

The Addictive Alchemy of Books

As a child, I gave my parents some worries. Well, probably a lot of worries - it was the sixties, I was obligated to worry my parents, and I did so with great gusto. But one of the first, albeit mildest, worries was probably my Saturday morning habit of rising from my bed, stumbling wordless into the kitchen for some food, then returning, not just to my bedroom to eat, but to my bed; and not to sleep, which would have been very typical adolescent behaviour, but to read till the late afternoon. Saturdays were an orgy of reading, usually one or two complete novels, while my bed filled with crumbs and spilled milk. Not a healthy teenage existence – not even near normal. I don't recall a scintillating social life, and I can't remember ever doing homework – that was always accomplished on the Monday morning school bus. (My teachers thought my handwriting was awful, unaware it was always performed on a moving vehicle).

Reading fiction was, and is my big vice.

I haven't learned much this life, but one of the few things I now believe to be certain is that readers are born, not made. You can lead the child to the book, but can you make him dip into it with genuine pleasure? Like hell.

I have stopped giving fiction to non-readers as gifts. I used to persevere, especially with my own children, convinced books were good for them, whether they liked them or not. Now, impossible as it is for me to imagine, I have come to accept fulfilled lives need not include fiction. In fact, I will go so far as to admit some doubt about its values

altogether. Compulsive fiction reading, like mine, is as total an escape as heroine. It is anti-life, removing the reader from their immediate surrounds completely. My youngest child once took to cutting up the novels I was reading, so strong was her resentment that I could cut her off like that. (Apparently she'd been talking to me for a half hour, then screaming, before I lifted my unfocused eyes.) This is not a good way to live. Never mind that it doesn't give you cancer, it is legal, and cheap. This is escapism, pure and simple.

Of course, that is why I love it. I get panicky when I finish a novel and don't have another one instantly to hand. A gap without written words is scary. Even worse – to find myself in a waiting situation like a car, bus or train, with nothing to read. At these times, I slip off my snobby literature seat and grovel. I have been known to empty my purse and read my driving license, read advertisements, phone books, ticket stubs, maps. Anything. My eyes, it seems, must have written words in front of them.

It a mysterious thing. The instant I get my fix, my heart beat slows, my eyes dilate, I feel soporific, go limp and basically leave my body. It is exactly like a drug and as exactly addictive. So why do we recommend it as an unqualified good thing?

Because it makes us better people – more informed about people's characters, ourselves, the world? Maybe, but a better answer might be – yes it is like a drug, but a good drug. A multi-vitamin for the soul. The habit of reading is a life long route to sanity, offering escape and relaxation and upon return to reality, hopefully an improved perspective. I will never ever say no books.

I used to read anything, beginning with all the Nancy Drews and Hardy Boys, along side D.H. Laurence and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, to quite recently, when I'd happily pick

up a Trollope (Joanna) or Binchy. But when I am writing fiction myself, I feel the need for a more nourishing diet, and try to stick to the good stuff. Shena McKay, Andrew Greig, Michel Faber, Anne Tyler, and I still love reading the old books – the Brontes, Galbraith, Wordsworth.

I do not normally hang on to books – I have very few at home, despite my greedy appetite. I get them, and I pass them on. Novels should be in motion, being devoured by new eyes all the time. Poetry books, reference books, and signed copies of books are the only ones I hang on to. Oh - also, the old books that I bought second hand because their titles intrigued me, or the first words I saw when I flicked them open were like voices I understood. Like an instant rapport with a stranger one meets in a train, intensified by watching them depart minutes later, their names still unknown.

Hence one of the books on my shelf that I will never give away is ‘Poems from the Forces’, (bought at a Newcastle Book fair for £6) including poems by Alun Lewis, who’d I’d never heard of before and I am now and forever in love with;

I very rarely read a book twice. The only book I have read almost yearly has been ‘The Sun also Rises’ by Hemingway. It is possibly the only good novel he wrote, though his short stories are excellent. I think endings are far more important than beginnings and the last line of ‘Sun’ makes the whole novel. The heroine, Brett, tells Jake it was a shame they couldn’t be together, and what a damn fine time they could have had if only, etc. Jake just shrugs and says ‘Isn’t it pretty to think so.’

I love that. I even named one of my daughters Brett. Needless to say, she has not thanked me for this.

Like people's names, I have trouble remembering book's titles. I can recall the characters and the plots, even the mood it put me in, but titles go right out of my head. So sometimes, I come home from the library to find I have just checked out books I have already read. At my age, I can only assume this will get worse. An abiding fear is that I will go the library one day, and not be able to find a single book I haven't read. Every Sunday, I read the reviews with relief – that there are still books out there I have not read.

I use the library, and over the years, have befriended many librarians rather like an alcoholic might naturally befriend quite a few bar tenders. It is my main fantasy job, to be a librarian in a little library close enough to the beach to hear the waves. That, or work in a second hand book shop that few people use, and I could write uninterrupted while surrounded by books.

I only buy brand new books for other people. Book shops like Waterstones and Borders over stimulate me - the sheer volume of enticing new covers is overwhelming. I usually leave without buying anything. When I do choose presents, I try to make the book say something to the person I'm giving it to. Books can be very eloquent presents.

The shops I feel most comfortable in are charity shops, in the book section, or second hand book shops. As I get older, I find it increasingly hard to enter a second hand book shop without wanting to take home the whole pathetic lot. Old books do talk – you must have heard them. And some days their plaintive, poignant cries are too hard to listen to. All those earnestly written words, all those hearts poured, all those lonely minds aching to find another understanding mind. Old books that are out of print, and whose pages stick together from lack of reading, make me sad. Worse, I feel responsible, as if having heard their cries, I am now obliged to possess them. To allow those muffled words to

come to life again. It is almost the same feeling as an old graveyard. If there are ghosts, they are only lonely people who do not want to be forgotten; who want, not life anymore, or fame, or fortunes, but to exist in a living person's mind. Old books are like ghosts. The yearning for immortality may be the major underlying motivation for writing.

Don't forget me, they say. Or me or me. All the sighs...I can hardly bear to enter some book shops, yet can't stay away.

My favourite second hand book shop is Leakeys, in Inverness. That it is in an old Gaelic church seems most appropriate. I try to go there once a week; my Sabbath is usually a Monday, and I enter with reverence. I move quietly, sombrely. I am not agnostic here but a full believer. I pay my respects by buying a book and moving up the stairs, through air ringing with the mumblings and mutterings of thousands of unread novelists and poets. Upstairs, where the prayers and fears of men and women used to rise and gather, I sip a cappuccino and breath the sweet slightly damp odour of written words. Ink on paper; paper rubbing, sleeping against paper, and the wooden shelves they sit on. They are not quiet, these books; they are not even still.

I hear you, I say to them, sipping my coffee. I am here, and I hear you, and you are not forgotten.

Old books that are not opened are like an orphanage of forgotten children, neglected and withdrawn. No book shines in a second hand book shop. Imagine not buying a self published book from the last century, entitled 'The Life of Florence Barclay', illustrated with photographs. It would be cruel and just down right rude to ignore a book like this. I'm afraid even the rare ones, who have pride of place on high shelves and high prices, may seem privileged, but are no less depressed.

They are not read. Not read equals dead.

Remember the sixties saying – ‘drugs are for people who can’t handle reality’?

And the answering cry - ‘reality was for people who couldn’t handle drugs’? But the truth is: Reality is for people who can’t handle books. Addicts, arise and unite, and attend your second hand book store regularly. Books are for reading.