Reading for Pleasure

Not always a joy for ever

ANDREW SMITH

Until I became a doctor most of what I knew about human behaviour came from books—mainly novels, but with a seasoning of Sigmund Freud. Apart, that is, from the behaviour of my contemporaries (few of whom read for pleasure). Some of the arts course ones read effectively enough to get English and history scholarships to Oxbridge but they seemed to take little more pleasure in reading English than I did in reading chemistry and physics. I should have liked to have changed places with them but even in those days an elementary knowledge of science was needed to get into medical school, and the contrast between science and novels so enhanced my pleasure in reading that I don't now regret the wasted time. Most of my friends who read books because they had to seem to have stopped when they left university. If novelists are mentioned now, they hark back to D H Lawrence, Hemingway, and the early Evelyn Waugh. They know who Irish Murdoch and Kingsley Amis are, to be sure, and probably read *Under the Net* and *Lucky Jim*, but haven't read much since. I read both with increasing pleasure because these authors describe the kind of behaviour I come across every day.

Love and affection

One of my medical school lecturing tasks is to teach pre-clinical medical students about human development and behaviour. A discussion about lectures and films on sexuality with my tutorial group brought up such questions as the effect of the contraceptive pill on promiscuity, the relation between pornography and sexual deviation, and the like. One girl said, "We are discussing sex as if it were an end in itself. It isn't, is it? It's part of love and affection." I thought she must have read *Jake's Thing*, Kingsley Amis's latest novel. But neither she nor anyone else had. Only two had even heard of him.

Jake is an Oxford don in his late fifties who becomes impotent. A successful womaniser in his younger days, he is now married to an intelligent fat woman about 15 years younger than himself. He feels no desire for her and decides that he ought to do something about it. He goes to his GP, a superficial non-communicative ass who spends part of the consultation questioning Jake about a previous illness he never had, oblivious to his repeated denials. He finally refers him to a sex therapist, who turns out to be a diminutive psychologist with an Irish accent called Rosenberg. This unlikely person takes a sexual history and pronounces that Jake's impotence is due to guilt about sex, though it is obvious to both Jake and the reader that this diagnosis is quite unfounded. He is put through the whole

gamut of sex therapy techniques: buying pornographic books, writing out sexual fantasies, attending sex laboratories, going through non-genital sensate focusing sessions with his wife. None of them work. He is then sent to a workshop where everybody has a different kind of problem: shoplifting, homosexuality, fear of the dark, pathological weeping, variegated phobias. His problem, he is told, is the overcoming of guilt, shame, and thinking everything about sex is unpleasant, despite the fact that it is not.

Jake's revolt

At this point Jake turns against the whole business. When he looks critically at his sex therapist he is struck by his complete ignorance of everything outside his specialty. Amis treats this theme with characteristic hyperbole. "He didn't know where Freud functioned, what had happened in 1848, or who James Bond was. Had never heard of the Titanic, haggis, T S Eliot, plutonium, Lent, Vancouver (city, let alone island or chap), Herodotus, Sauternes, the trooping of the colour, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the battle of Gettysburg, Van Gogh, Sibelius, Ulysses, chlorophyll, Florence Nightingale, the Taj Mahal, pelota, lemurs, Gary Cooper, and Hadrian's Wall." Jake could see that theoretically there was no reason why he should never have heard of any of these and still be a good psychologist. After all, he had heard of pornography, parents, marriage, and sex, but nevertheless his total unawareness of other things did not inspire confidence.

Jake gives up the sex therapy, but his wife, who has joined the workshop to help him, continues. She says, "You have got to find out if you feel any sort of affection for me. Screwing and affection go together." He takes an ex-girlfriend out to dinner, gets drunk, and finds himself in her bed the next morning. When he asks what happened she tells him he performed adequately but then turned over and went to sleep. "I used to think you were a nice man but now I realise you just see women as creatures to go to bed with." This, he realises, is true. He doesn't like women much and despises them intellectually. His wife wants physical affection and he does not want to give it. That is the crux of the matter.

She leaves him for the husband of a friend who will give her affection, and Jake moves to a bed-sitter, where he settles down to a life of drinking plonk and watching television. This, he comes to realise, is what he seems now to want of life. Later, he gets a prolonged bout of diarrhoea and goes to his GP, who again inquires about the symptom he never had and then does a rectal examination. The sight of Jake's genitals reminds him of the last consultation and prompts an inquiry about his libido. When told it has declined further, he offers to send him to someone else. Jake rapidly thinks of all the women he has known, all their faults and irritations, their concern with superficialities, and realises he is happier without them.

The book is vintage Amis. The kind of stuff which at first got

him thought of as an angry young man and, later, as a fascist because he protested against falling academic standards in universities. He is neither. Like all good novelists he describes human behaviour in all its marvellous peculiarity. His flair is in satirising contemporary orthodoxies—in this case, faith in the myth of perfect sex; that sex is an end in itself which should supply every couple with simultaneous orgasm at every intercourse, and not, as my student suggested, part of love and affection.

Brian Richards recently wrote a piece in *World Medicine* deriding "The Myth of Sexual Medicine," the first authoritative

doctor to do so. But Amis, the professional novelist, beat him to it.

Irish Murdoch beats me to it all the time. I enjoy reading everything she writes but found the characters and situations in her early novels a bit far fetched. Not like real people. In recent books they are. Some of my patients, acquaintances, and friends get into predicaments quite as extraordinary and behave quite as unpredictably. Are people becoming more complex, or is life just catching up with art?

Contributions to this column are always welcome

MATERIA NON MEDICA

What's in a name?

One of the side effects of that necessity of effective government, bureaucracy, is much to be regretted. Our surnames have become fossilised.

