Reading for Pleasure

The novels that I enjoy most

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This is no occasion for modesty, real or false. I was born into the purple of Birmingham professional and manufacturing life and enjoyed an idyllic childhood in Edgbaston. The house had many bookshelves reflecting the taste of my physician grandfather, and I was free to choose whatever I liked from them. It would be good to say that I picked from the shelves Young's *Night Thoughts*, but in fact it was Tobias Smollett's *Roderick Random*, a rough tough amoral piece, that I chose. I cannot say what I enjoyed in it, but it seemed good to a boy who did not yet know disgust. Books do indeed furnish a room, and it has been depressing, when on a domiciliary visit to a well heeled patient with bright children in the offing, to find a bookshelf of low footage containing nothing more substantial than the works of Dick Francis. Am I being priggish? Of course, but are we not the countrymen of Shakespeare, for whom all other countries envy us, and of those who wrote the Authorised Version?

I find that much of my enjoyable reading has been of books that are concerned with human nature and life as it really seems to be, books that brace me to confront the truths, pleasant and unpleasant, of existence. Few people have the opportunities given to the clinician to explore the complexities of human character and the vagaries of social life, but, like many others, I wonder why it is that so few doctors have been able to use their clinical experience to write convincing works of fiction. Somerset Maugham, for instance, is technically brilliant but lamentably meretricious in his characterisation. Would he have achieved greater profundity by spending more years in practice? I doubt it somehow, but dear Anton Tchekov was certainly repaid for his affectionate care of ill people with rich material for his writing.

I will leave out books not written in English, most of which I have had to read in translation—no doubt often excellent. Scott Moncrieff's Proust was considered by some Frenchmen to be more worth reading than the French version, but Proust has probably been rated more highly in England than in France. We are a strange people.

I gladly omit those books that I have begun to read without pleasure and seldom finished, including all works whatever of philosophy, all ghost stories, and all science fiction. They are literally a closed book. I can, however, go back with enjoyment to Smollett, whose *Humphry Clinker* is a considerable novel with a humanity that puts him in the class of Henry Fielding, a man of his time—the mid-18th century—when despite much brutishness there was a sudden blossoming of benevolence and a feeling for the underdog, which led among other things to the founding of many hospitals.

When I became an admissions tutor one of the favourite topics with the interviewing panel was reading, not of science but of English literature. I suspect that most candidates were prepared for

this, but the discussion seldom scratched beneath the surface. Their choice reflected the taste of teachers—D H Lawrence, Huxley, and Waugh—just as 50 years earlier it might have been for H G Wells and Conrad. The set books were usually more conventional and often included a novel by Jane Austen. The girls were keen on her as a rule, or said they were; the boys were doubtful. What did they all make of her? It is hard to believe that her sophisticated and subtle observation of her own exclusive class could have a ready message for the young of today any more than it did for me at the age of 15. I see it more easily now and enjoy her shrewdness. What a splendid headmistress she would have made and how readable would have been her reports on candidates. All the same, I am too much aware that her world could never be or have been mine for me to surrender entirely.

Of course there is much to enjoy in Dickens, a really great and universal writer, and if you read him again after a long interval you are bound to respect those subtleties that are not apparent to a young reader and that make *Bleak House* a wonderfully constructed work on the grandest scale. *Edwin Drood* shows that he was still refining his technique, but in the earlier works there is much that is less admirable; a sort of overdrive that justifies Oscar Wilde's remark that "one must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing. . . ."

Mrs Gaskell is not to be overlooked. After an overdose of the Brontës her steady and unsentimental view of life is therapeutic. The last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, published in 1866 just after her death, is almost faultless and entirely free from the desire to impress that mars the work of so many of her contemporaries. The central theme is the relationship between mothers and daughters, stepmothers and stepdaughters; not an obviously riveting subject but treated with great shrewdness, insight, and humour. The stepmother, Mrs Gibson, is a classically awful figure based on the author's own experience and is well matched by the honest and spirited Molly, whose father is a Scottish general practitioner (a title introduced before the period of the book, which is set in the 1820s). Dr Gibson accepts a second opinion from a physician with a good grace but complete scepticism. More surprisingly he is accepted socially by the Earl of Cumnor and his family. His shut in personality is finely done, and the characters at every social level are altogether convincing.

