Some of My Books

2022-02-09

Dr. Niall McMahon

Good afternoon everybody. This will be a short unscheduled lecture that you can listen to at your leisure. A kind of bonus edition and a connection to the small number of people who cannot make regular lectures. I hope that you're all well out there.

I had planned to deliver the second innovation lecture on Monday last. I'd like to do this in person, live, so instead of posting a version of that lecture - which I'll deliver next Monday - I'll do something else. I want to begin to address some of the questions and ideas that came up over the last few weeks. And some side stories that I didn't tell during the lectures.

So, for today, books. Somebody asked me if I could recommend some non-fiction books for reading, specifically books that might help improve writing. Well, reading always helps writing! It's probably true that most good writers were once avid readers. It's not always the case, perhaps, but mostly. From my experience.

I'm not the best reader in the world. I've read a lot but these days my ability to focus and read a book from cover to cover for myself is not what it was. I think this is a function of both circumstance and habit. I'm determined to start reading again. Today!

I was thinking that it might be interesting to look at my own bookshelf and to pick out some books, fiction and nonfiction, that I think were especially well written.

I read at night to my children and these days we're reading Treasure Island by the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson. This is a great book! The English is old-fashioned but it's where many of the ideas about pirates and treasure in popular culture originated. If you want to learn how to hold a reader's attention, you could make a study of its structure.

Now I'm looking around me and we're taking a (virtual) walk around my house, looking at the books lying about the coffee table and on the book shelves. They need to be tidied up!

I see Chris Hadfield's The Apollo Murders. Another fiction book but one that's in an interesting place between historical and technical fact and fiction. If you like space and you like mystery writing, this is a good one. Chris Hadfield was the commander of the International Space Station back in 2013 or so. He became well known for his frequent video updates - examples of good blogging - and his cover version of David Bowie's Space Oddity. This book belongs to my son but I'm midway through it. I'm reading very slowly!

Chris Hadfield is entrepreneurial. He's managed to create a new career after being both an astronaut and an airforce pilot.

Which reminds me! Last year, I read Space by James Michener. This is another great book that blurs fact and fiction. But less so - it's mostly factually sound. It's long, at about 800 pages, and deals with the evolution of the space program. It's epic, spanning the 1940s through to the 1980s. James Michener was famous for very well-researched, mostly historically accurate novels. His characters are fictional but occupy the real world and serve to tell the story of the world at that time. Michener had an interesting life and knew a lot about space, serving on Nasa's board for some years.

While Robert Louis Stevenson died young, at 44, James Michener only began is writing career proper in his late 30s. There's hope for all of us!

I see Isaac Asimov's Foundation, also under the coffee table. I read this over the Christmas holiday. I'd read some of the Foundation series when I was a teenager. It's remarkable. The far-future universe that Asimov describes is a kind of mirror image of humanity now. And it's essentially optimistic. The writing is clear and each chapter can almost stand alone as a story in itself. This makes sense as it was originally serialised in a magazine.

Science fiction helps us explore what might be possible and the different futures that may lie ahead. Asimov's writing is often profound, dealing with issues core to being human. I Robot is on the bookshelf in the same room; this book, a collection of stories involving robots in the 21st century, deals with issues around what it means to be sentient and with questions about equality.

Beside me, on a small bookshelf, are an awful lot of Agatha Christie mystery novels. She was a fantastic, prolific writer! All her books are excellently written and - some outdated characterisations and attitudes aside - mostly satisfying to read. Murder on the Orient Express and Death on the Nile are maybe the most famous but you could take any of hers and it will be a rewarding read.

We have a lot of Bill Bryson's books. I haven't read many but son likes him a lot. Bill Bryson is an American who lived for a long time in England. His books are non-fiction and mostly about places he's been to. He also wrote several books about other things, including A Short History of Nearly Everything. He writes informally, with humour and wonder. He's an excellent writer.

I'm scanning the main bookshelves now. Richard Feynman, the famous theoretical physicist, is the source of some of my favourite non-fiction books. Two of these are Surely You're Joking Mr. Feynman and What Do You Care What Other People Think? He told stories to a friend of his, Ralph Leighton, who recorded them and wrote them down. The stories - some dated these days - are at times entertaining, sad and profound but they are all true recollections of Feynman's and almost all a lesson in *thinking clearly*. I like his informal and direct style. You should check out his interviews and lectures online. More about Feynman again!

Near Feynman's books, I see Paul Theroux's The Lower River. He is another wonderful writer, also best known for writing about places and their people. All his books are worth reading. He has several novels also; a famous one is The Mosquito Coast, which was made into a pretty good movie with Harrison Ford. We have several of his books here. Theroux is the father of Louis Theroux, the documentary maker.

Two more writers on the bookshelf who write about places and people, Jan Morris and Michael Palin. Jan Morris was a reporter in Hong Kong and her book, Hong Kong, captures the uniqueness of the city in the 1980s. Michael Palin is better known as part of Monty Python's Flying Circus but his travel shows on the BBC in the 1980s and 1990s were at that time ground breaking. He directed and scripted these and his companion books are very nicely written.

Randall Monroe's What If? is a nice collection of thought experiments with his stick figure illustrations. Have a look at XKCD to get the idea. It has chapters with titles such as, "Given humanity's current knowledge and capabilities, is it possible to build a new star?", "How high can a human throw something?" and "Supposing you *did* drain the oceans, and dumped the water on top of the *Curiousity* rover, how would mars change as the water accumulated?". It's informal and entertaining but with serious, critical thought.

Years ago, I found a copy of a collection of Roger Ebert's movie reviews; this is on the shelf also. They were written for a newspaper and are clear and succinct. Let's see, for *Star Wars, Episode II - Attack of the Clones*, he wrote,

> "There is a certain lifelessness in some of the acting, perhaps because the actors were so often filmed in front of blue screens so their environments could be added later by computer. Actors speak more slowly than they might - flatly, factually, formally, as if reciting. Sometimes that reflects the ponderous load of the mythology they represent. At other times it simply shows that what they have to say is banal. Episode II - Attack of the Clones is a technological exericise that lacks juice and delight. The title is more appropriate than it should be."

It's how I felt watching it also. He expressed it better!

Close to this is a small book by Arundhati Roy, the Indian writer and activist, The Cost of Living. It's two essays, one about dam building in India and the other about nuclear weapons. She writes and reports clearly and with passion. It's hard to feel unmoved by her essays. And then other non-fiction books by excellent writers: In Praise of Shadows by Junchirō Tanizaki, Gaia by James Lovelock, Prisoners of Geography by Tim Marshall, Life 3.0 by Max Tegmark and The Illusion of Conscious Will by Daniel Wegner.

And then, yet to read, there's Svetlana Alexievich's The Unwomanly Face of War. Svetlana Alexievich is a Belarussian reporter, and the book is a collection of interviews with women who fought in the Second World War. And a fictional novel, Flights by Olga Tokarczuk, the Polish Nobel prize winner, writer and activist.

I'll draw this partial review of my bookshelves to a close with some books relevant the course!

To do with startups and entrepreneurship, there is a biography of Elon Musk by Ashlee Vance, Your First 100 Days by Niamh O'Keefe, Start Up by Stolze, Broken Promises by Mills and Friesen, about IBM, and Startups That Work by Joel Kurtzman.

And about writing, there's The Economist Style Guide (2005 edition) and Eats, Shoots & Leaves by Lynne Truss.

I may edit this a little in the future to add books that I've overlooked but I hope that some of you read some of these books and enjoy them as much as I did.