Reading for Pleasure

Contemporary novels on the bus

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I have one major advantage in life, and that is that I did not marry a doctor. Having married a mere nurse, our joint income is too small for us to become a two-car family, so on alternate weeks, when it is my wife's turn for "the school run," I have to travel to work by bus. That is the advantage: it gives me an opportunity to read. I draw the line at learned medical books or journals on public transport; in my view that smacks of exhibitionism. Instead, I rarely travel without a paperback novel in my anorak pocket. Furthermore, my frequent trips to London are made worth while for the journey alone, because they give me a chance to read; the official reason for travelling to the big city is of secondary importance. It is a nice habit to have got into, this commuter reading. I notice that only a tiny minority of my fellow commuters read while travelling, but without a book I end up feeling depressed—reliving and preliving all my problems. When I was a student I read most of Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh on the British Rail Southern Region. Briefly I think I became quite literate, but unfortunately I lost the habit and later became obsessed with exams and career. Now that I have a permanent job, incompetence and ignorance no longer matter and I have started reading for pleasure again.

Exotic lives

Usually I read books author by author, consuming their works until their similarities bore me. I loved the frenetic and illogical lives of characters in Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net*, *The Bell*, and *The Severed Head*, but finally ground to a halt with *The Red and The Green*. She deserves better from me and I shall return to her novels again soon. I was introduced to Tom Sharpe's books by my senior house officer some years ago—and I promptly sent him off to do psychiatry. *Porterhouse Blue* is Sharpe's most entertaining novel, and is about the election of the master of a wilfully retrogressive Cambridge college—a sort of C P Snow gone mad. The plight of a postgraduate student filling contraceptives with coal gas—or North Sea gas—hoping that they would float up the chimney and away is improbable enough for me; the resultant explosions led finally to the appointment of the college head porter as master. Another reason why I liked this book was that there was much in the blinkered behaviour of the dons that rang true of other professions, not least our own. Sharpe's two South African books, *Indecent Exposure* and *Riotous Assembly*, are also funny but confirm that it is not funny to be there, especially if one is black. I found *The Throwback*, an account of an English landed youth plotting the elimination of his tenants, pointless, overdone, raucous, and uncontrolled. Sharpe's latest book, *Ancestral*

Vices, while still lunatic, has more of the satire of his earlier novels. It's a long time since I was last reduced to helpless laughter—but reduced I was, much to the alarm of my fellow passengers on the 61 bus from Rubery.

Many authors and playwrights seem to concentrate on the moneyed classes for their inspiration. Perhaps they are interesting to some, but I think that the middle-class academic world of Redbrick and Oxbridge are much funnier. David Lodge's *Changing Places* is certainly the most entertaining academic novel I have read. It is based on an ill-disguised Birmingham and is all that flyleaf reviewers want: "Funny, hilarious, riotous, earthy, sexy, zany, disrespectful," etc. There is, however, much more than that. The exchange of jobs between a member of the English department in the University of Rummidge, England, and an assistant professor from Euphoria, USA, is seen convincingly through the eyes of both parties. The contrasts are predictable, I suppose, but most ingenious are the differing views on immorality and incompetence. In Rummidge incompetent dons who publish nothing have right of tenure; the only sin that guarantees dismissal is sexual immorality, especially with students. By contrast, promiscuity is the norm in Euphoria, but failure to publish leads to inevitable sacking—often by the students themselves.

Lodge's later book *How Far Can You Go?* is a novel about a group of dutiful Catholic university students followed through from the 1950s to the 1980s. I have no religion and it seems to me that Catholics and lapsed Catholics spend much of their time agonising about being Catholics and lapsed Catholics. As an Anglican parson's son myself I can understand some of their worries which, after all, are similar to those of anybody with a post-Christian childhood. We all believed in hell once, and its abolition has come as a great relief. This book is relevant to all students who have lived through the last 30 years from an era when times were inhibiting and the middle classes inhibited. David Lodge takes us through discovery and disillusionment as this sad cohort found out how far they could go. The book is extremely clever, and funny too—but it is not all funny and part of the book screams.

Continuing in the line of novels about academia, Malcolm Bradbury is much less kind than Lodge. His novel *The History Man* (recently serialised on BBC television) is vicious; few heroes have been painted quite so cruelly. All one's prejudices about lecturers in sociology in trendy universities are fuelled here. Why do so many media-conscious sociologists talk with clichés and jargon that turn the rest of us off? How many genuinely good ideas are submerged in verbal steatorrhoea, pale, bulky, and offensive.

Both sides of the Atlantic

We would all like to get our BTA (Been to America) to add to our MRCPs, and Bradbury's *Stepping Westward* describes a young don's attachment to a mid-western university. For me, the mid-west always seems to be indescribably depressing and

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bleak—like endless Australian outback. My views on both “big countries” are based on no experience. I have flown across the American mid-west, and all there seemed to be was a gloomy excess of light figuratively and abstractedly represented in a thin line across a white canvas. For some reason, which sadly I have never experienced, those who have stepped westward seem to carry some great burden for months after they return. In that vast American desert there appears to be some academic Mecca—where scientific standards are amazing, and facilities unique. Return to the miseries of gerontocratic English teaching hospitals produces some form of persistent jet lag; those who suffer have only their wives to blame for bringing them back home. Those with BTAs meet in corners and vie with each other to see who is the most miserable, saying, “I’m more disillusioned than you. . . .”

