

Student's book mandatory reading at Western Carolina U.

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The summer reading list. These words may instill feelings of dread into the hearts of incoming college freshmen.

Not only do they have to worry about leaving their families, making new friends, and coordinating their bedspreads and towels, they also have homework to do before classes even begin.

The last few falls, freshmen at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, N.C., were reading such books as Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air" and Charles Frazier's "Cold Mountain."

This summer, they will be required to read Worth Allen's "In Mind/In Country: From Mount Kenya to Tenewi Island," published by Thomson-Shore.

What makes this remarkable?

Like the students themselves, the talented Mr. Allen is enrolled at WCU. The publication is actually Worth's travel journal, based on a three-month trip to East Africa in the spring of 1999 with the National Outdoor Leadership School. Written as a requirement for honors credit, WCU faculty found the story to be of value to all students.

"This all came around in sort of an indirect way," says Worth, who confesses that the publication is still somewhat of a surprise to him. "At first I was asking the school if I could submit my journal to receive honors credit, and then they were telling me that they wanted to make it the summer reading."

"We were mulling over possible titles for the freshmen to read," says Brian E. Railsback, the founding dean of the honors college and chairman of the English department. "We wanted something relevant to their experience. I think the experiences Worth encountered during his time abroad are extremely relevant."

Literally written on the go, sometimes by flashlight, Worth's story tells of basic problems such as homesickness, long-distance relationships as well as new relationships. Meanwhile, some of his more exotic experiences still hold meaning for anybody who hasn't been to Africa.

"He was all set to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, when he realized that he was way over his head. He backed down, which I think was a good move," says Railsback. "The journal is all about him finding his own

way, and adjusting as he needs to. His basic attitude is: 'When this all becomes a memory, I want it to be the best memory possible.'" "I think that somebody who has the desire to do something different with their life, considers dropping out or quitting, or suffers while being in an unfamiliar place, could probably identify with it," says Worth. How are people reacting to the journal? "So far, there has been phenomenal feedback," says the author, who is enjoying a bit of local celebrity-hood.

He describes how the last time he went to the dry cleaners, the manager began scurrying around, opening drawers, saying "Where's the book? Where's the book?" "Apparently, her daughter was going to be a freshman, and had to read it," says Worth. "It took me a little bit before I realized that she was talking about me!" "If this goes well, we are thinking about making this a series," says Railsback. "I have some students who are in Mexico who are also interested in sharing their journal."

Worth will retain the copyright of his journal, and perhaps think of a broad publication. Meanwhile, he has already benefited from the journal, even before the majority of the students have given their input: he profited \$1 from each of the 1,700 journals sold.

Even though this success could make any English major jealous, Worth, interning with his local Secret Service, is still steadfast as a criminal-justice major.

"I'm still a little apprehensive about the whole experience," he says. "I feel extremely vulnerable."

Worth also may face resentment at the hands of a few unhappy freshmen.

"Hopefully, they will be in the minority," he laughs. "Besides, my book is one-quarter the length of the last book that was assigned. I'm saving them a lot of work."

