

The guest of the Library blog *Geros knygos* is our colleague **Brian Stettner** (Ohio, the USA). Brian works as Adult Services Librarian at the Martin Luther King Branch, Columbus Metropolitan Library. He is the Secretary of the Association of Public Library Employees (APLE) for Columbus Metropolitan Library.

It is always interesting to ask our foreign colleagues about the situation in their libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation regarding the virus in the United States is still serious. How is the Columbus Metropolitan Library facing the challenge?

Columbus Metropolitan Library (CML) locations have currently suspended service inside our buildings to ensure everyone's safety. CML offers curbside pickup of reserved materials as well as printing, copying, scanning and faxing services. The library's website offers eBooks, eAudiobooks, streaming music and movies and digital magazines. The library's telephone and text chat services offer reader's advisory and other assistance

How do you reach your users?

CML's website provides account access, enabling browsing and reserving materials from a shared online catalog of 17 central Ohio library systems, as well as free access to over 50 electronic tools and resources to learn new skills or get information. The library also reaches out on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, including online story times and other programming for all ages.

Do people miss the usual possibility to spend their leisure time in the library?

Yes, many have expressed their eagerness for the library to more fully reopen.

How important are books in your life?

Pretty important, even if many bibliophiles read more than I do. I value books as essential to my formal education and the source of much of my awareness of ideas and perspectives different from my own. As an example, books were essential in my learning other languages, which has enabled many of my most enriching experiences. If I want to give someone a gift, I often try to match a book to his or her interests because it can provide both an experience and a keepsake. I have books in nearly every room.

What was your favorite book as a kid?

At certain times, I would have answered, "the one I'm writing!" My best friend and I, perhaps inspired by the movie *2001*, started writing a space epic in junior high, but alas, never finished it. Before that, my answer might have been *Encyclopedia Brown, Boy Detective*, by Donald J. Sobol. My elementary school participated in a marketing initiative by the Scholastic Corporation

– as kids, we understood it simply as like extra birthdays to get presents – in which teachers collected book orders and money and gave out the brand new paperbacks a few weeks later. My parents always bought one or two for me. I remember this one most.

What’s your favourite classic novel?

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* would be a good contender, due in part to a recent, local, theatrical adaptation’s inspiring me to reread it 30 years after my first encounter for high school English. I rarely re-read books, preferring to discover something else. I confess that the most poignant passage for me, at the end when the 20th century narrator contemplates the original colonization of North America while viewing Long Island, New York, ages awkwardly. The confrontation by American descendants of Europeans, such as myself, of our implicit biases and orientations stands among this year’s big themes in the United States, along with COVID-19. Perhaps diminished in this light, Fitzgerald’s words nevertheless hit a vein:

“And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.”

If you could travel to one place you’ve read about in a book, what place would you visit and what book was it from?

Antarctica, the setting for Geraldine McCaughrean’s 2005 teen novel *The White Darkness*, among other places. The exoticism captured my imagination, bleak as it may be. There are few places I would not want to visit, however. I have a latent wanderlust I should probably listen to more!

Are you generally good at guessing twists or being able to see what's coming? Have any stories genuinely shocked you?

Yes, I can predict the action before I read many novels, in part because as a public service librarian providing readers advisory, I am *expected* to know more than I would *choose* to know before I usually get around to reading a book! As for “shocked,” if I may tone that down to “surprised,” George Saunders’ *Lincoln in the Bardo*, to which I listened via audiobook, and Libba Bray’s *Going Bovine*, both kept me guessing. The latter won the American Library Association’s teen fiction award one year, and although my job specification is Adult Services, I read many youth fiction award winners each year to better connect with our young readers. Such books get less overall publicity, so I often have fewer preconceptions.

Have you ever read a book where you needed more answers and wanted to kill the author for leaving it so open ended? Or do you like that kind of book? What book was it?

Yes, if I can commute “killing” to “haranguing.” I am neither attracted to nor put off by unresolved narratives *per se*, but many popular books form part of a series, and those that conclude like advertisements for the next volume annoy me. Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* let me down in this regard.

Have you ever finished a book that rendered you so emotionally unstable you couldn’t start another one for a few days?

