Reading for Pleasure

Thrall to the printed word

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I am not a lover of the classics, and there are only a few modern authors who I know will enthrall me. So from time to time, in an effort to escape from such a narrow brand loyalty, I join book clubs. I am always disappointed and usually cancel my membership (not always easy) after the minimum obligatory number of purchases. Although there is often a wide choice, somehow the books offered are never quite my cup of tea and the money seems wasted. Clearly, this is a personal quirk.

Bargain offers are another matter altogether. The public library holds regular sales of old stock, and I try to make two visits: early, to see if any otherwise unobtainable books, which I have previously been tempted to steal, are on offer; and again at the end, when everything is reduced to 10p. There has to be something worth 10p. Recently I acquired a profusely illustrated, albeit extremely battered, *Alexander the Great* by Peter Green, and the autobiography of a not-long-dead (I think) physician, which is so turgid and pompous that it is a joy to read.

The way to addiction

But Simon Raven, Patrick O'Brian, and Patricia Highsmith (when she is writing about Tom Ripley) hold me in such thrall that I buy their books at least twice—immediately on publication in hardback, to read for the first time and keep in mint condition, and again—sometimes again and again—to reread to destruction and lend or lose on holiday.

I feel I have wasted my life when I read Simon Raven, especially his *Alms for Oblivion* series of 10 novels about the post-war decline of the upper and upper-middle classes. What a world of intrigue, vice, and politics (high and low) his characters inhabit. Soldiers, dons, writers, businessmen, and, as the blurb has it, plain shits—they all do those dreadful and wicked things I have never had the opportunity (courage?) to do myself. The books are compulsively rereadable, first to be swept along by the narrative to some frightful or farcical dénouement, and then, again and again, to savour the descriptions and dialogue. Marvellous stuff.

There are many pretenders to the throne of Horatio Hornblower, but for me the only true successor is O'Brian's Jack Aubrey. I have not yet started his latest adventure, *Fortune of War*, because I know I shall be sorry to finish it. But dipping confirms that his friend Stephen Maturin, a cultured physician who doubles as ship's surgeon to cover his spying, is still with

him. And I could not resist buying Oliver Warner's *Fighting Sail*, a history of naval warfare before steam.

My enjoyment of books about old fighting ships has been greatly increased by the acquisition of *The Oxford Companion to Ships and the Sea*, edited by Peter Kemp, which not only tells you the difference between a Flemish horse and a futtock shroud—if that is what you want to know—but leads you on an unending trail of cross-references, so that you forget what you originally wanted to look up in the first place.

So far Patricia Highsmith has written only three books about Ripley, but he is not dead yet and I live in hope. This captivating psychopath unhesitatingly destroys anyone who threatens his egocentric lifestyle, and the absorption is in just how he is going to deploy his boundless ingenuity and effrontery to get away with it this time. If you don't know this astonishing man, start with *The Talented Mr Ripley*. Addiction is guaranteed.

I don't much like the puzzle type of thriller or detective story; I can never be bothered to work it out and the characters are often so secondary to the plot that I have to keep turning back to find out who someone is, which is why I have yet to finish anything by Le Carré. I'm not so much interested in who did what, as in whether and how he is going to be caught. This, combined with the pleasure of meeting old friends again, is why I like Ed McBain's 87th Precinct stories (over 30 so far) and have recently promoted them from paperback to hardback status. It would be terrible if, for example, in *Let's Hear It for the Deaf Man* the villain was caught, never to infuriate Carella *et al* again. But I doubt if they'd hold him for long.

Paul Scott has been a godsend to such an uncatholic reader as me, and I have raced through the *Raj Quartet* and *Staying On* twice already. The people are real and can be enjoyed again even when one knows their eventual fate. But what an intensely personal thing enjoyment of books is. The contributor who can't get into *The Jewel in the Crown* laps up Le Carré. I was disappointed by Ustinov's *Dear Me*, but can't resist Tom Sharpe. I shall certainly buy the successor to *Wilt* as soon as it appears in paperback. Sharpe is an absolute master of the truly monumental cock-up.

Men of action

Such history as I was taught at school was very dreary—mainly dates of kings, battles, and Acts of Parliament. I suppose it was easy to mark, like MCQs. Geography I wasn't taught at all. I've had no rebound resurgence of interest in either and can see no point in making a long journey to stand where Hippocrates might have stood; I can drive past a 3-star cathedral without a qualm, and if I see one château I have seen the lot.

But I like books by or about men of action (lone sailors and mountaineers excepted), especially when tricks of their trades are described. James Margach's *The Abuse of Power* is an eye-opening account of how prime ministers, from Lloyd George to Callaghan, have tried to manipulate the press. I don't think this

is just the paranoia of the media when they don't get their own way; it reads like a true account of shenanigans in the corridors of power.

