Reading for Pleasure

Adult books

JAMES OWEN DRIFE

The truth is, I'm at a difficult age for pleasure. My father, who recently retired, tells me he has just read *Tales of a Grandfather*—1100 pages of Scott in 10 leisurely days. Some good stuff and some rubbish, was his verdict. My 4-year-old son, who has yet not yet started in practice, gets through several books a day, from *Jack and the Beanstalk* to *Thomas the Tank Engine*. If he thinks any of them are rubbish, he's too polite to say. I represent the breadwinning generation with little time left for literature, and much of my reading is done aloud for the children's pleasure.

Children's books give the impression of being enormous fun to write. Grown-up authors are a bit frightening, with their analytic coolness and their pursuit of fame, but children's authors must surely be avuncular pullovered figures, chuckling tolerantly amid jam-jars full of paint brushes. There seem to be no rules for success, apart from the obvious ones: you must take children very seriously indeed, and you must have colour pictures on every page. Beyond this, if there is a pattern it is that children's authors ancient and modern follow the Brothers Grimm in keeping their fiction red in tooth and claw. The *Gingerbread Boy* is slowly dismembered by a hungry fox, and two of the *Three Little Pigs* are devoured by a wolf who is then boiled alive by pig number three. Burning houses and road accidents are received with relish by the preschool reader, and in *Farmer Fisher* a car engine explodes in a shower of beautifully drawn plugs and pistons. Another favourite, an American fantasy called *More Horrible Monsters*, is full of toothy, horned, and pimply apparitions which save themselves from being totally nightmarish by wearing school caps.

Some children's authors rebel against the conventions of talking cars and animals, and try telling stories that won't have to be unlearned in later life. Ten years ago at Edinburgh University, Jonathan Wills became a cult figure by drawing funny anti-Establishment cartoons for the student newspaper, but now he has mellowed into producing fascinating children's picture books about life in the Shetland Islands—where he runs the local BBC radio station. Like all good children's books, his *Linda and the Lighthouse* keeps the parents' interest as well as the child's. But the highest art in this type of writing is to amuse the adults more than the children. Best at such duplicity, in my opinion, are Oliver Postgate and Peter Firmin, whose *Ivor the Engine* sagas have subtleties far beyond a toddler—though perhaps my 4-year-old picks up nuances equally outside my grasp.

Browsing in the rocker

With the children in bed and the evening's chores completed or abandoned, I can retreat to the rocking chair with a glass of Glenmorangie and a book of my own. Would it be carrying eccentricity too far to confess to a liking for reference books? It is said that Kipling used to take a dictionary on holiday for relaxing reading, but I'd rather unwind with an atlas, or one of those coffee-table art books. Lavishly illustrated collections of masterpieces are self-indulgent purchases, but they soothe the eye while improving the mind. Over the last few months Hans Jaffé's *Picasso*, in Hamlyn's *Twentieth-Century Masters* series, has managed to convince me that there is more to painting ectopic noses than meets the eye.

Even the most daunting reference books may be fun in small doses. At first sight the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* is a formidable affair. Edited by a former vice-chancellor of Oxford University, it boasts 140 multisynaptic contributors (including Sir Peter Medawar and Benny Green), who bravely attempt to define the jargon words of the twentieth century. Entries include "black-body radiation," "south bank religion," and "capital gains tax," and definitions can be scathing. "Angry young man" is a "term indiscriminately applied to several British writers in the mid-1950s, some of whom were remarkable for stupidity rather than anger." "Angst" is robustly dismissed as "a synonym for anxiety," and at "Beardsley, Aubrey" we are advised to "see under DECADENCE."

Everyone's favourite reference book, the *Guinness Book of Records*, has been banished to a high shelf in our house. It is such compelling reading that if I pick it up to check a simple fact like the heaviest baby ever born (29½ lb, as a matter of fact), I find that I waste an hour or two regaling myself with the details of Hans N Langseth's 17½-foot-long beard, or Colin Bowcock's 209 lb pumpkin. Or Donn Reynolds, who once yodelled for 7 hours 29 minutes. Or Frank C Watts, who wrote the Lord's Prayer 34 times on a postage stamp. . . .

Fix of fun

My craving for laughter verges on physical addiction, but it can be difficult to get a regular fix. There are several funny journalists around—I am a keen collector of the work of Patrick Campbell, Paul Jennings, and Alan Coren, and when Keith Waterhouse's *Punch* articles are anthologised I shall queue outside the bookshop—but fiction is a different matter. Short stories generally leave an aftertaste of Dostoevskian gloom; in a contemporary novel, if a comic effect is sought, the author makes something chaotic happen—the bookish equivalent of the scenery falling down. Those of us who like our humour witty rather than anarchic have to console ourselves with the fact that Wodehouse wrote over 70 books. So imagine my delight a

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few months ago when, acting on a tip-off from a surgical friend, I discovered *On Broadway*, a Picador paperback collection of the stories of Damon Runyon. Originally a New York sports journalist, Runyon's hardboiled present-tense style is unique:

One night I am sitting in Mindy's Restaurant on Broadway partaking of some delicious gefillte fish when a very beautiful young Judy comes in and sits down at my table and starts in sobbing as if her little heart will break.

I am about to call a waiter and have her chucked out of the place as her sobbing interferes with my enjoyment of the gefillte fish, when I observe that she is nobody but Zelma Bodinski, the daughter of Blooch Bodinski. . . .

