

History isn't just about the past

Author David McCullough says everyone should learn about history because it is the story of all human endeavor

ERIK SPANBERG
SENIOR STAFF WRITER

David McCullough has become America's foremost historian during a 40-year writing career that includes two Pulitzer Prizes and a string of best-selling titles.

In December, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor.



McCullough

Now the 73-year-old author is headed to Charlotte as the keynote speaker for the MecDec Speakers Series, an event tied to the region's role in Revolutionary-era America.

McCullough recently spoke to the *Charlotte Business Journal* from California, where he is immersed in a seven-hour HBO miniseries starting Paul Giamatti as John Adams. Following are excerpts:

Why is it important for a place to recognize its history?

I think the need for history is part of life, because history is human. It is the story of all human endeavor, all aspects of civilization: arts, music, science, finance, architecture — the works. And, of course, it is also about what happened to people.

And I remember very well when (popular historian) Barbara Tuchman, who was a hero of mine, was asked once, "How in the world can you get people interested in history?" And she answered with two words. She said, "Tell stories."

How did you become an historian?

I was an English major in college.

It never occurred to me I would be writing history. ... Once I got started, I couldn't stop. I knew I'd found what I wanted to do with my life.

My aunt gave me a copy of Bruce Catton's *A Stillness at Appomattox* when I graduated, and I just loved it. I had taken history. And I liked history, but I always thought I wanted to write.

It never occurred to me I would be writing history. But I started reading history, reading Catton, Barbara Tuchman and Shelby Foote, for example.

And it dawned on me once when I read a bad book about the Johnstown floods. I thought, "God, I could write a better book than that."

So I got started, and once I got started, I couldn't stop. I knew I'd found what I wanted to do with my life.

Do you feel a responsibility to bear the mantle of promoting history and education as a payback for your success?

Yes. I don't claim the mantle — this is something I really care about. I'm trying to put my ideas in front of people who can make a difference.

I draw my conclusions (about the lack of historical education) from direct, on-the-scene experience.

And we can't blame students and young people for not knowing what they haven't been taught.

It's easy to laugh at some of the things they don't know or some of the things they say, but it's not their fault.

I'm sure there are plenty of demands on your time. How do you keep that from infringing on your real business of researching and writing?

People will often say to me, "Are you working on a book?" And I'll say, yes. But the preposition is wrong. When I'm working on a book, I feel like I'm working *in* the book. I'm inside the subject. So when I come out from inside the subject to give a talk, it doesn't mean I give up a day. I give up three days, because I have to get there, I have to do the talk and then I have to come back. And that's a very serious interruption, because when I'm involved in a book, it's almost as if I'm in a spell of some kind. And it's not always easy to get back into it.

What would people be surprised to learn that you read?

My kids all kid me by saying, "Well, he likes old things." I like old stories, old wine, old friends, and I like old books. I just bought (Victor Hugo's) *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* — I've never read it. I love Elmore Leonard. Elmore Leonard is brilliant. He can do more on a page and with more finesse than almost anybody I can think of. I love P.D. James. And I love Ruth Rendell — she's absolutely tops.

Tell me what you think of Paul Giamatti as John Adams.

He's wonderful. Because he's playing it with tremendous passion, but it's understated passion. He's a very intelligent actor.

And Laura Linney as Abigail — honestly, she is Abigail. It's uncanny.

McCullough speaks May 17 at the Charlotte City Club. Tickets are \$150 each. For details, call (704) 331-2308.

BUSINESS PULSE

All the national real estate reports and studies can be confusing. One says home prices were down slightly in February. Another says home sales in March were the worst since 1989. Yet another report says things are going to pick up this year.

What you said:

•I believe, like politics, home sales

200% in the last three years. I don't want to move, but I would if the price was right.