The booth bookshelf

Ever wonder what conference interpreters read in their leisure time? Here's a sample across four continents.

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I recently found myself sharing a booth with Phil Smith in Wellington and our conversation turned to books – where to find them in the city and what we had been reading lately. My supply is a tad limited in Bangkok and I was looking forward to browsing in an English-speaking country. Phil gave me an excellent suggestion: The Impressionist by Hari Kunzru. A nice thick tome it was too, certain to last me several nights and the long flight home.

That night an idea came to me. “Hey Phil,” I said the first thing the following morning, “how about an article on what interpreters read? I have the title and now we only need the rest.” The strong New Zealand coffee (“a long black” I think it was) hadn’t yet kicked him in the head and he actually thought it was a good idea. We quickly put together an international hit list of colleagues who would later get an email asking them to name one or two books they had read over the previous three months. Yes, we gave them a loophole – they didn’t have to cite the very last book they had read, probably a blockbuster bestseller picked up in an airport convenience shop.

At this point many of you are thinking, “Don’t they have anything better to do in the English booth?” That impertinent question does not merit a response. Instead we offer you the results of our very unscientific survey on the reading habits of conference interpreters. And, oh yes, some of these books are available at your nearest airport.

Masaomi Kondo – Tokyo

Recently I have read three books by science writer Richard Preston: (1) The Hot Zone (available in paperback from Anchor); (2) The Cobra Event (also in paperback, from Ballantine), and (3) The Demon in the Freezer (now only in hardcover from Random House).

The first is a non-fiction work about an outbreak of Ebola virus in Marburg, Germany (therefore the name Marburg for a strain of that virus), and also in the USA in a town where monkeys from the Philippines were kept. The second is a work of fiction, depicting bio-terrorist attacks on a few New Yorkers, the virus used identified as a GM strain of smallpox virus that defies the existing vaccine. The third is again a work of fiction about a smallpox virus that is supposed to be under wraps, but …
Cristina del Castillo – Mexico City

I am now reading *Devoirs et Délices* by Tzvetan Todorov, an interview with Catherine Portevin in which the author talks about his life and work. Most interesting and inspiring. Recently Todorov published his study of the 20th Century, *Mémoire du mal. Tentation du bien*...don't miss it.

I am also revisiting Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* is more than a learned reply to why it is good to read and think and wonder about the phenomena of life, even for a nun in the 17th century. Feminists have liked to call this book "the first feminist manifesto" in Latin America, but I think it is much more profound. And it is beautifully written.

Ayelet Najpaz - Tel Aviv

*A woman unknown (Voices from a Spanish life)* by Lucia Graves (yes, daughter of Robert). Raised in a trilingual environment (English, Spanish and the Majorcan variant of Catalan), this writer and translator describes life in Franco-era Spain, especially from a woman's point of view. Published by Counterpoint (Washington DC).

Robin Setton – Geneva

Not always being privileged to work on meetings as interesting as those on Luigi and Phil's calendar, for me the ideal read provides both escape and new insight into reality, a combination which you can sometimes get from history or science fiction. *Les croisades vues par les Arabes* by Amin Maalouf is an absorbing read with obvious contemporary relevance. William Gibson's books, starting with *Neuromancer* and *Count Zero*, project the most hair-raising novelties of the last two decades (the Net, genetics, synthespians, etc.) about eighty years into the future. There's no relief: pieces of his world can be seen falling into place in today's headlines ('US to counterattack in cyberspace').

Elsa Michael – Brussels

*Russendisko* by Wladimir Kaminer. Pocketbook, Goldmann Verlag.

This is a very entertaining collection of anecdotes and mini short-stories about the chaotic and exciting life of Berlin. The author, a Russian Jewish “refugee” living in Berlin since 1989, writes in a simple, fluid and very ironic style. The ideal book to read during a 4 to 6 hour flight… and laugh aloud!


A book of high intellectual standard to read and digest in calm, it presents an analysis of the Spaniard’s character, taking autobiographies as its source material. De Miguel deserves his fame as one of Spain’s foremost sociologists, and he writes beautifully as well.

Phil Smith – Birmingham
Phil Pullman also writes books ostensibly for children. The books are set in parallel worlds and deal with the struggle against a religious authority that wants to hold one of those worlds in thrall. These are much darker, more multilayered and morally complex books than Harry Potter. And you can lose yourself in a great story.

Vincent Buck - Brussels

1421: the Year China Discovered the World by Gavin Menzies.

Great story of an emperor sending his fleet around the world, not to conquer as usual, but to discover and learn.

Hong Jiang - Nairobi


In this book first published in 1906, Emily Ruete writes with affection and elegance about her sultan family and the warm island where she lived before her legendary marriage to a German businessman that took her to Germany for 19 years. Her life as a royal dignitary and her encounters with western culture, hardly rivaled by her female Arabian contemporaries, gave her a unique perspective of the cultural differences of the orient and the west. I was particularly impressed by her insightful cultural comparisons that still remain valid today. The translation makes pleasant reading, the translator unknown.

Maria Cecilia Navas – Bogota


Sergio Ramirez was vice-president of Nicaragua during Daniel Ortega's administration and he participated actively in the Sandinista revolution. Here he candidly describes the mistakes made and the reasons why their romantic ideas about changing a corrupt regime ended in a disaster. It is not a novel but its very human touch makes it an easy read.

La Defensa Apasionada del Idioma Español by Alex Grijelmo. Punto de lectura (Grupo Santillana) 1998.

Very well written and quite amusing, this is an actual defense of the Spanish language against "serious attacks," mainly from English.

Luigi Luccarelli – Bangkok

An imaginative high school student falls in love with his French teacher in 1960s Warsaw – and lives to write about it.


An American army deserter hides away for five years in Saigon in the room of his Vietnamese girlfriend. The south is about to fall. What do they do?

**Editor’s note:** Our special 50th Anniversary Award for Attentiveness goes to Vincent Buck, who took our request to provide 20 to 30 words quite seriously and came in right on target.

**Recommended citation format:**