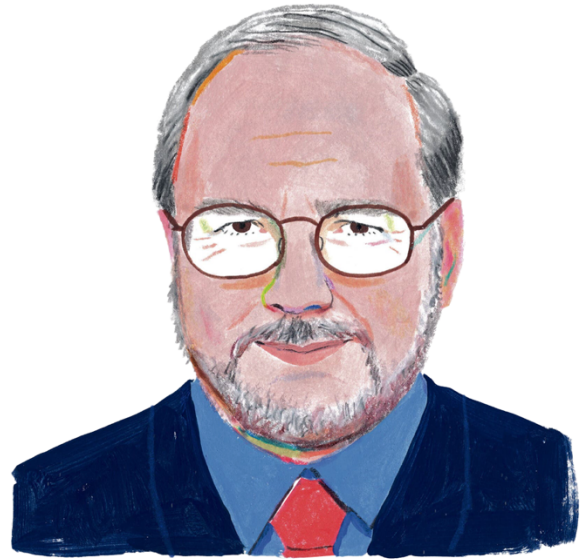


The New York Times

BY THE BOOK

Rupert Holmes Can't Read While Music Is Playing

"The resulting cacophony interferes with the author's rhythms and rests," says the musician and crime novelist, whose latest book is "Murder Your Employer." "Like listening to Beethoven in one ear and 'Roll Over Beethoven' in the other."



What books are on your nightstand?

"Haikus," by Kobayashi Issa, that most earthborn and humble of the one-breath poets; "Collected Stories," by Willa Cather; and, of course, "The Maneuver," by Heimlich. Just in case I choke on popcorn in bed.

What's the last great book you read?

I recently decided to reread every novel I was obliged to read in junior and senior high. Each time, I've found myself thinking, "Oh, so *that's* what this was about!" The latest is a period piece: "1984." It made me wistful for my youth, when the distant future was something I could barely envision, instead of what I wake up to each day. And yet I also felt the disturbing sensation that I'd been completely brought up to date on current events.

Are there any classics that you only recently read for the first time?

"Les Misérables." I and the title were as one.

Describe your ideal reading experience (when, where, what, how).

Blissfully snowbound near a low-burning fire, adrift in any book where a character intones: "But that means the killer must be one of us."

What's your favorite book no one else has heard of?

An 1873 edition of Dickens's famously uncompleted "The Mystery of Edwin Drood" — completed by Mr. Dickens *after* his death (!) via the spirit-pen of a shameless medium named Thomas P. James of Brattleboro, Vt. This enterprising scoundrel even announces Mr. Dickens's *next* novel: "The Life and Adventures of Bockley Wickleheap."

Which writers — novelists, playwrights, critics, journalists, poets — working today do you admire most?

Far too many to list here, many being close friends unless I omitted one in which case they would no longer be. (Phew, that was close.) So I refuse to answer on the grounds of my property or anywhere else for that matter.

Besides books, you've also written music — including the hit song "Escape (The Pina Colada Song)" and the Broadway musical "The Mystery of Edwin Drood." Who are your favorite musician-writers?

I think all good writers *are* musicians, rendering the sharps, flats, squeaks and clams of their characters in a score all their own — so much so that I find it impossible to read a book while music is playing. The resulting cacophony interferes with the author's rhythms and rests, like listening to Beethoven in one ear and "Roll Over Beethoven" in the other. So I appreciate the riffs of Dorothy Parker and Charlie Parker, Agatha Christie and June Christy, Madeline Miller and Glenn Miller, Zadie Smith and Bessie Smith.

And what are the best books about music you've read?

"The Agony of Modern Music," by Henry Pleasants, altered the course of my life in high school by encouraging me, a classical musician, to embrace the "illegitimate" music forms of the day.

Do you count any books as guilty pleasures?

It's a pity we must use that phrase to avoid being ridiculed for something which, left to our own devices, we would thoroughly enjoy without the slightest shred of shame. It's tantamount to saying you eat dark chocolate for its flavonols. So, yes, I can enjoy turning the pages of a Perry Mason in one breathless sitting until I realize it's the same book I read last year.

Has a book ever brought you closer to another person, or come between you?

Two books brought me closer to one person. The late David Corcoran, revered editor of the Science Times section of this newspaper he so loved, was valedictorian of our Nyack High School senior class and a friend; that same spring of '65, he played a lead role in the first play I ever wrote. When my first novel, "Where the Truth Lies," came out in 2003, my publisher had made copies available to Times employees, and David claimed one, called me,

and soon we lunched near the Gray Lady, meeting again after nearly 40 years. This became a recurring event. At this time, he was honing his craft as a poet and would often share his latest effort, to which I would always send a three- or four-page appraisal, emphasis on “praise,” as I’d quickly become a devotee of his captivating work. In the fall of 2018, David told me he was combating acute myeloid leukemia. The next spring, he entrusted me and a few other friends with his collected poems. I had the dread that he would never live to see their publication nor read any laudatory reviews of his ineffably sensitive work. So, each day I sent him a lengthy appreciation of one poem, highlighting its artfulness and haunting spirit. David wrote back to say these missives had become a rare bright spot in each increasingly difficult day. Toward the end, his wife, Bonnie Stetson (a younger Nyack classmate of ours), took to reading these sincerely felt paeans to him — until Aug. 4, 2019. Thankfully, the collection he’d shared with me was published last year under the title he’d chosen for it, “Midflight” (Four Way Books). I was privileged to write its foreword. So: two high school students brought closer in their later years by a book each had written.

What’s the most interesting thing you’ve learned from a book recently?

