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Scientists' Nightstand

The Bookshelf talks with Lisa Randall

Lisa Randall is a professor of theoretical physics at Harvard University. Her research on extra dimensions of space and other areas of particle physics, string theory and cosmology has made her one of the most highly cited theoretical physicists of the last five years.

She has recently completed *Warped Passages: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Universe's Hidden Dimensions* (Ecco, 2005).

Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

I work on many different aspects of particle physics, string theory and cosmology. I always liked mathematics, but took my first physics course at New York City's Stuyvesant High School, where I began to think science could provide a better outlet for my interests, one that is more grounded in the physical world. I went on to study physics at Harvard, both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student, and after holding positions at Berkeley, MIT and Princeton, I returned to Harvard in 2001 as a faculty member.

The chief goal of my research is to find connections between abstract theoretical ideas and observable physical phenomena. I started off as a model builder grounded in particle physics, went on to explore unexpected ways to go beyond the obvious interpretations of experimental measurements and later on started focusing on more abstract ideas rooted in string theory. My most recent research concerns theories of extra dimensions of space. Do they exist, and what effects would they have on our world if they did? It's fascinating stuff.

What books are you currently reading (or have you just finished reading) for your work or for pleasure? Why did you choose them, and what do you think of them?

I'm currently reading Cormac McCarthy's "border trilogy" (*All the Pretty Horses* [Knopf, 1992], *The Crossing* [1994] and *Cities of the Plain* [1998]). I very much enjoy his evocative language and strong

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characters. Strangely enough, however, I was directed to his work because of his profound interest in physics. He offered to read and comment on my book before I was done, which prompted me to go out and buy his novels.

I also enjoy reading foreign authors, who often bring interesting perspectives and insights. I recently read Giuseppe di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (1957), another novel with brilliant visual imagery. It's everything a good novel should be, telling about history, politics and human nature. It captures the ambiguities and subtleties in them all.

Another excellent novel I read recently is *A Late Divorce*, by A. B. Yehoshua (Doubleday, 1984). The cultural aspects enhance the story's impact.

When and where do you usually read (specific location, time of day, etc.)?

I usually read at night before going to bed, although I sometimes read when I'm on a plane and too tired to do more serious work. But once I'm completely absorbed in a book, I might read it any chance I get, which all too often means staying up much later than I had intended.

Who are your favorite writers (fiction, nonfiction or poetry)? Why?

I have a lot of trouble with questions that ask about "favorites" or "best." There are so many wonderful writers, each with their own particular gift. Until recently, I concentrated more heavily on fiction, and I tended to favor British writers, both of the past and of the present. Jane Austen and George Eliot are wonderful, as is Ian McEwan, and for pure entertainment Dorothy Sayers and P. G. Wodehouse can't be beat. I also think Susan Sontag was a fascinating essayist who always made you think in ways you otherwise wouldn't.

What are the best books you've ever read? Explain.

I can't answer that, so I'll tell you the favorite books I read in the last few years, which are Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* (BBC, 1969) and di Lampedusa's *The Leopard*. These books have very little in common, except perhaps that they all reflect the authors' understanding, humor and acceptance of the vagaries and capacities of human nature. And they are all extraordinarily well written.

What book has influenced you most? Explain how.

That's even harder than favorite authors, and I don't have a good answer.

My reading (textbooks, magazines and papers aside) doesn't usually reflect my scientific professional interests. What really attracted me to

science was my interest in and enjoyment of mathematics, not books, although I did enjoy *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (by Douglas R. Hofstadter, Basic Books, 1979), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (by Lewis Carroll, 1865), *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (by Edwin Abbott, 1884) and *The First Three Minutes* (by Steven Weinberg, Basic Books, 1977) when I was younger. I read primarily for pleasure, knowledge and understanding. To the extent my reading influences me, it is through my outlook on the world.

Name three books you want to read but haven't gotten to yet.

Robert A. Caro's *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (Knopf, 1974) is definitely on my list. Having grown up in Queens, near the Long Island Expressway, I find the subject of how New York City became the city I grew up with extremely fascinating, and Caro is an excellent writer. I'd also like to read Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), which has been sitting on my bookshelf for a couple of years but will teach me a lot more if I ever open it. I'd also like to read *Moby Dick* (1851). It was the only assigned high school reading I skipped. I clearly wasn't enjoying it, so I concluded I must be missing the point. I'm sure I would like it now.

What book recommendations do you have for young readers?

I recommend *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Flatland* for their playful nature but seriously clever content. I also recently read Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* (1948), which I think would be a fabulously sympathetic book for young adults (girls especially) who find themselves isolated by curiosity or intelligence.

Gödel, Escher, Bach was great when I was in high school. It might be too technical for true nonscientists, but I think some will find the interplay of the different threads fascinating.

What science book recommendations do you have for nonscientists?

I think Tom Levenson's *Einstein in Berlin* (Bantam Books, 2003) is a great book that captures both history and scientific developments during a fascinating time. I recently read it when I was attending an Einstein conference in Berlin.

I'm not sure *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (by Jared Diamond, W. W. Norton, 1997) is, strictly speaking, a science book. But it asks and answers many fascinating questions and contains some truly eye-opening ideas.

The Copernican Revolution (Harvard University Press, 1957), the antecedent to Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is another great book. It tells the fascinating story of how Copernicus's ideas eventually took over, but how difficult it was to make the dramatic

transition they implied. The earlier book was an excellent example of the ideas Kuhn focuses on in his later book.

Name one book in your discipline that you would recommend for scientists outside your field. Explain your choice.

Steve Weinberg's *The First Three Minutes* is definitely my recommendation (and I have recommended it many times). It tells a fascinating story directly and intelligently, without feeling the need to embellish it. I like the respect it has for the reader.

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