

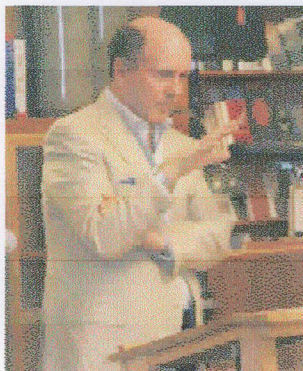
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LIVING YOUR WELL-READ LIFE™

Writers on Reading

Mining Footnotes with Simon Winchester

by Mim Harrison



Simon Winchester was in the bath when he had his second epiphany as a reader. It was the early 90s, and he was reading a book he had plucked from his New York editor's bookshelf, at her invitation, called *Chasing the Sun: Dictionaries and the Men Who Made Them*. The footnote was what caught his eye: a casual mention of a "deranged American lunatic murderer" named W.C. Miner who had been a longtime contributor to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Though he didn't realize it when he drew his bath, Simon was baptizing what would become one of his most popular books, *The Professor and the Madman*.

A footnote about a "deranged lunatic murderer" led him to write *The Professor and the Madman*.

His first reading epiphany had occurred in the late 1960s in a British Consul library in Uganda, where Simon was halfheartedly pursuing his recent Oxford training as a geologist. *Coronation Everest*, by a fellow Brit named James Morris, was an account of the 1953 British expedition to the summit of Everest. As with *Chasing the Sun*, it wasn't just the story that captivated Simon. It was the idea that he, like Morris, might be able to pursue a career as a travel writer.

"It was a moment of Pauline conversion," says Simon. "Reading *Coronation Everest* changed my life." (Footnote: Simon did, indeed, become a travel writer.)

To this day he still mines a book's footnotes and bibliographies like a geologist boring through rocks in search of a gem. His own bibliography for *Krakatoa* included works that dealt with the San Francisco earthquake. "The earthquake had occurred in 1906, which meant that 2006 would be the one-hundredth anniversary," says Simon. Thus was *A Crack in the Edge of the World* conceived, and published a few months before the centenary.

His father, a POW during World War II, urged Simon to pursue what had kept him sane: reading.

"My father was determined from day one that I would read," Simon recalls. Dickens loomed large in the small boy's reading world. "Dickens was a reporter of London life," says Simon, who would later work for the English newspaper *The Guardian*, "and it helped in my becoming a reporter."

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Taken prisoner during the Falklands War, Simon was rationed one book to read, which he read over and over—and never again.

But his father had a more urgent reason for wanting his son to be a reader. He had spent part of World War II in a German POW camp. Reading and keeping a diary kept him sane.

In an eerie parallel, Simon was also imprisoned, during the Falklands War in 1982. He was in Argentina as a reporter, but the Argentinean officials were convinced that this

Englishman, whose country they were fighting, was a spy.

"There was only one book in English," says Simon, "and the prison guard gave it to me. In desperation, I read it over and over again." The book was one by Harold Robbins. "I've never read him since," Simon adds.

But he has willingly read *George Perec's Life: A User's Manual* again and again. "Every book I write aspires to be as good as that," he says. A self-confessed crossword junkie, he devours writers such as Anthony Burgess and Saul Bellow because "I love reading that introduces me to weird and wonderful words." He also loves to both write and read standing up. Ever vigilant, of course, for the fortuitous footnote.

He loves Burgess and Bellow for their "weird and wonderful words."

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Simon Winchester was a speaker at the Books & Books at Levenger author series on April 13, 2005. His most recent book is *A Crack in the Edge of the World: America and the Great California Earthquake of 1906* (HarperCollins).

Mim Harrison is the editor of Levenger Press and the senior writer for Levenger.

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