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Francis S. Collins: By the Book

Though he believes in “the harmony of science and faith,” the director of the National Institutes of Health and the author of “The Language of God” says he keeps books by Dawkins and Hitchens on his shelves: “Iron sharpens iron.”

What’s the best book you’ve read so far this year?

I found “The Creative Destruction of Medicine,” by Eric Topol, to be very provocative. The author points out a deluge of dramatic advances in diverse areas of health care, including genomics, personalized medicine, the use of cellphone technology in health applications (so-called mHealth), new imaging approaches and new devices. Eric makes the case that the full utilization of these powerful technologies will require a major overhaul of our current system of delivering medical care.

Who are your favorite science writers? Anyone new and good we should pay attention to?

I have been very taken by the thoughtful essays on the profound flaws of our health care system penned by the surgeon Atul Gawande. But for spinning a yarn about the history of medical advances, there has been no better book in recent memory than “The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer,” by Siddhartha Mukherjee. For delightfully quirky descriptions of bizarre neurological syndromes that teach us a lot about how the brain works, there is no match for Oliver Sacks.

You have written several books on the intersection of religion and science. What other books on the subject would you recommend?

I’m happy to say that there is a growing list of thoughtful commentaries on the harmony that can be found between these worldviews. For conservative Christians, “Coming to Peace With Science,” by Darrel Falk, and “Origins,” by Deborah and Loren Haarsma, are accessible and reassuring reads. Slightly edgier but very well-argued perspectives are provided by “Finding Darwin’s God,” by Kenneth Miller, and Karl Giberson’s “Saving Darwin.” For those who are interested in the range of options that can blend science and faith, I found Denis Alexander’s book “Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?” to be an exceptionally well-articulated synthesis. And if you are looking for a pastor’s perspective on faith and reason, have a look at “The Reason for God,” by the Rev. Tim Keller of New York’s Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

What are the best books for laypeople about genetics and the most recent developments in the field?

Perhaps immodestly, I'd recommend my own book, "The Language of Life: DNA and the Revolution in Personalized Medicine." Other well-written descriptions include "The \$1,000 Genome," by Kevin Davies, and Misha Angrist's "Here Is a Human Being."

Are there particular books on bioethics or medical controversies you'd recommend?

Nothing compares in terms of recent impact on society (not to mention the number of weeks on the New York Times best-seller list) with "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks," by Rebecca Skloot. Her book tells the story of how the first immortal human cell line was derived without consent from an African-American woman more than 60 years ago, and how bioethics standards have evolved since then.

What are your favorite novels of all time?

My own favorites are mostly based on the effects they had on me when I was growing up — maybe because I had more time to read then. As a child growing up on a farm, we had no television — instead, my father would read novels out loud to us after dinner. My favorite was Charles Dickens's "The Pickwick Papers," but "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn" were on the shortlist. Later, as a budding scientist in high school, I read "1984" when it still seemed like a distant future vision, and worried about where science might be taking us. Now, almost 30 years after that scary date, I'm happy to see that Orwell's scenarios didn't happen.

What kinds of stories are you drawn to? Any you steer clear of?

I like biography, auto- or otherwise. I was deeply moved by Eric Metaxas' biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and loved "Einstein: His Life and Universe," by Walter Isaacson. Of course, for a well-told yarn of scientific competition, blind alleys, dirty tricks and triumph, there is no substitute for Jim Watson's "The Double Helix." As for what I steer clear of, that would include anything involving shoddy science and/or self-indulgent writing.

What books might we be surprised to find on your shelves?

Considering my own stance on the satisfying harmony of science and faith, you might be surprised to find on my shelves nearly everything written by Richard Dawkins (including "The God Delusion") and my late friend Christopher Hitchens (including "God Is Not Great"). One must dig deeply into opposing points of view in order to know whether your own position remains defensible. Iron sharpens iron.

What book has had the greatest impact on you?

As an atheist evolving to agnosticism, and seeking answers to whether or not belief in God is potentially rational, my life was turned upside down 35 years ago by reading C. S. Lewis's "Mere

Christianity.”

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

He’s a busy guy — so it wouldn’t be a whole book. It would be a booklet entitled “Leadership in Decline: Assessing U.S. International Competitiveness in Biomedical Research.” Published through a collaboration between United for Medical Research and the nonpartisan Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, it documents how America is steadily losing its leadership in biomedical research, with serious consequences for our economy and the health of our nation.

You were brought up on a farm in the Shenandoah Valley and home-schooled until the sixth grade. What kinds of books did you read as a child?

I was a regular at the public library, and I read everything written by Frank Baum — including “The Wonderful Wizard of Oz,” of course — which, at age 7, I turned into a full script that was performed on the stage. But there were 14 Oz books, and I loved them all. I also loved cowboy books by Zane Grey, the Doctor Dolittle series, and all of the Winnie-the-Pooh books from A. A. Milne.

Did you identify with any fictional characters growing up? Who was your literary hero?

Oh yes. The Cowardly Lion from “The Wizard of Oz.” I had my own childhood fears and nightmares (doesn’t every kid?), and I related to the Lion’s surprising admission of fearfulness — but I also noticed that the Lion was actually remarkably courageous and loyal when called upon. He just didn’t understand (until Oz) that courage is not the absence of fear, it’s taking noble action in the face of fear. I liked that. (And I got to play that part in the stage production.)

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel you were supposed to like, and didn’t? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

Sorry, Dan — but all of the Dan Brown books have left me agitated. I keep trying to like them, but the subtle distortions of history get in the way.

If you could meet any writer, dead or alive, who would it be? What would you want to know?

That’s a tough one. But I think I would go with Luke the physician, the author of the third Gospel. I’d want to have a long conversation over coffee (or better yet, over a nice pinot grigio) to learn everything about him — as a doctor, a follower of Jesus and a gifted writer.

If you could be any character from literature who would you be?

I'm tempted to go with Martin Arrowsmith (the title character of Sinclair Lewis's 1925 novel) — an early model of the modern medical researcher.

**What book have you always meant to read and haven't gotten around to yet?
Anything you feel embarrassed never to have read?**

The list is very, very long. We could start with Dostoyevsky.

What do you plan to read next?

"C. S. Lewis: A Life" — a new biography from Alister McGrath.



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