Reading for Pleasure

Escape in four categories

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All too often nowadays it seems that my reading is obligatory. Despite occasional attractive verbal infelicities—or even rarer doubles entendres—the agendas and minutes of area health authorities, hospital and medical committees, faculty and university bodies are not generally pleasurable reading. Nevertheless, they must be read carefully to avoid those minor (and major) administrative catastrophes that always seem to be just round the corner in these days of financial stringency and so-called industrial democracy. Scrutinising research grant applications is a more rewarding, if demanding, task, because the information that they contain often constitutes a mini-postgraduate course; the same is even truer of refereeing papers for a scientific journal. Higher still in my hierarchy of pleasure are those volumes of variable size I am occasionally asked to review; sometimes this endeavour brings genuine and unexpected rewards, as I become absorbed in a book that I would not otherwise read for pleasure.

Train, plane, and bed

But I have always been an avid reader and none of these activities can invariably be called “reading for pleasure.” The latter may be broken down into at least four categories.

Firstly (category A), there is the occasional holiday or weekend of “getting away from it all” when one of the major joys is to set aside a few continuous hours for enjoying literature. Secondly (categories B and C), there is travel. Living as I do at some distance from the metropolis where so many meetings take place, I always try to travel in at least one direction by daytime train, hoping fervently that my reserved seat will not be opposite that of a friend, colleague, or a stranger with a penchant for chatter. Then I can get down to some serious reading—even during the meal (category B).

Air travel (category C) is, however, quite different. On domestic flights there is time for little more than the morning or evening paper and a few pages of a novel. By contrast, European, transatlantic, or even more distant travel is a heaven-sent opportunity to devour that book which has been awaiting my attention for weeks or months. Cocooned in a corner, it is not too difficult to become sufficiently immersed to exclude sight and sound—including the ubiquitous inflight movie. And, finally (category D), perhaps the greatest pleasure of all, is that final 30-40 minutes last thing at night, when I retire to bed to read until the demands of slumber become irresistible.

These four categories of reading tend, in my view, to demand

rather different varieties of reading material, though it can often be fun to transfer a particular type of book from one category to the other to see how it fits in—and to prevent the pattern from becoming inflexible.

Old friends

I have always loved books, not just for their content but also for their shape, their feel, their size, their appearance, their binding, the quality of the paper, the type-face, the illustrations, and many other characteristics. Dictating, as I am now, from behind my desk, I can see in my bookcase a number of dear old friends to whom I turn from time to time, including Langhorn's *Plutarch's Lives*, Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (in a superb calf-bound edition), and two separate versions of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* sitting neatly alongside *Boswell's Diaries* and Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*. And below them there are two long lines of volumes produced by the Folio Society, including many of the well-known classics but also a number of minor gems which I would not have read had they not appeared in the Folio catalogue. These include *The Torrents of Spring* by Ivan Turgenev, and Peacock's *Crotchet Castle*.

But these are the volumes which I set in category A—not those that I pick up for casual late-night reading, but those that deserve attention for an hour or two at a time and from which it is wise to select an old friend, or sometimes one not read before, to be packed quietly into the suitcase so that I am never in foreign parts without something decent to read. I recall with horror one particular visit to South America during which I had absorbed practically everything that I had taken with me and all the tolerable paperbacks I could find, only to discover in Caracas airport that there was a 10-hour flight to the UK ahead, that I had nothing new to read, and that no books in English were on sale. Fortunately my wife, seeing my despair, came to my rescue with *Shardik* by Richard Adams, unexpectedly discovered in the bottom of her case, and all was well.

Weight and popularity balanced

In category B, on a long train journey, the duty of keeping up to date with medical and neurological journals always comes first, but I confess that there have been occasions when the knowledge that a fascinating biography or other entertaining volume was tucked away in my bag has meant that the latest issue of a journal received less prolonged attention than it deserved. These are the times, as on long aeroplane flights, when I try to alternate between a serious biography or weighty novel, and a more popular escapist novel. The disadvantage of being a member of two book clubs for over 20 years is that I have in a sense been spoon-fed with the literary choices of others; but it also has the immeasurable advantage that I am never short of interesting and enjoyable books. There are very few of the

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volumes which I have chosen from the catalogues of the Folio Society or which have been chosen for me by the Reprint Society that I should have preferred not to read or possess. But even these choices do not end the matter because no one, for instance, so far as I know, has established a book club for volumes of medical history or biography, and even the purchase of somewhat ephemeral paperbacks in railway stations and airport lobbies has occasionally thrown up unexpected gems.

Biographies and golf

I suppose that my interest in medical history began when, as a medical student, I read eagerly the works of the late Sir William Osler and particularly his *Aequanimitas and Other Essays* and his *An Alabama Student*. This led on naturally to an interest in the works of those whom he in turn had revered, and later to a study of two of the finest medical biographies ever written, Cushing's *Life of Osler* and Fulton's *Life of Cushing*. Coming much nearer to the present day, two attractive volumes with a strong historical flavour and of particular relevance to my own subject which I have enjoyed immensely are *The Human Brain and Spinal Cord* by Clarke and O'Malley, and *An Illustrated History of Brain Function* by Clarke and Dewhurst. Attractively written and produced, they give a fascinating insight into some of the origins of modern neurology.

