

Book Case

Dr John Purvis
6 favourites from my bookshelf.

THE AGE OF WONDER

Richard Holmes (Harper Collins, 2008).

Holmes explores the relationship between the Arts and Science through the eyes of Joseph Banks. Banks began his scientific career as botanist on Captain Cook's expedition to Tahiti (a somewhat erotic journey) and rose to become President of the Royal Society where he nurtured the blossoming careers of William and Caroline Herschel and Humphrey Davy. The Romantic poets and authors of those days were fascinated by "natural philosophy" as science was then known – Coleridge and Davy got high on nitrous oxide together whilst Mary Shelley wrote "Frankenstein – the Modern Prometheus" in response to experiments on "galvanism". A fascinating book.



THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO THE HERSCHEL OBJECTS

Mark Bratton (Cambridge, 2011).

William Herschel started his working life as a composer (CDs and MP3s still available) but as 18th Century gentlefolk often did, turned to something else. He devoted his life to astronomy and became famous for discovering Uranus (Uranus was father of Saturn who was father of Jupiter). With Royal backing, he built enormous telescopes and began systematically imaging the heavens. His



sister, Caroline, specialised in comet hunting and possibly was the first female to have solo letters published in the *Transactions of the Royal Society*. This beautifully detailed book lists each of the 2500 or so, galaxies, star clusters and planetary nebulae that they documented. An invaluable resource for modern day amateurs looking for something more challenging than Charles Messier's list.

THIS GAME OF GHOSTS

Joe Simpson (Vintage, 1994)

I'm not a climber but I enjoy reading books about it and this is one of the best. It's an autobiography of Joe Simpson – his previous book "Touching the Void" detailed how he survived when his friend deliberately cut Joe's rope in atrocious conditions in the Andes. Joe crawled back to base camp with severe injuries.

This is more of an insight into the psyche of climbers and the strange camaraderie they develop. Death stalks this book – as well as a fierce need for the high places. If you treat extreme sportsmen or the military and find it difficult to understand why they put their lives on the line then this may help.



THE PLACES IN BETWEEN

Rory Stewart (Picador, 2004)

I first came across Rory when he narrated a TV documentary on the life of T.E. Lawrence – it was clear that this was someone with the deepest knowledge and respect for the East and appreciation of the acute sense of mistrust engendered by the West's past mistakes.

This book documents Rory's walk across Afghanistan in 2002 accompanied only by a stray dog. He encounters nobility and generosity as well



as suspicion and warlords who would do anything to maintain their grip on their people. Only his ability to speak local languages and knowledge of Eastern culture keeps him alive. Rory is a politician now with a special brief for foreign affairs, perhaps one of the few who has first-hand knowledge of what he is talking about.

ANGELMAKER

Nick Harkaway (Heinemann, 2012)

I enjoy a good adventure story. This is set in modern London but is haunted by unresolved secrets from the past. There is much about old family trades such as watchmakers and undertakers. An interesting fact – Undertakers like to hire people who have the "acquaintance" – a familiarity with death - so Doctors, Nurses and Police are apparently ideal.

Nick is the son of author John Le Carré and this is his second novel. He has also written a book about what it means to be human in a digital world which leads me on to...

CONSIDER PHLEBAS

Iain M Banks (Orbit, 1988).

Can machines be petulant, spiteful and funny? Back in 1988, Iain was already famous as author of "The Wasp Factory". This was his first foray into science fiction and introduced us to a utopian galaxy of intelligent spaceships, wickedly sarcastic drones and enhanced human bodies that could release tailored hormones to promote any mood or body adaptation required. A dark sense of humour and sparse prose makes this a delight. Iain passed away in 2013 and will be sadly missed.