This brings me to George Eliot, a near contemporary of Mrs Gaskell. Mrs Gaskell was put out on learning that the author of *Adam Bede* was the woman who was living with the "soiled" G H Lewes but wrote her a generous letter of appreciation. I must be forgiven for going on about George Eliot but I have connections with her home town of Nuneaton and respond to her descriptions of provincial life and much else besides. *Middlemarch* is not only a great book it is highly enjoyable. It has everything to say about marriage, which had been denied to George Eliot because Lewes, who was so good at managing the unmarried relationship, had a living wife. In the book we have the cold, academic, but ineffective Casaubon and the passionate Dorothea, who goes into marriage knowing that it is not right. There is Bulstrode, an unattractive schemer whose marriage is strong enough to survive his disgrace, and Lydgate, the educated and well born doctor with idealistic

hopes for the new scientific medicine (again the period is the 1820s). His marriage to a vain, silly, but not worthless woman is brilliantly described. The only failure in the book is its conventional and unconvincing happy ending. There is a more serious weakness in *Daniel Deronda*. After a superb first half George Eliot gives rein to her interest in Judaism, and the writing becomes lifeless.

Either you like Trollope or, if you find him boring, there is no way of converting you. What appeals to me is his honesty, his good humoured realism, and his love of a stable society. It is a pity that he was not more interested in doctors, but he was mainly concerned with the interactions between people in society. He believed in a ruling class (not the aristocracy alone) and detested those who sought power by amassing wealth. In one work, *The Way We Live Now*, he allowed these feelings full rein, and the result is a large novel into which he put all his bitterness about the idle members of the upper class. Not comfortable to read but surely enjoyable. "Dullness is our line, as cleverness is of the French. Woe to the English people if they ever forget that . . ." he said, and thinking of the many very dull but extremely worthy people who contribute to the stability of England we must agree. After 20 years of enormous success when clergymen could daringly speak of "curling up with a Trollope" he wrote a devastatingly candid autobiography and his sales fell away at once. He had little standing at his death in 1882 and did not begin to re-emerge until after the first war.

The last major novelist on my list is James Joyce. *Ulysses* achieved once and for all the stream of consciousness thing. A real masterpiece to be taken seriously, it is also great fun and can be read a page or two at a time with constant pleasure in Joyce's delight in words and his skill in playing with them. Alas, his followers have never had his genius or minds as well stocked as his, and his example has been followed with lamentable results. Like Freud, perhaps. I would like to put in a word for Italo Svevo, who was Joyce's protégé in Trieste, but he did not write in English, and there is nothing English about him. William Gerhardie, however, despite being born and bred in St Petersburg had English parents and went to Oxford in 1921. *Futility* was written there, followed by *The Polyglots*. Both are set in Russia at the end of the war and reflect his experience with the British Military Mission in the far east. Each is about a group of people whom we would recognise as typically Russian in the sense that we say it of Tchekov's characters, understanding them imperfectly no doubt. Much time is spent in waiting. The books are serious about life but written with a light and very humorous touch. I find Gerhardie's later books difficult. He eventually settled as a recluse in Hallam Street. If only he had dropped in at the General Medical Council he would have found rich material for his unique style.

