Reading for Pleasure

No claim to fame

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I have to confess to being out of place in this spot. I do not have the intellect of a Dune or a Hubble, or the feeling for literature of Alex Paton; I haven't even tried, like Roy Meadow, to lay a future novelist in a punt. (To the best of my knowledge I've never met a novelist past, present, or future.) My sole claim to fame is that I may have been at school with Michael Parkinson—and I'm not even sure about that. I'd love to be able to impress with the breadth and depth of my reading, but I can't. I found the names of Pasternak's characters so difficult to remember that I became confused, and Ivan Denisovich's day just left me feeling depressed. Nevertheless, my wife regularly complains that I always have my head in a book so I must read something.

Journals and music

Much of my reading is medical. I devour the *BMJ* each weekend and feel cheated when it doesn't come. I take four other medical journals: a general paediatric one, one devoted to paediatric neurology, one to epilepsy, and the *Johns Hopkins Medical Journal*, which reminds me of one of the most pleasurable periods of my life spent in the Baltimore palace of medical excellence. Spare moments during the week are spent in the hospital library browsing through the American paediatric journals, the *Lancet*, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and the neurology journals. I also subscribe to *Medical History*, though I find many of the articles too long and technical. I enjoy the funny bits in *World Medicine*, but I ignore the other free publication which comes through my door, one of the keep-you-up-to-date-without-tears journals of prepackaged, predigested medical information. I am uneasy about the way many students and junior colleagues seem to have forsaken conventional journals in favour of this type of publication, as it seems to me that they thereby gain much information but little knowledge. I subscribe to the *Clinics in Developmental Medicine* series of books and get round to reading some of them, and each spring I look forward to renewing contact with the urbanity of Sydney Gellis in the *Yearbook of Pediatrics* with his comments sometimes witty, sometimes preposterous, sometimes childish, but always stimulating.

In relaxation I turn firstly and instinctively to music, often trying unsuccessfully to listen and to read simultaneously. I tend to go through periods when I am absorbed by a particular instrument or kind of music. Recently I've been fascinated by classical cello and jazz piano and have derived much pleasure from the addition to my collection of the HMV three-record set *The Art of Pablo Casals* and a Concord jazz record *Now* by Peter Nero. The latter has a clarity of piano playing which I find quite

thrilling. In my non-medical reading I'm a "dipper." I dip into *National Geographic Magazine*. I particularly enjoyed the article about Mecca in a recent issue and it turned out helpful in making my conversation more informed when I was invited to take tea in the home of a Pakistani family. Incidentally, for anyone with children of 8 and upwards I can thoroughly recommend the children's version of this magazine, *National Geographic World*.

Leisure and learning

Two books I've enjoyed dipping into recently have been *Byzantium* by Yanagi, Takahashi, Tsuji and Nagatsuka, and *The Inventions of Leonardo da Vinci* by Charles Gibbs-Smith. The former is a large, beautifully illustrated account of Byzantine art which I hope will add considerably to the pleasure of my next visit to Greece. Leonardo, of course, is universally recognised as a prime example of the genus homo sapientissimus, and so it is comforting to see that many of the great man's inventions were quite impractical and that he even made quite simple mistakes. He drew a plan for a tank, for instance, in which the wheels were turned by a crank but, as drawn, front and back wheels would turn in opposite directions. He certainly had a superabundance of energy and with his well-known habit of mirror writing it seems unlikely that, had he been born 500 years later, he would have escaped the label minimal brain damage (or dysfunction, whichever you prefer).

Of books I've read of late I found William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* particularly moving. We cannot afford to forget how easily civilised society can give way to thuggery and inhumanity, and the message of this book has seemed even more relevant in this winter—which has produced the unforgettable phrase, "If some people die, so be it."

My medical hero figure has for a long time been Sir William Osler. Sixty years after his death I believe we can still learn much from his ideas about what makes a good doctor. Pride of place on my bookshelf is reserved for the two volumes of Harvey Cushing's biography which I bought at Johns Hopkins, where Osler, Halstead, Welch, and Kelly were the start of it all. But this is cheating, because the editor said I had to write about what I've read in the last six months.

For my leisure reading I'm more inclined to turn to a thriller, and those I've recently enjoyed include Eric Ambler's *The Schirmer Inheritance* and Helen MacInnes's *The Double Image*, which filled in the empty corners of Christmas for me this year. I have often entered the escapist worlds of Georges Simenon and Hammond Innes, and I preferred the newer post-"doctoral" Richard Gordon in *Surgeon at Arms* and *The Sleep of Life*.

I've never thought of myself as a reader. I've always told myself that I never could seem to find the time for it, being particularly hampered by my total inability to read in bed—I just can't get comfortable. When the editor asked me to make this contribution my first thought was to say "No, I can't." Thinking about it, however, has made me realise that reading is much more important to me than I thought. It's funny, isn't it, how we come to know ourselves?