (and favorite brioche recipe!), and works that have inspired her academic writing.



Caroline Ferraris-Besso, Assistant Professor of French

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

Currently I am re-reading a novel by Sorj Chalandon, [*Profession du père*](#), the story of a twelve-year old whose father is an abusive mythomaniac, set in post-WW2 France. It is a very powerful tale about mental illness and how it affects families.

I recently read Celeste Ng's [*Everything I Never Told You*](#); I thought it was a wonderfully sensitive novel about being an outsider / different. I also very much enjoyed Emmanuel Carrère's [*Other Lives but Mine*](#), which is sort of an autofiction — Carrère documents how his recently deceased sister-in-law and her colleague, both judges in a small French town, launched a David vs. Goliath legal crusade against predatory money lenders. At the end of last year I also read Anthony Bourdain's [*Kitchen Confidential*](#) — since I frequently dream about running to the mountains to open a farm-to-table restaurant, it constituted a very entertaining wake-up call about the realities of the hospitality industry.

Do you have a favorite writer or writers? Is there an author who you look forward to reading their next book?

I often say that most of my favorite writers are long dead, but among the living ones, I enjoy reading Laurent Binet. His first novel [*HHhH*](#) was beautifully written, but it is [*The Seventh Function of*](#)

[Language](#) that solidified my impression of Binet. I laughed out loud reading that novel. My other favorite is Eric Vuillard.

You are working on a book about 19th century Polynesia. Can you recommend a book for the non-specialist that would help us understand this time period and geographical region?

Anne Salmond's [Aphrodite's Island: the European Discovery of Tahiti](#) explores early contacts between Europeans and Tahiti, but I think it really contextualizes the later period. Miriam Kahn's [Tahiti Beyond the Postcard: Power, Place and Everyday Life](#) is also a great read, a reflection on how places and people form and change one another. Above all, reading contemporary Tahitian writers helps understand the lasting impact of colonization and stereotypes. I would recommend Chantal T. Spitz's [Island of Shattered Dreams](#), which is considered the first Tahitian novel.

What, in general, are your reading habits? Do you read electronically, or print? Both? Write in the margins, or keep your books clean? Keep books, or give them away?

I mostly read in print. I do not write on books; if I am reading for work, I take notes, either using my computer if I am reading at my desk, or on a notepad if I am reading somewhere else. I am guilty of dogearing my personal books, even though I own an impressive number of bookmarks. At home, I usually keep a pile of books on my nightstand, it is my "to-read" pile. I never give away my books — it sparks joy in me to have many, many books! Perhaps if I did not like a book, I could abandon it, but in general I am very possessive of my books.

Is there a particular book or article that has inspired you to take some sort of action?

I cannot say any given book has really inspired me to take action, but I can identify some milestone books or pieces of writing, in particular in terms of academic writing, for example Susan Stewart's [On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection](#) and Bruno Latour's [On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods](#), because they strike a balance between rigor and being thoroughly engaging books.

Pieces about writing have inspired me and helped me put my own writing in perspective. I am thinking about Brian Lennon's ["The Essay, in Theory,"](#) and a short *NYT* piece by Geoff Dwyer entitled ["An Academic Author's Unintentional Masterpiece."](#)

If I think about books that affected me emotionally, there have been so many, and that is why I like books so much. More recently, I was particularly moved by Paul Kalanithi's [When Breath Becomes Air](#).

What do you read for pleasure? Do you have a preference for reading works in French? In English?

I am sensitive to style and I read indifferently in either language as long as I enjoy the style, but if I am reading for pleasure, it is most likely going to be a novel. I like visiting other places, and novels are an amazing way to do that without going through an airport.

What is your favorite book to give as a gift?

I do give lots of books as gifts, but I cannot say there is a single favorite; I really try to tailor it to the recipient. Most recently, I gave my mother copies of Jeffrey Eugenides's [*Middlesex*](#) and Philip Roth's [*American Pastoral*](#). I had enjoyed them, thought she would too, and she did.

What writers, living or dead, would you like to invite to a dinner party?

I think Proust would be a total gossip and fun to talk to. Balzac and Barthes look like they like to eat and would make great dinner companions. And I would certainly like to chat with Marguerite Duras.

Speaking of dinner parties, we hear you're a wizard in the kitchen. What are your favorite cookbooks?

I do not buy nearly as many cookbooks as I would like to, but I love Yotam Ottolenghi's *Plenty and Jerusalem* — the chocolate babka is amazing; Peter Reinhart's *The Bread Baker's Apprentice* (the best brioche recipe!); and Cathy Erway's *The Food of Taiwan: Recipes from the Beautiful Island* (great recipes for a great cuisine). I enjoy cooking and baking, and even though cookbooks are technically not necessary, since so much is available on Internet, I would still take a cookbook over an iPad every single time.

Where do you tend to get your books? Online? Do you have a favorite bookstore? Borrow from a library or buy to own?

One of the things I miss the most in Gettysburg is a bookstore. I love bookstores and cannot be trusted in one, especially not if there are cookbooks, because I want to buy all of them. Some of my favorite bookstores are: [Buffalo Street Books](#) in Ithaca, [Unabridged Bookstore](#) in Chicago and [Decitre](#) in my hometown. It is usually one of the first places I go to when I go home. My suitcase is half full of books and half full of food on my way back to the US.

I also exchange books with my uncle when I am in France, which is another way for me to discover and get books I otherwise would not have necessarily thought about.

In the absence of a bookstore, I order online. It is fast and convenient, but you cannot really “stumble” upon anything. I also borrow books from the library—I like “physical” libraries because I can browse the shelves and find something there I would not have considered. I understand the convenience of online materials, but there is an experience that is missing in the online catalogue, in my opinion.

I also like used book stores and book sales, where you can almost always find treasures. Nothing brings me more joy than opening a used book to find a dedication, a note, a letter, or a card that got stuck between the pages.

Do you have a favorite book or literary character from your childhood? What did you like to read as a child growing up in France?

I read *Le Petit Nicolas*, lots of comics (*Tintin*, *Astérix*, *Gaston Lagaffe*, *Les Pieds Nickelés*), Marcel Aymé’s *Les Contes du chat perché*, Roger Frison-Roche’s *Les Montagnes de la Terre*. Charles Dickens’s [David Copperfield](#) was also a favorite. As soon as I knew how to read, I pretty much read everything I could find.

What are you planning to read next?

My nightstand pile currently includes Malcolm Lowry’s [Under the Volcano](#), Amy Rowland’s [The Transcriptionist](#), François Sureau’s *Je ne pense plus voyager*, and Siddhartha Mukherjee’s [The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer](#). We will see which one I get to first!

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