Detective stories

The cult of the detective story seems overdone. I would never bother with an Agatha Christie were it not for the ingenious twist of the plot. Writers like Dorothy L Sayers with real genius work out their fantasies too thoroughly so that Lord Peter Wimsey becomes a bit much, and this still goes on with P D James and her ungracious Dalglish. When really tired a good detective story is what one needs if unable to curl up with a Trollope, but there is no substitute for Sherlock Holmes. Conan Doyle was the epitome of the decent, intelligent, and humane Englishman: he was Irish. His mind was straightforward and simple but by no means naive and quite free from prejudice. Nothing became him better than his championship, at high cost to himself, of the entirely unattractive Oscar Slater whom he believed to be innocent of the murder for which he had been convicted. Doyle's efforts prevailed, but Slater showed not a shred of gratitude, which did not upset his saviour. The historical romances are good but not very good, rather burdened by historical research, as in the case of Sir Walter Scott's. The Holmes stories are marvellous, and only a few late in the series are not worth reading. It is a good sign that both Holmes and Watson have persistently defied dramatisation; Holmes has lacked the magnetism and instant authority that we expect, and Watson has been made unnecessarily dull and stupid. In a recent television version of *The Speckled Band*

Dr Grimesby Roylott (a good name) was portrayed as a peppery little colonel from the Indian Medical Service. Where was the immensely tall man with a face "marked with every evil passion," "deep bile-shot eyes," and a "high thin fleshless nose" resembling a "fierce old bird of prey"? This story disturbed my sleep as a boy. The only other to do so was R L Stevenson's *Treasure Island* at the point where blind Pew comes tapping with his stick up the cobbles to the inn to give the black spot to Captain Bones. Now if you are reluctant to enjoy Sherlock Holmes try *Silver Blaze*, for here we have something not always found in Doyle's mysteries or those of most other detective story writers. The clues are all presented fairly including the dog that did not bark in the night, and nothing is held back, while the pace of the story and the detail are as ever admirable.

Finally, humorous books. Nothing is more dismal than the shelf in a book shop devoted to humour. There is so much obvious labour needed to produce a modest result. For effortless humour and wit combined I turn to Mark Twain. How about these two mots? "Wagner's music is better than it sounds" and "Man is the only animal which blushes—or needs to." My father, who was an old fashioned practical joker and thought to be a wit, would turn when there was bad news (and that was often) to three books. *Pickwick Papers* needs no comment. *The Diary of a Nobody* is extraordinary. It is set very exactly in a period, about 1890, and a place, "the Laurels," Brickfield Terrace, Holloway. The range of activity and thought of Charles Pooter and his family is extremely narrow, but the authors, George and Weedon Grossmith, record it with such delicate irony and restraint that Pooter has almost the stature of Don Quixote; and the Pooters are still with us but have moved out to Wood Green.

There is no need to justify a passion for *The Young Visitors*, written at the age of 9 by Daisy Ashford in pencil in a stout little notebook. From the opening, "Mr Salteena was an elderly man of 42 and was fond of asking people to stay with him. He had quite a young girl staying with him of 17 named Ethel Monticue," to the end, "the Earl soon got tired of his sickly daughters and his wife had a savage temper so that he thought he would divorce her and try again but he gave up the idea after several attempts and decided to offer it up as a mortification," there is literally not a dull moment. I read it aloud with my elder brother at the age of 9 and we were helpless with laughter from the first page. Now that seems strange because the fun is sophisticated and has a lot to do with the innocence and yet knowingness of a child. No description can convey the marvellous joie de vivre of this book. It has been suspected of being a fake, and one point in favour of this is that, unlike the vast majority of childhood enterprises, it is carried through to the final flourish of *The End*. "I don't care either way. it is pure, yes pure, pleasure from start to finish."

And that is it. As I grow old I find it more and more difficult to cope with writers who do not speak directly, do not identify their characters clearly, and indulge in flash back and other tricks with time. This drives me to read more history and biography, fewer novels, and hardly any poetry after W B Yeats, a sure sign of declining vitality, I fear. Therefore I conclude that it is later than we think and that the habit of reading good books cannot be encouraged too early in life. Then it soon becomes a pleasure but also contributes to the making of the sort of doctor whom we would like to consult as patient or colleague. Thomas Sydenham, who was surely a sage counsellor when good advice was the most a physician could offer, on being asked to recommend a textbook of medicine replied, "Read Don Quixote. It is a very good book. I read it still."

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