But I must not give the impression that *medical* biography alone is what interests me. Though written many years ago, I came across and read with great enjoyment only recently *Golf is My Game* by Bobby Jones with a foreword by Bernard Darwin; I doubt whether I am capable of deriving much benefit from the opening chapters which strive to improve the reader's game, but I found fascinating the autobiographical section of the book, showing to the full the courage of a talented and dedicated sportsman who was determined to triumph over adversity. In a sense, this must be something of a golfing classic to be compared with some of the cricket writings of the late Neville Cardus.

Equally as memorable in quite a different way is that hilarious collection of golfing tales by the late and revered Sir Pelham Wodehouse, *The Clicking of Cuthbert*, which I reread recently and found as fresh and as entertaining as ever; who can possibly forget that "he took her in his arms, using the overlapping grip"? Much more topical, but equally funny in parts (though the humour is quite different), is *Dear Me*, the autobiography of Peter Ustinov. While I found its opening section a little dreary, the later pages describing his theatrical and military experiences were wickedly fascinating and at the same time perspicacious. Books like this fall equally well into categories B, C, or D.

Fiction and fantasy

Perhaps another influence on my reading for pleasure in the last year or two has been the experience of interviewing intending medical students, most of whom seem from their UCCA forms to have been nurtured on a literary diet of Tolkien or Richard Adams, or of science fiction from Arthur C Clarke to Isaac Azimov. Science fiction has never been my cup of tea, though some of Arthur Clarke's books are quite tolerable on a late-night journey, and he plainly deploys considerable scientific knowledge. Nevertheless, when, about two years ago, never having read Tolkien, I took away with me on a professional trip overseas his famous trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, I found it totally absorbing. I knew that it was fantasy and yet found it impossible not to be caught up in the web of excitement and intrigue which he wove. Why, then, have I found it impossible to read *The Silmarillion*, which I have tried to tackle on several occasions in the last few weeks, only to admit defeat? It reads rather like some of the less attractive sections of the Old Testament and I have found it very disappointing. Similarly, while admitting that *Watership Down* possesses remarkable

charm and at times real enchantment, I find that Richard Adams's latest volume, *Plague Dogs*, seems to have lost completely the magic—and not only because of its profoundly anti-vivisectionist flavour.

But what of those volumes in category D which I have probably read in even greater number late at night or on the move? There have been many of these—for example, Graham Greene's *The Human Factor*, which deals with the dull but clever Maurice Castle, Davis (his associate), who was fond of port, and the sinister Dr Percival with the deceptively bland manner—who must surely be one of the least attractive members of our profession to have been portrayed in recent fiction. I think I have read better and more enjoyable Greene's, just as, after being fascinated if repelled by *The Collector* by John Fowles, I turned with keen anticipation and continuing enjoyment to *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, only to be greatly disappointed subsequently by *The Magus*, which, like *The Silmarillion*, I have started several times but never finished.

Perhaps I am missing points of great virtue in these works and perhaps I have to admit to being a lowbrow. I enjoyed immensely *The Day Before Sunrise* by Thomas Wiseman, describing the escape from Nazi Germany of the secret policeman Ernst Scholler; *The Valhalla Exchange* by Harry Patterson (who, as Jack Higgins, wrote *The Eagle Has Landed*), another novel of the dying days of Nazi Germany; fascinating, too, were *Harry's Game* by Gerald Seymour, which gave a considerable insight into the psychology and infrastructure of the present conflicts in Ulster; and *Kramer's War* by Derek Robinson, which must be one of the few novels written about the German occupation of the Channel Islands. And even the sheer escapism of Frederick Forsyth, Len Deighton, or Alistair Maclean—as recently typified in his *Goodbye California*—has enlivened for me many a long and otherwise boring journey.

The great virtue of reading for pleasure is that one can choose, depending on the whim of the moment, to be edified, entertained, or even to escape, if only briefly, into the realms of fantasy or an exciting if totally unreal world.

An infant had severe diarrhoea on the day after each of her first and second immunisations with DPT and oral polio (trivalent attenuated) vaccine. Aged 10 months, she has just received the third immunisation with the same vaccine, and this was not followed by diarrhoea. Is she inadequately immunised against poliomyelitis?

Diarrhoea is a contraindication to oral poliovaccination since the vaccine may fail to take. In developing countries where diarrhoeal diseases abound the use of five or more doses of vaccine has been suggested to overcome this problem.¹ A similar policy should help when the diarrhoea starts after the vaccination, as in this case. I suggest giving at least one more dose now and making sure that the preschool "booster" is given in due course.

¹ John, T J, *British Medical Journal*, 1976, 1, 812.

Does drinking black coffee after heavy alcohol consumption lessen the latter's deleterious effect on driving performance?

Strong black coffee, traditionally used after an alcoholic binge for its sobering-up effect, does not increase the rate of alcohol metabolism.¹ In some people it may increase alertness but it would be dangerous to assume that tasks requiring considerable co-ordination and reflex skill—for instance, driving—would be performed more capably. Obviously the legal position in these circumstances would be unaffected. The only substances that are known to increase alcohol metabolism (in the short term) are fructose² and laevulose,³ but the amounts required are so great as to be nauseating—most people would prefer to remain drunk.

¹ Pawan, G L S, *Biochemical Journal*, 1967, 106, 19P.

² Tygstrup, N, Winkler, K, and Lundquist, F, *Journal of Clinical Investigation*, 1965, 44, 817.

³ Sammalisto, L, *Acta Physiologica Scandinavica*, 1962, 55, 313.