

## “What Have You Read Lately?” Some Recommendations

Dr. Ronald Bretsch, Department of Secondary Education

*New York*, by Edward Rutherfurd,  
Ballantine, 2009, 862 pp.

From the historian/story-teller of *Sarum*, *Russka*, *London*, *The Forest*, *The Princes of Ireland*, and *The Rebels of Ireland* — all among my favorite reads — is Rutherfurd’s historical novel of New York City, in a leap across The Big Pond from his usual excursions into European settings. In a more intellectual style than James Michener’s more populist books, Rutherfurd, too, helps the reader understand “a place”, by following a few families through decades — and centuries. From geography, “history”, economics, politics, religion, ethnicity, and technology, to foods eaten, loves, losses, inter-family and inter-personal relationships — all are there, interwoven in their accurate time/place settings. *New York* begins with Native Americans in chapter 1, carries on with the Dutch, and concludes with the present. Although focusing on New York City, it is impossible to separate the City from the State — and, thus, *New York* contains much about “upstate”, as well. An engaging style of writing combined with much historical research result in another bestseller for Rutherfurd.

*The Social Animal*, by David Brooks,  
Random House, 2011, 424 pp.

David Brooks is a respected commentator on American politics, economy, and domestic and foreign affairs — including in *The New York Times* and, with Mark Shields, every Friday evening on PBS’s “News Hour” — a “must-see” in my schedule every week. An intellectual who communicates well, Brooks examines a wide range of topics including the latest brain research, effective leadership, decision-making skills, “culture”, intelligence, morality, older-ness, education. A Renaissance writer, he helps us to understand modern life and the interconnectedness of its many facets. Not understanding life around us? Read *The Social Animal* — whose subtitle is *The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement*. A handy pen or pencil will be needed for your notations.

*Heart of Europe: The Past in Poland’s Present*, by Norman Davies, Oxford University Press, 2001, 520 pp.

Davies is a professor emeritus of the University of London, a fellow of an Oxford college, and profoundly an historian not for the faint-hearted or a reader with only a sophomoric mind. In preparation for my biennial peregrination of “summer in central Europe”, 2012 being to Poland, I selected Davies’ *Heart of Europe* — and am not being disappointed. Although a student and scholar of Europe — and since 1997 of central Europe in particular — my knowledge of Poland needed upgrading. This is a book for the senior high school teacher of European history, for the university professor, for anyone of Polish ethnicity or Interest, and for anyone wanting to know more about Poland’s lack of natural borders and resulting centuries of sad history as it has suffered from its not-so-friendly neighbors of Russians to the east and Germans to the west. Poland is the “heart of Europe” in geography and history, as well as, more importantly, in morality (or lack thereof by Russian, German, Austrian, British, French — and American — “national interests”). Davies writes from meticulous research and scholarship, with a witty use of English, and from an understanding of Poland, Poles, and Polish culture that is not patronizing, but is compassionately analytical. He intentionally and successfully helps the reader to understand present-day Poland by understanding its pasts — as the subtitle states.

*Napoleon’s Gold: A Legend of the Saint Lawrence River*, by Thomas Pullyblank, Square Circle Press, 2011, 348 pp.

In contrast to the three preceding books, *Napoleon’s Gold* is “a book to take to the beach” — be it on “The River” (for although we may have seen the Danube, Ganges, Mississippi, and Thames, there’s only one “The River” for those of us raised on the shores of the mighty St. Lawrence!) — or on an overnight kayak trip in the Adirondacks. This is a novel written by someone who knows the coves, the islands large and small, the “local culture”, the summers, the winters, the folklore, the fish, the murders (real and fictional) — and the currents of many kinds — of The River. Pullyblank knows — and loves — them all. A professor of history at SUNY Oneonta (and a United Methodist pastor!), his focus is on telling “a good tale” that has roots in The River, as well as in Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign, varieties of gold, and late 20<sup>th</sup>-century interpersonal relationships of “river people”. His wide net is successfully cast! ■

“ Assumption:  
by definition, a “professional” —  
especially a teacher —  
reads continually, maintains currency,  
and shares. ”