No, not that I remember, and I should confess that I frequently go days, if not weeks, between books. I do believe that books deliver important wake-up calls that should engage our emotions and intellect, sometimes to unsettling states. I think of topics such as the environment, and the quality of life for our fellow man near and far. Atul Gawande’s *Being Mortal* comes to mind.

Do you like new book smell? Old book smell? All book smell?

Yes, no, & no: As a public library employee, I definitely prefer new book smells to old book smells, though *no* book smell is best of all, simplifying one factor in collection weeding analysis!

Which would you rather live without? Books or films?

Films, because the content and variety of uses are so much vaster for books, especially when you think of non-fiction, such as reference and self-help books, and biographies. The book is such a stable, economic, self-sufficient medium compared with just about any other. I do love movies, though, and have many books, including textbooks, on movies and directors.

Who would you cast as the main characters of a movie adaptation of your favourite book?

Daniel Craig as Vladimir Putin; the *World Book Encyclopedia*, *P* volume (the article on Putin). OK, that volume’s not honestly anything special to me, but a good encyclopedia set *is* truly one of my favorite print desires, at least were there no Wikipedia. The Craig-Putin resemblance, not to mention spy world context, struck me the minute I saw my first Craig “007” film!

What are your favourite American authors or your favourite books of American authors?

Along with a good encyclopedia and dictionary, these would be among my list:

William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White’s *The Elements of Style*, which esteems simplicity, directness, and brevity in writing – tips one can apply in many other contexts.

The *Scott Standard Postage Stamp Catalogues*, (Jay Bigalke, Editor-in-Chief) enable my hobby of philately, so I always have a set on hand.

John Updike's *Rabbit* series, with the title protagonist's quiet desperation, provides a character with which I have sometimes identified; this was among the first books I read just for pleasure after graduating from college.

Zora Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provides the kind of perspective I could never have without great books, and has one of the greatest openings I've ever read.

I have looked forward every day for years to reading humor cartoonists Stephan Pastis (*Pearls Before Swine*) or Gary Larson (*The Far Side*).

Do you like the idea of e-readers or would you rather have the physical book in your hand?

I prefer a physical book, although I see advantages of both formats. Certainly a physical book is the more stable, versatile, and, I would argue, ecological platform - at least until the materials that go into modern electronics are environmentally accessible and recyclable, and the electricity infrastructure that sustains everything electronic comes from renewable sources. The eBook advantages I see are ability to scale font size for aging eyes, the light weight of modern tablets, and the capacity for text searching to quickly revisit passages or appearances of characters whose details one has forgotten!

Is there a quote from a book that has inspired you/changed the way you view things? If so, what is the quote?

Yes; my high school French teacher assigned *Huis Clos* (English: *No Exit*), by Jean-Paul Sartre, and this angry accusation by one of the characters left an impression:

"Tu as rêvé trente ans que tu avais du cœur; et tu te passais mille petites faiblesses parce que tout est permis aux héros."

The speaker is calling her interlocutor out for a lifetime of self-aggrandizing dreams accompanied by a reality of innumerable shortcomings, which the addressee excuses by believing that one makes such allowances for heroes. As a teen-ager, I was increasingly confident of my own righteousness, and for some reason this opened me up to self-critical analysis. I try to relive that moment of perception regularly.

Maybe you would like to say or wish something to Lithuanian librarians?

I don't know your daily concerns at work or home, although I did spend several memorable weeks in your friendly country almost 30 years ago, and have a close Lithuanian friend in Kaunas. I encourage you to take advantage of your professional opportunity to facilitate the expansive, logical, and compassionate thinking of everyone you encounter. A retired professor from nearby Ohio State University, Rudine Sims Bishop, wrote of the role of literature as providing "windows" to look into other cultures and ideas, "sliding glass doors" enabling entry to environments different from one's own, and "mirrors" reflecting every part of society's own

stories. As the Collection Lead in my library, I encourage you to pursue collections that reflect these values. We aspire to maintain our integrity as a resource open to all, and not associated with any singular social, political, or ethnic identity, or age; I would encourage every library to do the same.

Thank you very much for the interesting conversation!

Photo from Brian Stettner's personal archive

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