In Japan, condemned prisoners — waiting from six months to six years for the enactment of their death sentence — are notified of the date of their execution only that day. Imagine “lights out” each evening, not knowing what news might await you in the morning.

Which subjects do you wish more authors would write about?

The incalculable odds of being born a sentient human being. We might have been a fleck of silica in space, a strand of algae or nothing at all; instead, we’re able to observe the working universe and speak with others about this incalculable experience. Some people accept their life as if they were born at a deli counter with a numbered tag in hand, ready to claim their sandwich. Yet simply reading this (or any) text means you’ve won the grand lottery of the cosmos. I wish there was a book, or better yet, a mandatory course between kindergarten and first grade called Your Unimaginable Luck to Exist.

Which genres do you especially enjoy reading?

I’ve been an equal opportunity enjoyer of all typefaces since I was 5. Waiting in my father’s car while he taught music lessons, I found the operating manual of the 1955 Plymouth Belvedere gripping. Likewise, the backs of all cereal boxes. I suppose I’m most partial to fair play mysteries where you see the same clues as the detective. But lacking anything better, a pamphlet about deer ticks can keep me occupied quite some while. It’s said that Charles Dickens would allow no stranger to be a bore. I feel that way about reading matter.

And which do you avoid?

Autobiographies. If you don’t mind, I’d like a second opinion.

Which books got you hooked on crime fiction?

“Freddy the Detective” (Freddy’s a pig, BTW), the Hardy Boys and other Grosset & Dunlaps by the yard, “The Thinking Machine,” by Jacques Futrelle, “The Thirty-Nine Steps,” “The New Adventures of Ellery Queen,” “The A.B.C. Murders,” “The Complete Sherlock Holmes,” “The Complete Father Brown Stories” and “I, the Jury.” All before I turned 16.

What’s the most terrifying book you ever read?

“MS-DOS for Dummies.” No, really, books don’t generally terrify me. You can always close them, whereas at the movies the terrifying thing will happen even if you look away. It’s a Schrödinger’s cat affair. When I read “A Night to Remember,” by Walter Lord, I put the book down when a lookout first sights the iceberg. I expect the Titanic to dock in New York any day now.

Who’s your favorite fictional detective?

That’s elementary, but Father Brown is a close second.

Best villain?

You might expect Professor Moriarty, but he directly appears in only one of the 56 canonical Holmes stories. I’m currently partial to the triumvirate of villains in “Murder Your Employer.” Imagine how despicable they must be if readers root for their would-be killers to succeed at deleting them.

What makes for a good mystery?

Characters whose motivations are difficult to anticipate, some of whom conspire and lie behind a friendly facade. *Kind of like real life, you know?* Then someone’s existence is cut short for reasons and by persons unknown. Suspicions tilt toward Suspect A; Suspect A becomes the next victim. Anarchy reigns. Enters the detective who makes sense of everything: You at last understand what it’s all been about, good triumphs over evil, justice is done. *Kind of not like real life, you know?*

How do you organize your books?

Not alphabetically or Dewey-Decimally but shelved by the decades in which I was first privileged to read them: child, boy, tumultuous teen, young adult, mourning father, humbled human. To quote my chosen namesake Rupert Brooke: “These I have loved.”

What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

“Be My Guest,” the life story of Conrad Hilton, a paperback that used to reside in the bedside drawer of every Hilton hotel. When I was touring in the ’70s and ’80s, if the hour was late and I had nothing to read (the Gideon Bible contained far too many senseless killings for my liking), it was either “Be My Guest” or the Yellow Pages. The Gideons International asked you to leave their Bible where you found it; Hilton implored you to take their story with you. I did, as a memento of the road.

What’s the best book you’ve ever received as a gift?

A copy of my first novel, “Where the Truth Lies,” inscribed by Colin Firth, co-star of Atom Egoyan’s screen adaptation of same, in which Colin wrote that he feared he would be the victim of “novel envy.”

How have your reading tastes changed over time?

I used to read Agatha Christie and John Dickson Carr for their twists and revelations, as if taking a seat on a heart-stopping roller coaster. Now I read mysteries more for their characters and motivations. Many of the best are misshapen love stories involving a macabre (and for one participant, often unwitting) ménage à trois. See Christie, Highsmith, Cain.

You’re organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

1.) Shakespeare, to whom my demand would be, “Just who do you think you are?” with the fervent hope of a definitive answer; 2.) Robert Benchley, before whom I’d kneel and say, “How do I begin to thank you?” 3.) Anne Frank, to let her know her voice would be heard and that she would be remembered.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good:

Every well-intended book I read as a boy that tried to explain sex to adolescents. I thought, “Surely it must be better than *that!*”

What book did you feel as if you were supposed to like, and didn’t?

“The Catcher in the Rye.” I was the same age as its protagonist when I read it and I felt the book’s author was a 30-something ventriloquist using Holden Caulfield as his dummy.

Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

“On the Road,” by Jack Kerouac. Again, in my teens. Fun, but I gradually got the feeling it didn’t matter where I stopped.

Do you do much reading by way of research for your books?

I savor the literally years of research I put into my period mysteries: “Murder Your Employer” (set in the early ’50s), “Swing” (set in the late ’30s); but when complimented on the research for my mid-70s show business mystery “Where the Truth Lies,” I respond: “What research? I was there.”

What books are you embarrassed not to have read yet?

The New York State Driver’s Manual. Don’t worry, I’ve never been behind a wheel.

What do you plan to read next?

The final chapters, as I type them, of “Murder Your Mate,” Volume 2 of “The McMasters Guide to Homicide.” I think I may have guessed the ending.