

## Summer Reading for Science Editors

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*CBE Views*

Lighter workloads (for some of us). Weather too hot or sun too intense for outdoor activities. Time in the mountains or at the beach. Long flights and airport layovers. Refuge from visitors or fellow tourists. A history since childhood of spending summer hours this way.

For various reasons, many of us in science editing and related fields find summer a good time for extra reading. And even during leisure hours, many of us choose books related to communication, science, or both.

To obtain suggestions of such summer reading, I surveyed by e-mail various science editors of my acquaintance. The following is a compilation of responses. For readers' convenience, some bibliographic data have been added, updated, or otherwise revised. In some cases, editions other than those listed also are available.

### On Communication

The first response arrived from Tom Lang of the New England Medical Center. He recommended *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, by Neil Postman (New York: Viking; 1986. ISBN 0-14-009438-5). "Postman is a communications scholar with much to say about the causes and effects of written, televised, and computer-assisted communication", he wrote. "He notes, for example, that writing not only made science possible, it is responsible for the nature of scientific thinking itself." Lang recommends other books by Postman as well.

Also suggested by Lang was *Information Anxiety*, by Richard Saul Wurman (New York: Doubleday; 1989. ISBN 0-385-24394-4). Lang's capsule review: "Wurman, who designed the Smart Yellow Pages for AT&T, is a master information designer. The book is full of insights into communication and is arranged in modules. One can begin reading on any page and not be lost,



Graphic by Anne Woods

for example. He provides information on a variety of communication activities, such as giving directions, organizing concepts, and creating visuals. The margins contain lots of quotable quotes and interesting bits and pieces of advice that, with the text, make for a most enjoyable experience."

R Elliott Churchill, of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, also recommended *Information Anxiety*. In addition, she listed the following other books on communication:

- *Getting Together: Building Relationships as We Negotiate*. Roger Fisher and Scott Brown. New York: Penguin; 1989. ISBN 0-14-012638-4.
- *On Deadline: Managing Media Relations*. 2nd ed. Carole M Howard and Wilma K Mathews. Prospect Heights (IL): Waveland Press; 1994. ISBN 0-88133-801-X.
- *Persuasion: Reception and Responsibility*. 8th ed. Charles U Larson. Belmont (CA): Wadsworth; 1998. ISBN 0-534-52281-5.
- *A Guide to Preparing Cost-Effective Press Releases*. Robert H Loeffler. New

York: Haworth; 1993. ISBN 1-56024-882-3.

- *Rewriting Writing: A Rhetoric, Reader and Handbook*. 2nd ed. Jo R McCuen and Anthony C Winkler. Fort Worth (TX): Harcourt Brace College Publishers; 1990. ISBN 0-15-576721-6.
  - *Communications Model for the Study of Mass Communication*. 2nd ed. Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl. London: Longman; 1993. ISBN 0-582-03650-X.
- Donna L Dowdney, of De Anza College, recommended a newly published textbook, *Editing for Writers*, by Lois Johnson Rew (Upper Saddle River [NJ]: Prentice Hall, 1999; ISBN 0-13-749086-0). Content that may interest even experienced editors includes advice for editing documents written by or for international readers.

And Ellen W Chu, of Northwest Environment Watch, suggested *Woe Is I: The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*, by Patricia O'Conner (New York: Putnam; 1996. ISBN 1-57322-625-4). Calling this work "the best grammar book I've found lately", she noted that it "puts to

rest a lot of copyeditors' bugaboos".

### On Science

Popular writings on science, especially as related to society, appeared among the recommendations. Gil Croome, of *Dead Line Editing* in Ottawa, mentioned *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time*, by Dava Sobel (New York: McGraw-Hill; 1996. ISBN 0-07-059593-3). "I picked this book up in England . . . and read most of it on the flight back to Canada", he recalled. "It does not go into the science of the solution but emphasizes the political intrigue that Harrison was up against. If modern researchers worked at the rate that Harrison did, they would be without a grant in very short order."

Chu suggested *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*, by Jared Diamond (New York: Norton; 1997. ISBN 0-393-97386-7). She described this sweeping work, which has won a Pulitzer Prize, as "provocative and powerful".

Identifying a favorite anthology, Ann Morcos, of Tulane University Medical Center, recommended *Best Science Writing: Readings and Insights*, edited by Robert Gannon (Phoenix: Oryx Press; 1991. ISBN 0-89774-592-2). This collection of award-winning science writing includes comments by the authors.

### Biographies and Memoirs

Respondents also mentioned biographies of editors and scientists. Although generally preferring leisure reading unrelated to editing, Aileen A Marks of Albuquerque said she favors books addressing "the important relationship that can develop between author and editor". She thus recommended *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius*, by A Scott Berg (New York: Riverhead Books; 1997. ISBN 1-57322-621-1). She also noted as having been favorably reviewed a collection of letters of Ursula Nordstrom, children's book editor at Harper and Row (*Dear Genius: The Letters of Ursula Nordstrom*, collected and edited by Leonard S Marcus. New

York: HarperCollins; 1998. ISBN 0-06-023625-6).

