

The John McPhee Reader, ed. William L. Howarth recommended by David Taylor

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the “VABooks!” column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, David Taylor—Alexandria resident and author of *Ginseng, the Divine Root*—recommends *The John McPhee Reader*, edited by William L. Howarth. We hope that individuals, book groups, families, and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



“Slow, law-abiding and drunk, I cruised dIn Detroit for a wedding once, I was awoken at 2 a.m. by a frantic pounding on my hotel door. I can still feel how my heart pounded, and see the hollow darkness of my room at that moment, and the gauzy strip of curtains glowing from the sodium light in the parking lot. A man’s glazed smile and square glasses filled the fish-eye peephole.

This is how Bob Willis, a friend I hadn’t seen in years, greets me. Willis, a Florida lawyer, likes a wide swath of humanity and the extremes of life. But he is, more than anything, a voracious reader. The next day in a used bookstore we meandered down one aisle, pulling out hardcovers from one side and paperbacks from the other, each ending up with a pile of books, leap-of-faith purchases based on the other’s recommendation. The last was a paperback that Willis tossed into the back seat of my car when I dropped him at the airport, mumbling something about oranges and pine barrens. That’s how I got one of my favorite books, *The John McPhee Reader*.

John McPhee began writing nonfiction stories for *The New Yorker* in the 1960s, approaching a wide range of subjects, from natural history to physics, trucking to basketball, with a meticulous eye for detail and the ability to combine precise pictures in ways that seem surreal. By the mid 1970s he had published a dozen books, which are represented in *The John McPhee Reader*. “What my work has in common,” he told an interviewer recently, “is it’s about real people in real places. Period.”

As a sampler, the *Reader* makes an excellent entry point. “Oranges” reveals the shadow world of Florida sunshine. What drew me into “Oranges” wasn’t an interest in the fruit or Florida, but the way McPhee unspooled one incredible episode after another—human foibles, piracy, even a future governor serenading alligators with his violin—all centered on the small bright orbs.

The same holds true for “Pine Barrens,” a vast wilderness (he’s very precise about its dimensions) hidden amid New Jersey’s industrial landscape. McPhee conjures a mystique with hard facts and the indelible characters he befriends there. “A Roomful of Hovings” takes you into the equally varied atmosphere of art museum director Thomas Hoving. “A Sense of Where You Are” shows a young Bill Bradley startlingly attuned to the basketball court.

In “Survival of the Bark Canoe,” McPhee gets more personal to show how the challenges of a wilderness camping trip can cut through Thoreauvian expectations. In “Canoe” the contradiction is that the writer’s desire to enjoy nature slams up against the frustrations of dealing with a person as idiosyncratic and stubborn as your next-door neighbor. It’s a deeply funny illustration of the adage, “Wherever you go, there you are.”

Then you might move on to the *Second John McPhee Reader*, published in 1996. But for its characters as true and strange as a friend pounding on your door in the night, the first *McPhee Reader* remains my favorite.