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Musselman Library
Gettysburg College

David E. Flesner
Gettysburg College

Authors

Musselman Library
David E. Flesner, Gettysburg College

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Abstract

In this new *Next Page* column, David Flesner, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, explains why he is a big fan of author Dan Brown, which book inspired him as a child to pursue mathematics, why he adopted “Fyodor” as a class name in high school, and much more.

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Next Page

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In this new Next Page column, David Flesner, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, explains why he is a big fan of author Dan Brown, which book inspired him as a child to pursue mathematics, why he adopted “Fyodor” as a class name in high school, and much more.

I know you are a fan of Dan Brown and have read all his books. What about Brown’s writing appeals to you? Characters? Plot? Why? Does the appeal have anything do with your being a mathematician?

There are two main characteristics of Dan Brown's books that appeal to me. First, as a mathematician I am intrigued by his use of symbology. There is a nice, tight logic and puzzle nature throughout his works. His use of symbols is marvelous. There is a wonderful little book [Dictionary of Symbols](#) by Carl G. Liungman that would certainly be in Robert Langdon's library as it is in mine. Second, there is a wonderful art/culture/history perspective that Brown brings to his books. I just love it when Robert Langdon is being chased through some museum or church and he is explicating a detailed description of the historic or artistic background of all that he is passing. Brown's writing style is very engaging. When I say to myself this is the last chapter I'm reading tonight, I am compelled to retract my resolution by the time I get to the end of that chapter!

Do you have a favorite Dan Brown book and why?

Usually my favorite Dan Brown book is the one I am currently reading. In fact, the one I most recently read was his first book, *Digital Fortress*, which presages the current NSA/Snowden scandal. Another favorite is [The Lost Symbol](#), which takes place in Washington, D.C.

Can you tell me about a book with a mathematics theme that is accessible to the general reader?

I highly recommend [Mathematics in Western Culture](#) by Morris Kline. In it you will find both the symbolism of mathematics (but not daunting) and the cultural references and discussion that you find in Dan Brown's writings. However, do not be dissuaded by the first page of Chapter I: “Did not St. Augustine say: ‘The good Christian should beware of mathematicians and all those who make empty prophecies. The danger already



David Flesner, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics, reveals which book inspired him as a child to pursue mathematics, why he is a fan of author Dan Brown, and much more.

exists that the mathematicians have made a covenant with the devil to darken the spirit and to confine man in the bonds of Hell.” Hmm, that would make a good opening line for Dan’s next book!

What are you reading now that you would recommend to a friend or colleague on campus?

I am currently reading *Dark Fire* by C.J. Sansom, the second in his series of five crime novels set in Tudor England and involving the hunchback lawyer Matthew Shardlake. I find them interesting for their historical context and unusual twists at the end. I highly recommend them to anyone who likes fiction set in an historical context. The series was recommended to me by the librarian spouse of one of the Canadian exhibitors at the Bridges conference I attended in Towson in the summer of 2012. They can be read independently in any order; I started with *Heartstone* and then read *Dissolution* and *Revelation*.

What are you planning to read next?

Sovereign by C.J. Sansom, the third in his Matthew Shardlake mystery series.

Is there a book or article that has inspired you to take action?

[One Two Three ... Infinity](#) by George Gamow was one of my inspirations as a child for pursuing mathematics.

I know you have travelled a lot? Do you read about a place before you go there? Do you have a favorite travel book?

I like best the *Lonely Planet* series of travel books and will usually read and take with me the volume relating to where I am travelling. Before my travel to China in 2011, I read several books related to China. I particularly enjoyed three books by Peter Hessler dealing first with his two-year Peace Corps teaching in a town along the Yangtze River and then with his living and traveling in China as a journalist: [River Town](#), [Oracle Bones](#), and [Country Driving](#).

What is your favorite book to give as a gift?

Rather than giving books as gifts, I am always recommending books to people. In addition to the books I mention above and below, one that I have most frequently recommended is *Between Two Worlds* by Zainab Salbi. In this memoir, she describes her teenage experiences as the daughter of the pilot for Saddam Hussein, her arranged marriage taking her to Chicago, her founding of the Women for Women organization, and her complex relationship with her mother.

What other books do you read for fun?

I enjoy reading lots of different books and genres for fun. I have already started answering this question in my responses above. In order to limit my response so that it doesn’t get carried away (one, two, three, ... infinity!), I’ll stick to some of the authors by whom I have read multiple (three or more) books. Khaled Hosseini wrote three very interesting books related to his native Afghanistan: [The Kite Runner](#), [A Thousand Splendid Suns](#), and [And the Mountains Echoed](#). The Mars trilogy (*Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, and *Blue Mars*) by Kim Stanley Robinson is more about interesting human relationships and interactions than about the science fiction context in which the series is set. Jeannette Walls wrote about dysfunctional families (including her own) in [The Glass Castle](#), [Half-Broke Horses](#), and [The Silver Star](#). Patricia Knutson, a former family lawyer and college professor now retired and living in Gettysburg, wrote three engaging, hard-to-put-down mysteries: *Shelter of Lies*, *Mountain Blood*, and *Fatal Game*. The last book raises moral and ethical questions as three teenage boys accidentally run over and kill a man while playing a very risky and careless

automobile game. Finally, I must confess that I have been a big Harry Potter fan and have read all seven books (which I won't list) by J.K. Rowling.

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

Somewhere around my junior year of high school but outside of any class, I picked up a copy of [*Crime and Punishment*](#) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and started reading it. I simply couldn't put it down. I was thoroughly enthralled by the psychological nuances and philosophical discussions. I went on to read [*The Brothers Karamazov*](#), [*The Idiot*](#), and [*Notes from Underground*](#). I got a real sense of the "Russian soul", especially reading while listening to Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 in E minor. In my senior year, I took a Russian language course and adopted "Fyodor" as my class name. Since then, I've gone on to enjoy works by Chekhov and [*Anna Karenina*](#) by Leo Tolstoy. In the summer of 2012, I was able to complete an item on my bucket list: reading all 1215 pages of [*War and Peace*](#) by Tolstoy, using the new translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.

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