Reading for Pleasure

First, news; first books; fast books; first book

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Being in Keneba again, after an absence of two years, I find that old reading habits have quickly returned. Here, in the isolated Gambian village, we lived as a closely knit community of expatriates, two hours from the nearest European, three hours and 100 miles (160 km) from the capital and its inevitable cluster of fellow migrant workers. No matter how affable your companions are in such circumstances, it is not long before the same tales are told a second or even a third time, and the same dishes served for guests at dinner. Eventually you turn inwards for entertainment and sustenance. Thus, far from television, theatre, cinema, concert, and public house, far from the madding crowd, you read. During this brief return visit, having travelled without the impedimenta of sports gear and the paraphernalia of hobbies, reading has again become a major leisure activity.

I have always been interested in the personal libraries of others: a glance at the bookshelves in any home shows much. Occasionally, I still resort to a trick I learnt as a student when I shared a house with a wag who gave everyone an "orange/grey/black/blue" rating. I was then given a "grey/black" score, but I think my tastes are wider now. The coding, if it still mystifies you, refers to the predominant colour of the paperbacks in a person's bookcase. Orange is the ordinary Penguin; grey, the modern classics; black, the classics, and blue the Pelicans.

Information, pleasure, and escape

This series, however, is about personal reading habits, and though almost all reading gives me pleasure, I shall divide the activity into three parts. I read for information, for pleasure, and for escape.

In England, information is abundant. You cannot live in a major city and ignore hoardings, advertisements, newspaper headlines, and shops of flickering television screens. In your own home radio and television bring their intrusion of unwanted information, and the influx of "local newspapers" and medical journals adds to the burden. In Keneba, I delight in finding that only that information that I request is sent to me. For a brief stay I have not reordered the *Guardian Weekly*, which gave me much pleasure during my previous time here, and which I would recommend to all who are abroad. Its tripartite base of the *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and the *Washington Post* ensured more than a unilateral nationalistic viewpoint. Major world events were frequently seen quite differently by journalists in

the three papers, and the juxtaposition of these opinions gave instructive insights into world politics. The paper also shed a more detailed light on my only other source of news, the BBC World Service bulletins, to which I listened sleepily in the brief African dawn before the day's clinic began. Working in a research unit, there was much more reading for information. Our efficient and helpful librarian in Cambridge was someone without whom I could not have managed. Her patience seemed inexhaustible as I asked for one obscure reprint after another. We received also the *BMJ*, the *Lancet*, and the major nutrition journals, which were searched carefully for articles of interest. Not only that, but I took more note of the small print columns lodged between the correspondence and the advertisements. Word-of-mouth news of former colleagues was rare, and the announcements at least gave some clue to happenings at home.

Reading for pleasure was the hardest activity to achieve, as it should be as it gives the greatest reward. The discovery of a previously unread author whose writing, by style or content, affords memorable pleasure is nearly always a surprise. The discovery of a whole school of African authors was, therefore, a considerable surprise to me, and though I remain largely ignorant about African literature as a whole, such is the nature of man that I now intend to comment on it briefly. My introductory remarks have betrayed a sadly persistent streak of European arrogance, for who, in this land of griots, choral players, and story tellers, should complain that compatriots (with the implication of "culture") are a 100 miles away? In the local villages is a wealth of stories, legends, and family histories sufficient to enthral any traveller who still has time enough to employ the lost European art of listening. Yet, for those of us mentally bound by the habit of rushing hither and thither, or for those of us who claim to be more physically bound by the desk at work, there is the resource of the African Writers Series, published by Heinemann. It is worth looking at. The two authors who most excited me were Elechi Amadi and Chinua Achebe. Mr Amadi's quiet soaring novels of village life moved me deeply. We, who read and write this essay, have all depended much on literacy for our education and thought development. I found that Mr Amadi's *The Slave*, *The Concubine*, and *The Great Ponds* could, through his literacy, take me beyond words and place me in a feeling of his life. Having read him, I knew more of the village life around me than my eyes had seen or than my ears had heard. Sad, perhaps, that I needed books for this. In contrast, the same author's autobiographical *Sunset in Biafra* is a sobering shock-wave from modern Africa. If you need an antidote to it, help may be found in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*, a sardonic tale of aspiring politicians and corruption in provincial Africa. It is a book that makes you chuckle, then smile, and then it freezes the smile, for the tale is not without its own sharp smack. I closed the book a little more at peace than after *Sunset in Biafra*, but wondered at its malignant dis-ease which lingered with me for some weeks after having known these thoughts.

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Rereading the Russian giants

At times there is a great sense of space here: never more so for me than at Tankular, a fishing village known to the Portuguese in the eighteenth century and probably before. It stands on the banks of the River Gambia, which is still 3 km wide and salty at this point, some 90 km from the Atlantic coast. When I travel there to work, two thoughts are evoked. Firstly, as I pass slowly through woods as yet little ravaged by the dual scourges of man and fire, I think of the endless forests I enjoyed in north-west Maine. I know nothing of the writers from that insular state; a sign warns you: "You are now leaving the United States of America and entering Maine." It foretells of the reserve the hard winters breed there. If climate is a determinant of character, from the friendly African to the reserved northerner, this argument cannot be sustained for literature, for as I leave the Gambian forests behind and come to the river plains, the space reaches out to hold me. Then I think of the gently rolling grasslands of Byelo-Russia, contrasting in so many ways with The Gambia, but sharing this element of space. If I know of no writers from Maine, you hardly need to think to recall the great Russian authors who must have written in their bitter and isolating winters. So my second thought is of the Russian literature I have reread here. I still find that Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Sholokov, like Amadi, can take me into an ethereal feeling of their lives. Turgenev's *Sketches from a Hunter's Notebook* are gems, telling of brief incidents in the lives of ordinary people, be they lord or peasant.