The nobility were the first people to use in writing another label in addition to the name with which they were christened. Its effect was to give some indication where their families' interests lay and thus give a broad idea on what their politics would be. Geoffrey Chaucer was thus unusual among commoners in having what we recognise as a surname—but then he was an unusual man.

How more ordinary people were identified a little later can be seen from the list of archers recruited in 1415 to fight at Agincourt. The bowmen were predominantly Welsh, and their names are patronyms: Richard ap Gruffydd fought, as did Philip ap Adda. Some Englishmen were also recruited, and Thomas Cooke's name in the list shows that surnames were used in England earlier than in Wales—they did not become common there until the middle of the sixteenth century.

The earliest entries in *Alumni Cantabrigiensis* show that people were identified by where they came from—Nicholas de Rome was a Kings Scholar in 1319—but also show that Thomas Cooke was not unusual in being identified by what his family did. There are lots of surnames which tell us about people's occupations. The Church attracted several: Abbot, Bishop, Monk, Deacon, Dean, Friar, Prior, and Parson, while Thomas Cooke could have been renamed Archer, Bowman, or Fletcher. Many names tell us what people made, or what sort of animal they looked after—Glover and Cutler and Falconer and Ostler are examples—and others tell us of their administrative or clerical aptitude, being called Scrivener or Reeve, Burgess or Alderman. And, of course, there were Constables.

Alumni Cantabrigiensis tells us, among other details, what the father of the young man coming up to Cambridge did, and here are some occupations which catch the imagination, but have failed as surnames. How interesting it would be to be called Adventurer, Escheator, Woolstapler, Pewterer, or Cordwainer.

Which brings me to my point—I can think of no twentieth century surnames. Where are the Camerams and the Dubbing-mixers? Shall I ever be able to introduce you to Miss Radiographer? We have Chandlers and Drapers, but no Macromoleculists. The Clarks have not evolved into Programmings.

But at least the Gentlemen are still with us.—VIRGINIA ALUN JONES (clinical student, Cambridge).

Alpine flowers

Early June must be the most pleasant time to visit the Swiss alps. The skiers have vanished with the snows and the summer visitors not yet arrived. It is also the time to see the flowers. The hotel was in the small town of Villars, in the mountains at the eastern end of Lake Geneva. Within a hundred yards of its door was an untouched pasture with a wealth of water avens, *Trollius*, the clear-eyed *Ranunculus aconitifolius* and purple orchids hybridising so freely as to confuse even the most learned botanist with us.

We tramped up into the mountains behind and it was wonderful to see spring being retold as we climbed. At first the later flowers—the cowslip, oxlip, wind flower, and the purple *Primula farinosa*. Higher still one of the most delicate flowers I have seen, the *Soldanella*

alpina or mountain snowbell, looking like a miniature, tasselled, old fashioned lampshade. At the top, where the snows were still melting in sheltered gullies, were the real riches. Surrounding each patch of snow was a thick piled carpet of blue and white crocuses. It seemed a sacrilege to walk on them. Nearby were the gentian, both the vernal and trumpet species. Rocky outcrops around had their own particular treasure, the rare (at least in England) *Daphne mezereum* and masses of *Pulsatilla alpina*, the white alpine anemone. On a ledge overlooking a small frozen lake we found one single specimen of the clear yellow *Primula auricula*.

The "bag" for five hours of somewhat dilettante botanising was 40-50 species. Although some could have been seen in the British Isles it would have taken an ardent and experienced botanist to the top of Ben Lawers, upper Teesdale, and the Avon gorge to see a comparably rich alpine flora as we did in so short a time.—RICHARD WISE (medical microbiologist, Birmingham).

Short-wave messages

They used to call it the ether, but I'm not sure what they call it now. Whatever it is, it is all around us, and it is full of overflowing with messages from all corners of the earth, intended specifically for . . . you and me.

Most of the developed countries, and many of the under-developed ones, have short-wave external broadcasting services which beam programmes in English towards Europe. It is true, but misleading, to describe their content as "propaganda": some of it is enjoyable, and nearly all of it is interesting to anyone with even a remote concern for foreign affairs. You don't need any fancy equipment. For European broadcasts, reception is best after sunset, and if you are a beginner, start in the 49- or 41-metre bands.

I used to listen to the English service of Prague Radio during the spring of 1968. This was the time when Czechoslovakia was enjoying its tragically short period of intellectual freedom under Mr Dubček. This freedom, the sense of excitement, was infectious in spite of the distance and the comparatively poor reception. Bohemia is one of Europe's oldest centres of culture and learning, and here were the Bohemians re-united as it were with the outside world after years of sterile isolation. They discussed modern art, music, literature, theatre, democracy, religion, and, true to their name, or its later connotations, there was nothing reactionary or bourgeois in what they were saying: rather, the impression was of vigorous creativity, dammed up and then released. Then, as we know, Czechoslovakia was invaded and the whole thing was slowly suppressed. I still have tape recordings of Radio Prague's broadcasts at the time of the invasion, as the announcers bravely continued to provide the world with the truth of what was happening in the face of increasing difficulties. I still have the tapes, but I can hardly bear to listen to them.

That was strong stuff, but the short waves offer great variety. There are Strauss waltzes from Austria, folk songs from Hungary, pop songs from Sweden, and ragas from India. There is religion and politics galore. Fancy learning Dutch or Russian? A few winters ago I discovered how to cheer up the cold evenings with calypsos from the Windward Islands and start the following morning with a live cricket commentary from Radio Australia.

I never understood cricket, but the medium is the message, and it is very consoling on a cold English winter morning.—V P SMITH (general practitioner, St Ives, Cambridgeshire).