Reading for Pleasure

Short and good

J C GRIFFITHS

I have been enormously impressed by the diligence of contributors to this column; how on earth do they find the time to read so much? As I keep telling my offspring, school days are the best time for cultural reading and the opportunities are never as good again. Then the brain absorbs literature fast and uncritically, like a dry sponge. In due time the sponge slowly releases its contents drop by drop, providing those pleasurable recollections that make life tolerable for the middle-aged and elderly. In busy adult life, cultural reading needs to be well organised and thus can be difficult. Detective stories and other ephemera are consumed with little effort but—along with crossword puzzles, golf, and other expedients for passing time—are unsatisfying and oppressive to the nonconformist conscience.

The work ethic on which many of us are founded disapproves of the mere hedonism to which pleasurable reading seems to belong. There tends not to be enough day at the end of work to fit it in—although reading a newspaper and possibly one of the heavier weeklies is permissible. Immersion in a book beside the fire of an evening when there are “things to do” demands more discipline than I possess. Reading during the working day is equally naughty, unless it be a technical journal; even anaesthetists are not permitted such an indulgence now. Committee men on long train journeys to London are more fortunate, but for those who have to “mind the shop,” such “working” trips are rare.

Books at bedtime

Thus it is that “extraneous literature,” as schoolmasters used to describe the occasional *Beano* secreted behind the desk lid, is normally only to be found scattered over the bedside table or on the floor alongside. It is, it seems, quite in order to read in bed, although in childhood even this was banned as being bad for the eyesight. I can still remember smuggling a torch to bed—when I could afford the batteries—and dousing it on threat of a parental tour of inspection. At one time a street lamp used to shine conveniently on to my bed right through the right, but alas one day it was moved to make room for a bus shelter. Rarely, the full moon would pierce the industrial gloom but this could not be relied on.

Best of all was double summer time during the war, when it was often light until 10.30. In childhood this gave me nearly two hours of *Biggles*, G A Henty, R M Ballantyne, Jules Verne, and other boyish works that were all readily available then in secondhand shops or at the public library. Some of them would be hard to find now. I suppose that as a preparation for life—in a world with no red left on the map, and loud with vociferous demands for racial equality and womens lib—such reading was

pretty awful. Still, Jules Verne wasn't bad and there were bits of H G Wells too that prepared me for scientific wonders to come. Had I known it then I might well have envied the Shetlanders who in June and July have good light until midnight and beyond, and need no concerted clock tinkering to extend the reading day.

The trouble now is that it seems almost impossible to retire to bed early enough for purposeful reading. In childhood one was packed off soon after tea with little desire to sleep; as an adult, allegedly master of one's own life, retiral is indefinitely delayed until so late that sleep immediately follows the contact of head and pillow. Hence a small cairn of half-read literary masterpieces accumulates at the bedside—commemorating good intentions, but a constant reproach to the indiscipline of late retiral and disorganised evenings.

I could give an interesting account of “books I have not finished”—rather like my youngest son whose sole literary achievement to date has been to plod earnestly through 75 pages of *Barnaby Rudge*, only to get bogged down in the end and become the undeserving butt of a much repeated family joke: my wife has been reading a life of Simpson (the obstetrical anaesthetist) for two years with little real progress. I am still striving to finish Compton Mackenzie's *Sinister Street*, but advancing very slowly. It seems a pity that a writer with such an enviable way with words should not be able to stem the flow a little. I believe self-indulgent would be the correct critical term with which to describe such verbosity. In the end I fear it may suffer the fate of my earlier dalliances with Butler's *Erewhon* and *The Way of all Flesh* and tentative dips into Kafka and Thomas Mann. Every month or so the accumulated residue of books with their ever-hopeful bookmarks, or barbarically turned down page corners, both clearly showing low achievement, are dusted down and returned to the bookcase. In succeeding months, with renewed optimism, they are replaced by others. Hope, as they say, springs eternal.

For me, bedtime reading of long books is not a success. Only a few pages are read at a sitting (should it be a lie-in), and those with difficulty. By the time the next evening comes round the previous session has been forgotten and a recapitulation is needed—one step forwards and two steps back. Progress is slow and little is retained. In this context “well begun” is most certainly not “half done.” To use the classics as a sedative is scarcely to put them to their proper use.

Small may be beautiful

Why is it, I wonder, that short stories are less popular than they were? They can be read at one sitting—some, at least, are very short. Could it be that their very brevity is a disadvantage? They must be read slowly and every word weighed carefully. The modern fast reader tends to skip large chunks of print, thus converting many pulp novels into what they often probably are—short stories, excessively garnished. Careful diligent

reading of short stories is nearly as hard as mastering poetry and consequently may not be sufficiently relaxing and escapist.

But the good short story has an impact that should not be missed and ought to be popular in a society where haste is of the essence, and subtlety is unfashionable. It is a curious anomaly that as our days are increasingly distracting, and as travel becomes more hectic, popular novels become longer than ever. *War and Peace*, *The Gulag Archipelago* (in three volumes), and long-winded Americana like *Catch 22* are immensely fashionable. It was not always so, it seems:

To Nysus

How shall we please this age? If in a song
We put above six lines, they count it long;
If we contract it to an epigram,
As deep, the dwarfish poetry they damn;
If we write plays, few see above an Act,
And those lewd masks, or noisy fops distract,
Let us write satire then, and at our ease
Vex th'ill natured fools we cannot please

Sir Charles Sedley (1639-1707)

Fashion now seems to dictate that an interest be declared in long works—but I suspect that few read them any more than they read their expensively illustrated coffee table adornments. Should we not learn, as we have done in other spheres, that “small is beautiful.” Talking of another art form, Mozart wrote: “In Germany we rather like length, but after all, it is better to be short and good.”

