



A Real Page-Turner

NPR's Maureen Corrigan on the reading life.

If you're the kind of rabid reader who follows critical opinion, you've likely heard of Maureen Corrigan. A reviewer, author and professor, Corrigan reviews books for NPR's "Fresh Air," writes a mystery column for the *Washington Post* and teaches literature at Georgetown University; she's also written reviews for *The New York Times*, *The Village Voice* and others. Her memoir, *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading: Finding and Losing Myself in Books*, combines analysis of Corrigan's favorite genres and books with tales from her life, including stories about her father, her career path and her trip to China to adopt her daughter. Via email, Corrigan answered a few questions about the life of a nationally known critic.

What was the first book you reviewed for "Fresh Air"?

The first piece I did for "Fresh Air" wasn't a book review. I had done an exposé about my experiences as a grader for the AP English Exam given by the Educational Testing Service. That exposé ran in *The Village Voice*, and one of the producers at "Fresh Air" had read it and invited me to boil down the piece and rewrite it for radio. ... It took me weeks to rewrite the piece and make it more comprehensible to an audience who was just going to absorb it "by ear." After I finally recorded the piece, I was told I had a good voice for radio and I was invited to suggest some books for possible review on air (I had been reviewing books for a few years for *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*). ... I was very lucky in that "Fresh Air"'s book critic at the time, John Leonard, was very generous and willing to let me have air time as a fellow book reviewer. And the "Fresh Air" folks were very patient with me as I learned how to write and speak on radio by trial and error — which is probably the most effective way to learn.

How do you decide which book or books to talk about each time you're on?

I get catalogues from all the publishing houses at the start of every season. I also get *Publishers Weekly*, the organ of the publishing world, every week. From those two sources (and recommendations, and general buzz in the literary world) I put together a list about three months in advance of upcoming books that look promising. ... We try to cover the waterfront on "Fresh Air" so I like to alternate "big books" with

books put out by smaller publishing houses; fiction with non-fiction; high literature with genre fiction; etc. If Terry Gross is interviewing an author, I usually won't do a review of that author's book since ... we like to spread out our coverage as much as possible. Finally, I receive between 50 and 75 books a week sent to me by publishers hoping for a review on "Fresh Air."

How do you manage your time, between "Fresh Air" and teaching and everything else? How does your reading for the radio inform your teaching, and vice versa?

I get up very early (around 4 am) on weekdays to have a solid block of three hours to read, write, think, prepare for classes. I frequently incorporate great new books that I've read into the courses I teach at Georgetown. This year, for instance, I'm asking students in my freshman lit course (which deals with political issues in 20th century America) to read Philip Roth's superb novel *The Plot Against America*. Students in my autobiography class are being directed to *The Tender Bar* by J.R. Moehringer. And I think teaching and regularly rereading the classics enriches my critical responses to new books.

Was the structure of *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading* — three central essays surrounded by smaller pieces — something you planned from the beginning, or did those main themes appear as you wrote?

The structure of *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading* evolved as I was writing it. I wanted to think about how a lifetime of serious reading had changed my life for the better and, occasionally, for the worse (see the chapter on graduate school in English!). ... I found that the book really took off for me when I began to think backwards: starting with my most recent adventures in reading (women's extreme adventure tales) and reaching back through my discovery of American hard-boiled detective fiction (Hammett, Chandler and all those tough guys) in my 20s, and, finally, my earliest love affairs with reading as a Catholic school girl in New York City who read a lot of martyr tales along with Nancy Drew novels. **CW**

Maureen Corrigan speaks at the downtown Eugene Library at 7 pm Thursday, Sept. 21.

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