

SCIENTISTS' NIGHTSTAND

The Bookshelf talks with Vaclav Smil

Vaclav Smil is a distinguished professor in the Faculty of Environment at the University of Manitoba. His most recent book is *Transforming the Twentieth Century: Technical Innovations and Their Consequences* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

I am an incorrigible interdisciplinarian. I was trained in a broad range of basic natural sciences (biology, chemistry, geography, geology), and then branched into energy engineering, population and economic studies and history. For the past 30 years my main effort has gone into writing books that offer new, interdisciplinary perspectives on inherently complex, messy realities. I wrote the first comprehensive books on China's energy and on China's environment, and I have also written a number of wide-ranging analyses of global energy, books on global ecology, food production and most recently on the technical foundations of modern civilization (more on all of them on my [Web site](#)). Right now I am writing my 24th book, *Global Catastrophes and Trends: The Next 50 Years*, a sweeping look at sudden events (ranging from volcanic mega-eruptions to viral pandemics) as well as some mercilessly unfolding trends (population aging, great economic power shift, global warming).

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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?

Very easy to answer: I have kept the list of books I read (in order to be able to dip into some of them again without tormenting my memory or blindly searching) ever since we came from Europe to the United States in 1969. The list contains only novels, poetry, biographies, history, linguistics and arts books, *not* science books I read for my work. Here are the books I read between early July and late September. I tend to read in bunches: When I discover a new author or a new topic, I tend to do a systematic sweep of other available writings, and so the summer of 2006 was taken mostly by the first biographies of Mozart (both third or fourth rereads from my collection of Mozartiana) and by Jonathan Coe (a new discovery for me) and Naguib Mahfouz (I began rereading one of his books a few days before he died, then read more).

- Friedrich Schlichtegroll: *Mozarts Leben* (Bärenreiter, 1974)
- Franz Xaver Niemetschek: *Lebensbeschreibung des k.k. Kapellmeisters W.A. Mozart* (Deutscher Verlag für Musik, VEB, 1978)
- Jonathan Coe: *The Winshaw Legacy* (Knopf, 1995), *The Rotter's Club* (Viking, 2001), *The House of Sleep* (Knopf, 1998)
- Naguib Mahfouz: *Midaq Alley* (Heinemann Educational, 1975), *Children of the Alley* (Doubleday, 1996), *Akhenaten* (Anchor Books, 2000), *The Thief and the Dogs* (American University in Cairo Press, 1984), *The Beggar* (American University in Cairo Press, 1986), *Autumn Quail* (American University in Cairo Press, 1985), *Arabian Nights and Days* (Doubleday, 1995)
- Ryu Murakami: *69* (1993, Kodansha Europe)
- Junichiro Tanizaki: *The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi* (1935) and *Arrowroot* (1931)
- Jake Morrissey: *The Genius in the Design* (Morrow, 2005)
- Stefan Grundmann: *The Architecture of Rome* (Edition Axel Menges, 1998)
- Ian McEwan: *Black Dogs* (Nan A. Talese, 1992)

Right now I am in the middle of Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul* (Knopf, 2005).

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

Perhaps the only time I do not read (because I prepare breakfast, then set down the sentences that have been running through my head just after waking up, and take the first run through my e-mail) is before 7 or 8 a.m. Otherwise, I read in snatches through the day, in between the spurts of my writing, after lunch, after dinner (in our kitchen, in the living room, in my library), late at night in bed (and as much as possible on airplanes: I cannot sleep aloft, so reading shortens the airborne suffering).

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

Given the amount of reading I do (science books aside, I go through 60 to 90 novels, history, arts and biography books a year), this would have to be a longish list, not just a handful of names. For the sheer joy of reading, for appreciating the craft of writing, for immersing oneself into intricately constructed mental universes, I still look for a complex novel, classic or modern, but tilt toward contemporary. Hence my list would contain authors ranging from Émile Zola (definitely my 19th-century favorite) to David Lodge and John Mortimer (two of my favorite modern Brits) and T. C. Boyle (my favorite modern American). And at least half of it would be non-Western writers: I have read just about everything by the still-advancing echelons of Indian authors, from Vikram Seth to Rohinton Mistry and from Shashi Tharoor to Amitav Ghosh, as well as by the two great Arab fabulists (Mahfouz and Amin Malouf) and by a score of Japanese writers ranging from Tanizaki to Haruki Murakami.

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

Impossible to reduce this to three. But there is one book I have been rereading (usually large random chunks of it, not cover to cover) once every 12 to 18 months for decades: Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), for its inimitable combination of sublime and mundane, poetic and scientific, thrill and repose.

What book has influenced you most? Explain how.

Again, impossible to reduce to a single volume. Influenced in what way? Emotionally, I was much taken by Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle* (Harper & Row, 1968), the book I could not read as a citizen of the westernmost province of the Soviet Empire and read in the original right after we came to Pennsylvania in 1969. I have always been awed by Osip Mandelstam's poetry and by the parables of Franz Kafka and Jose Luis Borges. I am no less awed by Zola's ability to render so many milieus with such a verisimilitude, and by Melville's skill to pull so many disparate strands into such a magnificent volume.

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

Seven volumes, not just three: Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1927). During the 1990s I had gone systematically through Zola's massive Rougon-Macquart cycle, in total a much bigger task than reading Proust's search, but somehow I never plunged into Proust.

What book recommendations do you have for young readers?

Be eclectic: try many authors, topics, fields and epochs. This is the only way to discover books that you will remember. And do it on your own: take recommendations of others as mere suggestions.

What science book recommendations do you have for nonscientists?

Stay away from highly touted bestsellers that claim to make you understand matters such as black holes or DNA sequencing: they will not. Stay away from books that appear in fashion-chasing clusters: excellent recent examples are books on nano-everything, on hydrogen economy and on global warming. Simply explore, go on book Web sites, search and buy: Paperbacks are cheap, and if you do not like them after the first few pages, give them away or just recycle the paper.

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

Again, an impossible reduction to a single item, made even more impossible because of my interdisciplinary work. For a pathbreaking (not easy to read but highly rewarding) look at energy and the environment, Howard Odum's classic, *Environment, Power and Society* (Wiley-Interscience, 1971). For grasping the diversity of life, another classic, Lynn Margulis and Karlene V. Schwartz, *Five Kingdoms* (W. H. Freeman, 1982).