But to write memorable short stories is difficult. Hemingway suggested that each word should be weighed as carefully as for a telegram to be paid for by the author. The genre tends to breed

the specialist—De Maupassant, Poe, or Somerset Maugham, whose forays into longer forms are less memorable. My earliest recollections are of the short stories of Wells and Poe. *The Cone* still haunts me, although less obviously horrific than Poe's Gothic tale, *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Nastiness, I fear, is a feature of many short tales. I recall in particular Thomas Hardy's *The Withered Arm*, televised a few years ago with great success. For light relief one can always turn to O Henry, who writes with great brevity and style and is relatively cheerful.

My two favourite writers I leave to the end. Neither is widely read today and both deserve better; perhaps I may encourage others to create a demand. Both wrote little of consequence except short stories, thus showing the virtues of specialisation. H H Munro (Saki) wrote stories with a sting in the tail, but nothing overtly horrific or calculated to disturb sleep. They are beautifully written and show a great understanding of the repressed Edwardian child (which he was himself). They also contain brilliant descriptions of birds and animals—species that he clearly felt to be more satisfactory than man. Ambrose Bierce is my other favourite; most of his stories are based on his personal experiences in the American Civil War. His most famous tale was televised some years ago, vividly portraying the last home thoughts of a confederate prisoner about to be hanged after a drumhead court martial. A cruel story, but graphically written and quite unforgettable. If you can obtain a volume of his collected stories, grab it—they are hard to find.

Perhaps, when I find more leisure, one day I will turn again to novels and biography, perhaps I might even get through *The Gulag Archipelago*: but at the moment my leisure reading will largely remain the short story. Like the therapeutic apple it may be consumed at one sitting and does one no end of good.

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What might be the cause of involuntary snapping of the jaws in an elderly woman?

Conceivably two or three consecutive “snaps” of the jaw could be due to a neuromuscular disorder, and I suggest that a neurological examination be made for evidence of involuntary movements elsewhere. The temporomandibular joint is a diarthrodial joint containing a meniscus and is subject to the types of episodic internal derangement occurring in similar joints elsewhere. Temporary subluxation may occur and lead to a snap. Such symptoms may occur for a long time before osteoarthritic changes are seen on a radiograph, as such changes are generally late. Although exercises have been prescribed, these would seem particularly unlikely to add much to the thrice-daily habit of chewing. Occasional hydrocortisone injections into the joint help. Most important is to detect and correct any underlying disorder of “bite,” and to this end dental advice should be sought.

Is toxoplasmosis a health hazard for blood transfusion or laboratory staff?

Toxoplasma gondii infection is widespread in animal and human populations throughout the world. Serological surveys show incidence rates ranging from 5% to 50%. Most infections are acquired symptomlessly; among the immunologically normal clinical disease is uncommon and serious illness is rare. Though *T. gondii* cysts may be present in many biological specimens, there are few accounts of clinical disease in laboratory staff; those noted suggest that infection leading to clinical disease tends to occur in research laboratories in which the numbers and virulence of the organisms may be increased inadvertently by laboratory procedures, such as cell culture or passage. The health hazard of toxoplasmosis to laboratory staff, defined as a risk of developing clinical disease, is extremely small. Congenital infection is the most serious threat. Procedures causing a risk of acquiring toxoplasmosis, symptomlessly or clinically, present a hazard for seronegative pregnant laboratory staff. This risk to the fetus,

however, can be avoided by careful observance of high standards of microbiological techniques and safety precautions in laboratories.

Is garlic oil a carcinogen?

Garlic oil is a mixture of chemicals including allicin, with antibacterial properties, diallyl sulphide, and allylpropyl disulphide. The Food and Drug Administration in the USA reviewed the status of garlic oil in 1974 and left it in the broad category of substances that are generally regarded as safe (GRAS). Garlic oil has not been subjected to the large series of toxicological tests normally required for man-made food additives. Published evidence suggests that it has antimutagenic properties that might theoretically be beneficial in the treatment of cancer. No one, it would seem, has reported evidence suggesting that it is a carcinogen.

Can chloroquine injection be given concurrently with a therapeutic dose of amodiaquine hydrochloride (Camoquin)?

Chloroquine and amodiaquine are both 4-aminoquinolines and their toxicity is probably additive. Chloroquine, especially by injection, has caused death,^{1,2} usually because of damage to the heart or nervous system. A slow intravenous infusion is safer than injection. Amodiaquine may be a more effective antimalarial than chloroquine in some parts of the world.³ If chloroquine (by injection) and amodiaquine (by mouth) are given together the total dose should not exceed the recommended dose for chloroquine alone. For example, the total daily dose of chloroquine+amodiaquine in milligram base should not exceed 15 mg/kg on the first day or 10 mg/kg on subsequent days. The total dose of 4-aminoquinolines should lie between 10 and 50 mg/kg dependent on the rate of clinical and parasitological improvement.

¹ Don Michael TA, Aiwazzadeh S. The effects of acute chloroquine poisoning with special reference to the heart. *Am Heart J* 1970;79:831-42.

² Carson JW, Barringer ML, Jones RE. Fatal chloroquine ingestion: an increasing hazard. *Pediatrics*, 1967;40:449-50.

³ Hall AP. The treatment of malaria. *Br Med J* 1976;i:323-8.