From America there also comes the phenomenon of American Jewish women writers—and they truly are a phenomenon. All these writers describe people who have the undeserved advantage of enough money—so that they have time to indulge their whims. All have somewhat harrowing lives as they examine their persistently subservient role to improbably insensitive husbands. *Kinflicks* by Lisa Alther, *Wifey* by Judy Blume, and even *Compromising Positions* by Susan Isaacs are all sexy, readable, and entertaining; and, in the end, inevitable. And then we have Erica Jong. *How to Save Your Own Life* is so sexually explicit that one is inevitably turned on; but what would happen if a man wrote such a book? Surely it would be deemed pornographic by the reviewers, and would be relegated to the lower end of the paperback market beside television “novelisations” and Mills and Boon—not for the literati. Erica Jong is not pornography—she is brilliant, funny; but the problems that she describes are full of pain. She is perhaps the first serious writer who has had the courage to hold nothing back in her descriptions of sex, whether in fantasy or reality. As Billy Connolly has said, there’s no point in pretending we don’t do these things—so it’s illogical to exclude them from modern novels.

I much enjoyed Colin Douglas’s *The Houseman’s Tale*. I had

thought that, at last, here was a well-written book about hospital doctors that did not fall into the trap of ending up as potential for some ghastly TV soap opera. The cover of the paperback version was clearly an attempt by the publisher to downgrade this serious novel, initially with a picture of a half naked and probably prediabetic nurse—and later with a horrible cartoon drawing. Douglas’s second and third books, *The Greatest Breakthrough Since Lunchtime* and *Bleeders Come First*, have proved a major disappointment. His original book was bitter and questioning, and I had hoped that the later novels—especially the book about medical research—would be as good. Sadly they have been submerged by inevitable “amusing incidents.” The last book is no better than the tenth Herriot “vet book,” potential Saturday peak-viewing material but otherwise pointless, endless Scottish M*A*S*H.

There is no need to feel that one must finish a book if one does not want to. *Zen and the Art of Motor-cycle Maintenance* by Robert M Pirsig, well reviewed, but in my view turgid and dire, will probably never be finished, and I suspect that many who buy it will agree. Perhaps I found it grim because it conjured up the same thin line across the bleak American horizon that distressed me so. The idea of juxtaposing a philosophical view of life with a philosophical view of motor-cycle maintenance, from both a classical and romantic standpoint, is highly original if unlikely. The many rave reviews on the book cover suggest that this is a brilliant work—so I should feel guilty for not bothering to finish it.

The authors who I have also enjoyed are Gore Vidal, John Fowles, and John Updike. I am deeply indebted to Robert Graves, J R R Tolkien, George MacDonald Fraser (Flashman), Isherwood, and Greene. Try as I do I cannot get into Anthony Powell’s *A Dance to the Music of Time*, possibly because this series of books deals mainly with the upper middle and moneyed classes. In the next few months Anthony Burgess and Iris Murdoch again can be sure to occupy me on the buses of Birmingham. The occasional missed bus stop is a small price to pay.

What is the Lincoln-Oseretsky test for “soft” signs of motor dysfunction?

The Oseretsky tests of motor proficiency were developed in Russia in 1923 to provide a year-scale of motor maturation comparable with the Binet scale for intelligence and the Vineland social maturity scale. If so desired the tests can be adapted to compare the efficiency of either hand or either foot. The original formulation reached the English-speaking world via the Portuguese translation and failed to find general favour as too time-consuming and cumbersome. Subsequently there have been many modifications and simplifications of the original tests. The Lincoln-Oseretsky Motor Development Scale is but one example.

Sloan WW. Lincoln-Oseretsky Motor Development Scale. *Genet Psychol Monogr* 1955;5:183-252.
Stott DH. General test of motor impairment for children. *Dev Med Child Neurol* 1966;8:523-31.

Can all long-acting sulphonamides and sulphamethoxypyridazine be used with pyrimethamine (Daraprim) for resistant malaria and what is the recommended dose? Has pyrimethamine been withdrawn from the market in any country, and if so why?

Although any long-acting sulphonamide would tend to potentiate the antimalarial effect of pyrimethamine, it is best not to experiment as, to be most effective, the ratio between the sulphonamide and the pyrimethamine must be optimal and the half life of the sulphonamide should match that of pyrimethamine fairly closely. It is best to stick to a combination of proved effectiveness against malaria. The only sulphonamide/pyrimethamine combination at present marketed is Fansidar, which is available as tablets each containing 500 mg of sulphadoxine and 25 mg of pyrimethamine. The tablets are easily

divided into quarters for use in children. Full prescribing information is available from the manufacturers. A similar combination drug for malaria is Maloprim, which is available as tablets each containing 100 mg of dapson and 12.5 mg of pyrimethamine, and also as a syrup for use in children. Maloprim is used only for preventing malarial attack, whereas Fansidar has been used to treat malarial attack in areas of chloroquine resistance. Usual dose of Fansidar in an adult is two tablets immediately, followed by a third the next day. When used for prophylaxis the dose is one tablet a week. Prophylactic adult dose for Maloprim is one tablet twice a week. I know of no country which has withdrawn pyrimethamine from the market. The drug under the trade name of Daraprim is widely advertised in Africa as “Sunday-Sunday medicine.”

On repairing a femoral hernia in a 25-year-old woman I was surprised to find the fimbriated end of the Fallopian tube of the same side contained within the hernial sac and adherent to the sac wall. Is this unusual?

The Fallopian tube is certainly an unusual but by no means rare content of a femoral hernia. It has been said that any of the abdominal viscera except the liver and pancreas have at one time or another been encountered in the sacs of femoral hernias. Omentum and small intestine are the most frequent organs to be found, but among structures less often present are the colon, bladder, ovaries, epiploic appendages, strangulated Meckel’s diverticula, and inflamed appendices, as well as Fallopian tubes. Not only may a large variety of viscera be encountered within the sac, but inflammation of the structures occupying the sac may also occur as well as torsion of organs within the sac, including tubes, ovaries, and epiploic appendages. Either of these conditions may produce adherence of the contents to the the wall of the sac.