Regularly he makes me weep with laughter, but Runyon's prime aim is storytelling, and his sad tales can start tears of sympathy too. A Canadian contemporary was Stephen Leacock, whose gentler style has dated more quickly than Runyon's bizarre prose. The *Bodley Head Leacock*, discovered in our local library, contains several gems, including his perplexed foreigner's attempts to understand the teaching system at Oxford ("I gather that what an Oxford tutor does is to get a little group of students together and smoke at them. Men who have been systematically smoked at for four years turn into ripe scholars"), and his reaction as a lecturer to someone in the audience collapsing while laughing at his jokes: "As in duty bound, I went right on with my lecture. But my heart beat high with satisfaction. I was sure that I had killed him." One discovery in the book suggests that Leacock may be less dated than I thought. Ten years ago, while watching a student revue in the Edinburgh Festival, I was impressed by a Chekhov parody so brilliant that I have remembered parts of it verbatim. Now I find that it was written by Leacock in 1911 ("Translated, by Machinery, out of the Original Russian")—a fact that says much about Leacock, and about student revues.

Penchant for poetry

Earlier I suggested that my tastes might be eccentric: to admit to liking poetry makes me almost certifiable. Poetry is an art that has suffered badly from the invention of the printing press. In the days when stories had to be memorised or written longhand, verse was the natural medium. Now that broadcasting has induced us once again to gather round the fire and listen to the spoken word, one might have expected verse to blossom anew. Not so: most poets still write to be read rather than heard, and poetry readings remain ill-attended festivals of intellectual elitism. The Scottish poet Alan Bold recently pointed out that only Pam Ayres and John Betjeman have used television to any effect, and they are consequently regarded as rather common.

I enjoy reading Betjeman's work, but an even more enjoyable experience is listening to him. In 1974 he recorded some of his poetry to the accompaniment of music specially written by Jim Parker, and the result (*Late-Flowering Love*, on the "Famous Charisma" label) was magnificent. On the printed page it is easy to turn straight to the jollity and firm metre of poems like "Joan Hunter-Dunn" and to be entranced by his half-assured, half-miserable self-mockery. Only on listening did I feel the impact of love-lyrics like:

I could not speak for amazement at your beauty
As you came down the Garrick stair.
Grey-green eyes like the turbulent Atlantic
And floppy schoolgirl hair.

George Gershwin once said, "Originality is the only thing that counts," and Betjeman, like other great artists, has pursued his own line in defiance of sceptics—in his case, cynics who believe that genius is incompatible with middle-class tastes. More records like this might win some of them over. I have just learnt that he made two others: I hope when I buy them they turn out to be as good.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Flight, fright, and sight

I was overjoyed recently when presented with the opportunity of trekking to Everest and also of flying into Lukla as part of the journey. We flew out to Kathmandu via Frankfurt and Delhi, the last stage of the journey taking in part of the Himalayan chain including Annapurna, Machhaapuchhre, Manaslu, and Dhaulagiri: a stunning hors d'oeuvre to whet one's appetite.

Having enjoyed Kathmandu for two days we were ready to fly on, weather permitting. The first view one has of Kathmandu domestic airport is invariably in the early morning, one's senses heightened by the hangover from the night before, when it seems the whole climbing world has assembled to observe the nail-biting, chain-smoking ritual of awaiting the announcement of the Lukla weather conditions. The décor does little to help the pickled neurones and frayed synapses, the building being littered with warped wooden benches and archaic avoirdupois guessing machines.

The whole flying day hinges on the weather report from Lukla, with most pilots being unwilling to fly in under anything less than perfect conditions. The reasons for this are apparent as soon as one sees the airstrip and its precipitous position in the Dudh Kosi valley. The strip climbs a mountainside, 9000 ft up amid some of the most impressive scenery in the world, with an incline of 1 in 10 increasing to 1 in 5 at the end.

Our flights were cancelled twice but, on the third day, we were greeted with a blue sky and a light mist clearing as the sun rose above the surrounding peaks. During the journey to the airport we caught glimpses of the distant peaks, their snowy tops glimmering in the sun. It was to be a fruitful trip.

With the usual chaos our bags were inspected, weighed, lost, refund, and then loaded. We wandered through the exit booth, a

seething mass of bodies, baggage, and boots. On the tarmac our aircraft, like obedient begging puppies, noses sparkling in the sun, awaited our arrival. We took to the air and winged our way, courtesy of a 130 mph tailwind, eastwards to Everest. The morning mist still shrouded the lower hills, although one could see the small houses scattered around the slopes of the sparsely populated foothills. To the north rose the ice giants of the Himalayas. The peaks in view included Everest, Nupste, Lhotse, Pumori, and Melungste. The blue sky complemented the white peaks, their ice-fields shimmering in the sun, and the classical snow-plume blowing off Everest completed the picture.

The plane flew directly towards Everest before turning slightly north to follow the Dudh Kosi valley. The valley is spectacular, carpeted with rhododendron bushes and split by a milky white stripe in the depths. A short way up the valley the airstrip appeared through the cockpit window, a small postage-stamp-sized streak on a green base.

How could anyone contemplate landing on that patch of bare ground? With my heart in my mouth, my finger on the camera shutter release, and my thoughts on who would benefit from the insurance, the pilot descended towards the airstrip.

The landing was near perfection and we returned to solid ground amidst a flurry of dust and goats. Being the first plane to fly for three days we were swamped by frustrated unwashed and unkempt trekkers, desperate to bathe away their blisters. The aircraft had been made ready for take-off within minutes and was soon disappearing down the runway in a cloud of dust, leaving one with the impression of being stranded among the mountain peaks.

That day we started our trek, but what a way to begin a holiday.—PAUL EDWARDS (senior house officer, orthopaedics, Kent and Canterbury Hospital).