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Daniel DeNicola, Professor of Philosophy

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Daniel DeNicola, Professor of Philosophy

Abstract

In this issue of Next Page, Professor of Philosophy Daniel DeNicola reveals his appreciation for mysteries, especially those focused on manuscripts or works of art, and how his incessant childhood habit of reading the backs of cereal boxes at breakfast led his parents to buy him a set of "Children's Classics" and his very own encyclopedia-sold in installments at the supermarket.

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Next Page

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Professor of Philosophy Daniel DeNicola finds time for mysteries in the midst of his teaching schedule.

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

On the fiction side, I recently read [The Luminaries](#) by Eleanor Catton. It is a sprawling 19th century sort of novel, set in the Gold Rush of New Zealand with a complex structure, central mystery, and a huge cast of well-drawn characters, and lots of atmosphere. I've just finished Tana French's latest mystery novel, [The Secret Place](#). Her writing is always of a higher quality than most mysteries, especially in the poetic richness of her language in conveying feelings. For comic relief, I'm now finishing Julie Schumacher's [Dear Committee Members](#). In non-fiction, I've been reading a lot of books related to my current project on ignorance; a very readable example would be Philip Ball's [Curiosity: How Science Became Interested in Everything](#). Beyond these, I've recently read Anne Whitehead's [Memory](#), am midway in Robert Pogue Harrison's [Juvenescence: A Cultural History of Our Age](#); and am about to begin John Hooper's [The Italians](#). I can say the first two are excellent!

Do you have a favorite genre?

For recreational reading, I like mysteries: especially those focused on manuscripts or works of art (such as [The Rule of Four](#) by Caldwell and Thomason or several of the works of Arturo Pérez-Reverte) and locked room mysteries, in which the how is as mysterious as the who (I am just finishing the best collection of these: The Black Lizard Big Book of Locked-Room Mysteries, edited by Otto Penzler). But I also like the darker Scandinavian mysteries, and the gentler Italian series, like those of Donna Leon (Commissario Brunetti) or Andrea Camilleri (Inspector Montalbano). The non-fiction fun for me is in biographies, historical studies, and those books that center around a single object or substance-you know, a painting or a rare stamp or salt or wine. I loved Julian Barnes' [Flaubert's Parrot](#). What I enjoy is the skillful unfolding of the significance of individual people and things-the "Flower in a crannied wall" phenomenon.

I know you are a pianist and love music. Do you read biographies of the composers you enjoy playing?

I find many biographies of composers and musicians rather dull. There are wonderful exceptions, though. I have recommended [The Cello Suites](#) by Eric Siblín. As its subtitle states, it is a book about Bach, Pablo Casals, and mystery of a lost Baroque masterpiece. I guess it combines music with the other interests I mentioned earlier. Humphrey Burton's [Leonard Bernstein](#) is also a fine biography-but, in this case, there is little labor needed to craft the story's significance!

What journals and magazines do you read regularly? Where do you get your news?

My favorite is the [New York Review of Books](#). I admire and learn from its lucid writing and interdisciplinary range. The same is true of sources like [The American Scholar](#), [Atlantic Monthly](#), or the [New Yorker](#), which I read more sporadically. Of course, I read relevant articles in philosophical journals and follow the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). News-no surprise here-is from the [New York Times](#) online and other web sources and TV.

Are you someone who reads a book over and over again? Which books stay fresh with each reading? What books do you find yourself returning to again and again?

So many books, so little time! Except for a very few, like Eliot's [Middelmarch](#), I'm afraid the books I read many times over are the ones I have returned to in teaching. The classics of philosophy always stay fresh with me. I've felt so privileged to work in the humanities because there is always something more to discover in the works taught in even the introductory classes-Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche-you'll know the list.

Who is your favorite overlooked or under-appreciated writer?

I'm equipped only to identify a few authors who are famous elsewhere, but seem to be under-appreciated in the United States certain academic circles. Most of those are Nobel Prize winners, people like Patrick White (Australia) and Yasunari Kowabata (Japan).

What book have you always meant to read and haven't gotten around to yet?

Two fascinating but big projects come to mind: Giacomo Leopardi's [Zibaldone](#) and Anthony Powell's trilogy, [A Dance to the Music of Time](#).

What kind of reader were you as a child? What were your favorite childhood books?

I've always been an omnivorous reader. My parents complained about my reading the cereal boxes at breakfast. They bought me a set of "Children's Classics" and a large but inexpensive set of encyclopedias-they were all sold in supermarkets at a volume per week. Later I got a surprisingly good science encyclopedia that was sold in the same way. I took out my own Book-a-Month-Club subscription, then added a Science Fiction Book Club membership. Shelves sagged, I struggled to pay, and it was so complicated to stop the mailings. As a child, I loved *Bob, Son of Battle*, by Alfred Oliphant, a shamelessly sentimental dog story; I'd need to read it aloud to make sense of the transliterated Scottish brogue and idiom. But there are so many others. In high school, I discovered the poetry of Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot, and got lost in their worlds for a while.

What were your favorite books to read to your children and grandchildren?

There was, of course, the Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein stage. Most memorable was the bed-time reading of *The Wind in the Willows* (Kenneth Grahame) and *The Secret Garden* (Frances Hodgson Burnett), to my daughter-and her brothers usually listened in. My grandchildren seemed to organize their own reading, thank you, but when very young they loved to engage their grandparents in solving the visual challenges of the I Spy books. We suspected they'd visited these pages many times before we arrived.

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