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The Straits Times (Singapore)

September 15, 2013 Sunday

Bookends

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SECTION: LIFESTYLE; Read

LENGTH: 346 words

Who: Science historian John van Wyhe, 41, a senior lecturer in the departments of biological sciences and history at the National University of Singapore.

The father of one listens to audio books which he compiles himself. His collection ranges from Victorian-era tomes of natural history to British naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough's stories of past adventures. He scans the pages of each volume and converts the files into audio mp3 format.

"That's how I can get through more books," he says. "It's half an hour of investment and then you have an audio file you can access at any time."

Formerly with Cambridge University, he is an expert on 19th-century naturalists Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. He founded two searchable databases, Darwin Online and Wallace Online, where the public can access their original writings for free.

His newest and seventh book, *Dispelling The Darkness*, aims to clarify misunderstandings about these scientists' contributions to evolutionary theory. Local readers will particularly enjoy descriptions of Wallace's voyages in the Malay peninsula and the time he spent in Singapore observing tiger hunts or seeking specimens on Pulau Ubin.

"There are bookcases full of Wallace books in stores and they are all the same because everyone has read the same sources," says Dr van Wyhe.

What are you reading now?

I'm listening to a book by David Attenborough, *Zoo Quest For A Dragon*. Next I'll read *Quest In Paradise*, about his trip to the place where birds of paradise live. What interests me is that this is a part of him that's forgotten. People know only the David Attenborough of the big TV series, the adventurer is forgotten.

I recently read Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*. It's a very interesting, intellectual book about the discovery of a philosophical work from ancient Rome and how the author thinks this kick-started the Renaissance.

If your house were on fire, which book would you save?

That's very difficult. Would I choose it based on its value or based on whether I wanted to read it? No, no, I couldn't choose.