

Louise O. Fresco: My Greatest Fear Is Not Having Anything To Read

Louise O. Fresco is the President of Wageningen University & Research in the Netherlands. Louise combines a long academic career as a professor at both Wageningen and Amsterdam with an extensive involvement in policy and development, with many programs in Africa, Asia and Latin America and teaching in Sweden, Belgium and the US.

Louise O. Fresco is a member of six Scientific Academies. Ten years of her career was spent as Assistant-Director General at the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN, as well spending extensive periods in Africa, Asia and Latin America. She served on the boards of companies like the Rabobank and Unilever, and also serves in various philanthropies.

Louise O. Fresco successful book, *Hamburgers in Paradise*, the stories behind the food we eat, was translated in several languages. In total she published twelve books of fiction and non-fiction, while she also writes a bi-weekly column in NRC, the leading evening paper of The Netherlands. Louise O. Fresco presented a six part documentary on food and development for Dutch public television (to be found in translation on her website). You may have seen her TED talk in Palm Springs in 2009. Needless to say, Louise O. Fresco is a highly impressive individual, who continues to achieve huge things. Please enjoy my interview with Louise O. Fresco...

When someone asks you ‘what do you do for a living?’ – How do you respond?

Nobody ever asks me that! I guess I could call myself a thinker who is lucky enough to make a living that way. The results of my thinking express themselves through a myriad of activities such as science, teaching, research management, governance, writing of newspaper columns and books, and lots of talking.

What are you reading at the moment?

As I read in several languages, and simultaneously, there are continuously many books heaped upon tables, my desks and next to my bed, as well as in my suitcase. My rule while traveling is to include always a book by an author from the region I am visiting, so Mo Yan when I am off to China, Borges when in Latin America and so on. Right now I am immersed in *La Septième Fonction du Language* by Laurent Binet, *Asi Empieza Lo Malo* by Javier Marías and *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara.

When you think about your childhood, what book comes to mind?

The book that most triggered my imagination, and has ever since, is *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Then there were various books by the Dutch author Tonke Dragt, who I loved, but I started reading adult books quite soon, at the age of nine I believe. I remember *Buddenbrucks* by Thomas Mann, all of Charles Dickens of course, and *Lettres De Mon Moulin* by Alphonse Daudet.

What did you want to be when you were growing up?

For a long time, I wanted to be a medical doctor in some faraway tropical country, although I also vaguely flirted with the idea of studying classical music. I changed from medicine to agronomy and food science at the age of 17 when I realized, quite precociously I think, and also rather simplistically, that there is no point in improving people's health if they do not have enough food.

What do you think your school aged self would think of the present day you?

I think little timid ten year old and sickly Louise would be most amazed by the improved degree of self-assurance, not so much by the actual achievements.

If you could wrap up a single book and gift it to yourself as you left education – which book would it be?

Without doubt an illustrated multi-volume encyclopedia with maps of every country and the universe, and lots of drawings and chemical and physical formulas. The more pages the better!

Does your reading have routine? Is there a particular time or place that you like to read?

I literally read all the time, everywhere. My greatest fear is not having anything to read, which stems from my years in Central Africa when I had finished all the books, including those from the missionaries, or when I was stuck while traveling and had to reread every book twice. So I always carry books and newspapers in great quantities, even when just going from home to the office. I read on trains, in cars, while eating, before sleeping, after waking up and even, I have to admit, while eating if I happen to eat alone.

Which book has had the biggest impact on your career so far? How did it impact it?

As an agronomist I grew up with two famous handbooks called *Tropical Crops* by J.W. Purseglove, and the unparalleled French, anonymous *Mémento de l'Agronome*. Those gave me a solid scientific basis. But of course beyond the science I read so much about culture and development all over the world, e.g. *A Bend In The River* by V.S. Naipaul, or *The Emperor* by Ryszard Kapuscinski.

Do you have any books that you strongly associate with someone important in your life?

I have two answers here: books about music, in particular *Testimony* by Dmitri Shostakovich as told to Solomon Volkov. And far too many books about the Second World War and Jewish history. Perhaps the most appropriate to mention here is the new annotated translation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I happened to go to the same primary school as she had, in fact in the same class room which is now a national monument.

What book have you recommended the most to friends and family?

Life and Fate by Vassily Grossman.

Do you prefer fiction or non-fiction?

Fiction and non-fiction have different, complementary roles and I need them both, just like I write both.

Do you think reading is important?

Absolutely! Reading stimulates the imagination and develops one's identity in ways no other human activity can. Who does not read, does not learn how to express his or her thoughts. I find it particularly worrisome that images are replacing words on the internet and in the way people communicate on social media. Rather than saying what they like and why, they send a simple icon.

What's the best book you've read in the last 6 months?

There are so many! If I must limit myself: *The Gift of Rain* by Tan Twan Eng impressed me greatly.

Do you prefer real books or digital books?

Digital is practical for traveling but it makes for lousy reading, worst still – you cannot lend a book to a friend. That must be solved, I feel, before, digital can really take off. In 99% of the cases I prefer a real book and I love the sight of them on my bookshelves.

Name a book that you feel everyone would benefit from reading.

Life and Fate by Vassily Grossman.

What is the book that you feel has had the single biggest impact on your life? What impact did it have?

When I had to decide what to read at university, reading *Out Of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography* by Albert Schweitzer showed me that it was possible to dedicate oneself to Africa's poor while at the same time retaining one's love of Bach. However, as a budding non-fiction writer *Ever Since Darwin* by Stephen Jay Gould, and *Surely You're Joking, Mr Feynman* by Richard Feynman, made me see that writing about science was a delight.

Are there any books you haven't mentioned that you feel would make your reading list?

Probably a hundred.

What books or subject matter do you plan on reading in the next year?

I will read anything by Amos Oz and my other favorite authors. But the subject matter I will pursue also are new visions of biology, such as *Life Ascending* by Nick Lane.

If you were to write an autobiography – what would it be called?

Cosmopolitan and Committed (I hope).

<https://www.thereadinglists.com/louise-fresco-reading-list/>