Their further beauty is in the joy with which Turgenev can describe the countryside. I had not *looked* at a larch until I read his description of one such tree. Sholokov, with his Cossack tale in *Quiet Flows The Don*, has a gift of opening spaces in his book, giving a sense of the unreachable, intangible essence of life in the vastness of these continents. Graham Greene wrote, "I knew I was alive, because I was uncomfortable." He described a sensation, which I and many others have experienced in the humid rainy season in the tropics. How great the descriptive powers of Tolstoy then, that in *Anna Karenina* he can take you from the sweltering tropics almost to *feel* his icy blizzards.

I never read the last page of a book first. I say this after reading two authors whom I wish to mention before leaving reading for pleasure. The novel of each was entertaining, but as I crept through the 400 or so pages of both books, I wondered how the author would finish his work. Both James A Michener in *The Drifters* and John O'Hara in *From The Terrace* did so with a memorable last sentence to counterbalance all that had preceded it, enabling you to hold up the novel anew and to re-examine its structure and content in a fresh light. Do writers have this final sentence first, or do they write blindly, trusting their art to lead them to this final master stroke? Many authors state that their fictional characters take control, and the novel evolves under its own force. Perhaps so, but I suspect that the discipline of Michener and O'Hara was such that they had their endings long before their pens spelled it on paper. O'Hara is underrated at present. His "Gibbsville" novels with their penetration of the meaninglessness of middle- and upper-class American life between the wars are the work of an acerbic mind. The essays on marriage found in *Ten North Frederick* unseat you lest your friends or even you should struggle only to attain the dull mediocrity he describes. I hope his writing will stand the test of time and become more widely recognised. I am not so sure about Michener, currently the more popular of the two. *The Drifters*, an examination of the rebelliousness of American and European youth in the "flower-power" era of the 'sixties, is, on the one hand a seemingly self-indulgent "roman fantastique," and, on the other, a book that might just help parents to understand teenagers! After this interesting introduction to the author, it was perhaps a mistake to read *Hawaii*, *Chesapeake*, *The Source*, and *Centennial* all within two years. I was addicted, but the pleasure has now palled. Though the other novels differ, these four have the common theme of the evolution and development of a particular geographical site, be it a Pacific island, or a

ria on the eastern seaboard of America. All are tales well told, but as the inevitability of construction and style becomes fixed, so the pleasure diminishes.

Intrigue and adventure

Wilbur Smith, Alistair MacLean, and others of their kind give me stories which I read to escape. The syntax is terse, the story tense, and, as the cover reminds you, "gripping," "unput-downable," "thebestIhaveread." The pleasure they offer does not depend on lyrical prose, nor on philosophy, nor on a flavour they can give to life. They simply absorb you into their tangled web of intrigue and adventure, which can be forgotten as soon as the book is put down. They are read in a day, in a night or two, but I am grateful at times for the escape they offer. You return to the real world and its problems, not to find them changed, but to find yourself ready again for the fray, having escaped from it for a while. There may be those who have a harsh disciplinarian philosophy that could not allow such escapism. Yet there are times in Africa when, even if you work with good resources, there are too many people without help, and too few hours in the day. You have to escape occasionally.

How do we manage to read so much? The question may not have troubled you, and nor did it concern me until I attended a fast reading course. There I was told that fast readers read quickly by taking in only the bottom half of a word, or by reading every word filling the bottom half of a word, or by reading only every other word and filling in the blanks mentally. Very fast readers combine both techniques.) I offer this as a tip, but I try not to use it myself, as it seems like listening with only half an ear: one miss point!

Finally, why did I offer a contribution to Reading for Pleasure? Perhaps some were invited, but not I. Others may have wanted to tell us of fine authors they had read: certainly I wish that African literature was better known, and I hope for wider recognition of O'Hara's talent. The reason I put pen to paper now is that I have the time to do so. This is a gift that I may not have much longer: behind me my 10-month-old son waves his much-chewed *First Book of the Farm* in destructive expressions of joy. Friends who have older toddlers wearily warn us about this habit of "books." Apparently in years to come I shall tire of reading the same stories word perfect, never skipping a page, a line, or a pause. In my present fool's paradise I still look forward to extending my reading with him. I hope we will read old favourites, but there are obviously many excellent new writers, whose names I do not yet know, whose tales we shall enjoy together. Of course, I can only express a hope. No one can be coerced into reading, least of all a child. And yet, is this not the essence of all writing? We write, not just in solitary pleasure, but that others may read, that our children may read and know more of us, of our hopes and joys, of our troubles and failures. Will they be any wiser?

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A middle-aged patient who has recently noticed the appearance of a large number of Campbell de Morgan spots wants them removed. What is the best treatment?

Campbell de Morgan spots or senile angiomas are small, red, vascular lumps, which are usually found on the trunk, sometimes in large numbers. They tend to occur in middle age, hence the alternative name, and are quite benign so that treatment is really unnecessary. I suppose that if they were considered unsightly some form of cauterisation might be used, but this would be unwise if there were large numbers.—ALEX PATON, postgraduate dean, North-east Thames Region.