Susan E Aiello, editor of *The Merck Veterinary Manual*, recommended 2 autobiographies. One was *Koop*, by C Everett Koop MD (New York: Random House; 1991. ISBN 0-394-57626-8), which Aiello characterized as "essentially his memoirs, insights, and opinions". The other was *Naturalist*, by Edward O Wilson (Washington: Island Press; 1994. ISBN 1-55963-288-7). Aiello described this work as an "inspiring, well-written" book "about a young boy filled with the wonder of scientific discovery growing into a man with a fascinating career in entomology".

Chu included "on my personal summer reading list—if only I had a summer to read in—" *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, by Linda Lear. This long biography is now available in paperback (New York: Owl Books; 1998. ISBN 0-8050-3428-5).

### Essay Collections

In addition to having other appeals, essays make convenient summer reading. And respondents suggested some recent essay collections.

Cheryl Iverson of the American Medical Association recommended *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*, by Anne Fadiman (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 1998. ISBN 0-374-14860-0). The volume contains book-related essays that Fadiman wrote for the magazine *Civilization*. "Very wonderful", Iverson said.

Chu noted a compilation of essays by Wallace Stegner: *Marking the Sparrow's Fall* (New York: St Martin's; 1995. ISBN 0-8050-4464-7). Stegner "writes magnificently about the landscapes, cultures, and natural history of the American West", Chu observed. She finds "reading Stegner the antidote to dry scientific manuscripts and a much-needed reminder of why I went into this often frustrating field in the first place".

### Novel Ideas

Novels dealing with publishing or science

were also among works recommended.

Susan L Abrams, of the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, suggested a book by Jose Saramago, winner of the most recent Nobel Prize for literature. *The History of the Siege of Lisbon* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace; 1998. ISBN 0-15-600624-3) "introduces us to a hermetic proofreader who willfully adds the word 'not' to the text of a history book—and whose life changes utterly as a result". Abrams characterized the book as "densely written but very entertaining".

Aiello mentioned a biographic novel on Charles Darwin: *The Origin*, by Irving Stone (New York: Doubleday; 1980. ISBN 0-385-12064-8). She also cited *The Novel*, by James Michener (New York: Random House; 1991. ISBN 0-679-40133-4). This work, she noted, was "not about medicine or science, but a novel about four individuals intertwined in the writing/publishing world (a writer, his editor, a critic, and a reader)". She described this work as "good for anybody who just likes books!"

Also listed by Aiello were 2 novels that she termed "airplane reads". One, *Unnatural Causes*, by Thomas T Noguchi and Arthur Lyons (New York: Charter Books; 1988. ISBN 1-55773-264-7), is "a fictional mystery thriller by the coroner who investigated the deaths of Marilyn Monroe, John Belushi, and Robert F Kennedy". The other, *The Bestseller*, by Olivia Goldsmith (New York: HarperCollins; 1996. ISBN 0-06-109608-3), provides "an inside look at the competition and corruption of writers, agents, and editors in a large publishing house".

In shorter fiction, Chu recommended *Ship Fever* (New York: Norton; 1996. ISBN 0-393-03853-X), a collection of short stories by Andrea Barrett. This collection, which includes scientific themes and settings, won the National Book Award. "Warning, however: The book is not full of good cheer", Chu stated. "Neither the characters, their emotions, nor their situations will leave you singing."

Chu also cited Barrett's latest novel,

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The Voyage of the Narwhal (New York: Norton; 1998. ISBN 0-393-04632-X), “an epic story of a failed arctic expedition”. Chu noted that its “historical detail and scientific themes are likely to appeal to a well-read science editor”.

Likewise mentioned by Chu was “Patrick O’Brian’s series of Napoleonic seafaring novels, the ‘Aubrey/Maturin’ novels, starting with Master and Commander and published since the 1970s by Norton”. Regarding the books’ attractions for biology editors, Chu said: “The character Stephen Maturin is a ship’s doctor, musician, proprietor of a small castle in Spain, and a secret agent more interested in obscure fungi or critters than in politics or the sea. The writing is difficult, quirky, and absolutely splendid.”

### Additional Suggestions

Aiello also noted books for those interested in forensic medicine and allied realms:

- *Dead Men Do Tell Tales: The Strange and Fascinating Cases of a Forensic Anthropologist.* William R Maples and Michael Browning. (New York: Doubleday; 1995. ISBN 0-385-47968-9).
- *Bones: A Forensic Detective’s Casebook.* Douglas Ubelaker and Henry Scammell. (New York: HarperCollins; 1992. ISBN 0-06-016328-3).

And finally, Chu highly recommended “Gary Larson’s not-for-kids kids’ book”, *There’s a Hair in My Dirt!: A Worm’s Story* (New York: HarperCollins; 1998. ISBN 0-06-095268-7). “This is Ecology 101 with pictures and a biting last word!” Chu stated. “My 8-year-old gets a kick out of reading it aloud—with FEELING.”

### Thanks and Requests

Thanks to all who responded to my call for suggestions. Further recommendations are appreciated at any season, especially if accompanied by blurbs describing the books and their appeal to science editors. You can convey suggestions to me by post at the Department of Journalism, Texas A&M University, College Station TX 77843-4111, or by e-mail at [b-gastel@tamu.edu](mailto:b-gastel@tamu.edu). If ample suggestions arrive, you might be subjected to a sequel to this piece.

Whether or not you read any books noted above, I wish you an excellent summer. And if you are one whose summer is undemanding, how about writing something for CBE Views? 🖊