Books by, or about, sportsmen seldom fill in much of the background. But a recent paperback, *Nastase*, by Richard Evans, really does take us behind the scenes of the world tennis circuit, and tells us whom Nastase is insulting during the other 50 weeks of the year—and where and how. The description of the top players hurtling madly from one contest to the next almost persuades me that they earn their money.

Those who enjoy a thoroughly rumbustious rollick should not miss *Rum, Bum and Concertina*, George Melly's account of his time as a lower-deck conscript in the post-war Navy. On second thoughts, belay that. I am not too sure it would appeal to what I imagine are the main factions of the *BMJ*'s readership. Anyway, the title is sufficient warning to the fastidious. Rumbumbustious might be a better description.

A word about words

I'm a sucker for word books and dip into them regularly, often while waiting for the paper to arrive. (And a dull paper it is—not the one I want at all.) Dictionaries are like a drug to me and I buy them on ridiculous and expensive impulses. I find the *Concise Oxford* best for everyday use—to check, for example, that rollick really is a word and not just ought to be. The

Shorter Oxford is more impressive, but duller. I can feel the urge getting stronger and stronger to go out and buy the mini-print *Compact Oxford Dictionary*, and I read recently that there is a new Collins on the way. But *Chambers's Twentieth Century* is by far the best for Scrabble.

The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought and Edward de Bono's *Word Power* are interesting guides to modern jargon (real jargon, not gobbledegook), although de Bono seems to support—or at least does not decry—the use of the word “parameter” to mean anything measured. This word seems to be making a comeback in medical writing; I saw it the other week in one of the journals I do not enjoy reading. *BMJ* readers may relax, however, as their editor, in *Thorne's Better Medical Writing* condemns it to Pseud's Corner, to be used at the writer's peril. A whole book of pseud words and usages is Kenneth Hudson's *The Dictionary of Diseased English*. This and the Gowers/Fraser *The Complete Plain Words* dismay me every time I look at them by making me realise how easy it is to accept and slip into diseased English. My spell on a district management team had a very bad effect. I defy anybody's antibodies to withstand five years of attack by administratese. That is something I really do enjoy not reading any more.

My brief was to write about what I have enjoyed reading in the past six months, so it is obvious that I have cheated. So, I suspect, have other contributors. And I have also read books that I am not going to mention. So, I suspect. . . . Well, perhaps not. I mean science fiction, of course.

Medicine and Books

Looking back in anger

Croom Helm Social History Series. “The People's Health 1830-1910.” F B Smith. (Pp 436; £14.95.) Croom Helm. 1979.

Frances Smith has chosen a huge canvas on which to convey her message, yet she paints on it in the minutest detail. She has written in anger—anger about the suffering of mankind. In her introduction she tells us that the book presents details of people and their diseases and the clinical, the quasiclinical, and institutional approaches to coping with them from “the 1830s when medical journalism started to flourish and relevant parliamentary inquiries began” until about 1906, when the infant mortality rate started on a downward trend which has continued ever since. In fact, these limits are not rigidly adhered to and allusions are made to incidents from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the first world war.

The book is long, gripping yet tedious, well written but without a clearly stated thesis. I doubt if I would have read it all had I not been asked to review it (but am only too conscious of how it feels to read derogatory comments from the reviewer who clearly does not bother to read a book), yet I am very glad that I have read it all.

Series of shocking case histories

So far as I can tell, the way the writer has gone about her task has been to read, and systematically to organise, material on her subject in the *British Medical Journal* and the *Lancet* from their inception through the years that interest her; her subject is so broad that this must mean that she has used a large proportion

of everything that appeared in those journals during their early years. “By the twentieth century,” she writes, “news of sanitary progress had all but disappeared from the *Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*. Forty years earlier it had formed a main part of every issue. By 1900 the journals were filled with highly technical reports of specialised clinical analyses and procedures.” The reports of the commissions, early epidemiological and public health research, new legislation, and the judgments of the courts all serve as a sometimes misty background.

The material from medical publications amounts to a long series of shocking case histories. Among them, the death of Caroline Gilbert searching for a maternity bed but “over her time” and “jolted to death” (literally) in a cart as parishes argued where she should be admitted, and the case of the footman who, because his penis had been cold for 12 days after he had lain with a woman who had been cold, and because he thought he had caught something, got into the hands of the quack who charged a fee amounting to several weeks wages for advising no treatment.

Undoubtedly such cases were proportionately commoner among the poor, with whom most of the book is concerned, than among the more prosperous, but the fact that the medical profession allowed these horror stories space in their journals presumably means that they were concerned. Presumably, too, the practice of medicine was not all scandal because editors show scant interest in the commonplace. Yet the only case history with a happy ending that I can recall in the book describes the birth of one of Gladstone's children; this is relegated to the status of a footnote, and is quoted as an illustration of the shortcomings of theodicy.