

BY THE BOOK

Steven Pinker: By the Book

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The author of “The Language Instinct,” “The Blank Slate” and, most recently, “The Sense of Style: The Thinking Person’s Guide to Writing in the 21st Century” has never gotten in trouble for reading a book. “Just for writing them.”

What books are currently on your night stand?

“How Could This Happen: Explaining the Holocaust,” by Dan McMillan. “Severed: A History of Heads Lost and Heads Found,” by Frances Larson. “Ascent of the A-Word: A_ism, the First Sixty Years,” by Geoffrey Nunberg. “The Enlightenment,” by Anthony Pagden. “Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow,” by F. R. Leavis.

What was the last truly great book you read?

With the serene confidence that only a brilliant theoretical physicist can get away with, David Deutsch’s “The Beginning of Infinity” defends the unfashionable view that the Enlightenment inaugurated an era of unlimited intellectual and moral progress. The key is the human mind’s infinite combinatorial power, embedded in a culture that allows conjectures about the world (including the social and political world) to be tested and criticized.

Who are your favorite science writers?

Broadly defined: Dan Dennett, Jonathan Gottschall, Colin McGinn, Geoffrey Pullum, Mary Roach, Robert Sapolsky, Steven Strogatz, Carl Zimmer.

And what are your favorite books about language?

George Miller’s “The Science of Words”; my adviser Roger Brown’s 1958 classic “Words and Things”; and anything by David Crystal, especially his “Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language.” When a British team consulted with me about setting up a Museum of Language, I told them to put David Crystal in a glass case and they’d be done.

Your new book is about writing. Who do you think are the great writing stylists of our time?

Where to begin! In the book I showcase Richard Dawkins, Rebecca Goldstein, Margalit Fox, Isabel Wilkerson, Brian Greene, John Mueller and Mike O’Connor, author of the Ask the Bird Folks column in The Cape Codder. I encountered many more while researching “The Better Angels of Our Nature” — whether it’s in fiction or nonfiction, the topic of violence attracts gifted writers, including David Bell, Susan Brownmiller, David Courtwright, Simon Schama and Harold Schechter.

In researching this latest book, which books were most useful to you? Any unexpected gems you came across during the process?

Mark Turner and Francis-Noël Thomas’s “Clear and Simple as the Truth.” Their model of “classic prose” — the writer directs the reader’s gaze to something in the world — elegantly captures the differences between vigorous and turgid writing.

What kind of reader were you as a child?

Much as I am now: voracious, eclectic, mostly nonfiction. The World Book Encyclopedia. The Time-Life science-book-of-the-month series. Edith Hamilton’s “Mythology.”

The Hardy Boys. Heroic biographies of scientists and inventors. “1984.” William Shirer’s “The Rise and Fall of Adolf Hitler.” George Gamow’s “One, Two, Three . . . Infinity.”

Have you ever gotten in trouble for reading a book?

No, just for writing them.

If you had to name one book that made you who you are today, what would it be?

No single book: I’m a magpie, not a fanboy.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

John Mueller’s “The Remnants of War” explains how warfare has changed over the course of history, and how to deal with the remnants today.

Most Recent: What to Read

- ‘Mercy Street,’ by Jennifer Haigh: An Excerpt
An excerpt from “Mercy Street,” by Jennifer Haigh Feb. 2, 2022
- He Suffered Under Romania’s Dictatorship. Then He Was Forced to Spy for It.
Ruta Sepetys’s latest historical Y.A. novel, “I Must Betray You,” follows the life of a teenager who is blackmailed to become an informer for a repressive Communist regime. Feb. 2, 2022
- ‘Vladimir,’ a Debut That Celebrates Transgression — Up to a Point
In Julia May Jonas’s first novel, a married literature professor becomes obsessed with a younger experimental writer. Feb. 2, 2022

You’re hosting a literary dinner party. Which five writers are invited?

Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Mary Shelley, Charles Darwin and William James would have a humdinger of a conversation on human nature.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn’t?

John Keegan’s “A History of Warfare” shows the hazards of excessive erudition: His ideas came avalanching down faster than he could organize them, and the book is a case study of incoherent structure.

Is there one writer, historical or contemporary, whom you consider wildly overrated?

“Friends come and go, but enemies accumulate.” I’ll pass.

What’s the one book you wish someone else would write?

“Science Schmaltz: Peaceful Tribes, Altruistic Apes, Neuroplasticity, Epigenetics, Group Selection, Mirror Neurons and Other Distortions of Science for Dubious Moral Uplift.”

Whom would you choose to write your life story?

Margalit Fox is a linguist, wordsmith, seasoned obituary writer and a bit of a wiseguy. Perfect!

What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?

The great 19th-century novels by Eliot, Dickens, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Hardy and others. I often read books to help write books, so one day I may co-author a book on the psychology and philosophy of fiction with my novelist wife, Rebecca Goldstein, if only to give me an excuse to read these.

What do you plan to read next?

“Middlemarch.”