Reading for Pleasure

Happy hunting grounds

NICHOLAS GOLD

With fish or pheasants, the thrill of the chase rivals the enjoyment of digestion, and, in much the same way, the pleasures of reading may start before the book is opened. Though I do not envy my barrister friends their midnight oil, or their predawn petrol, I should like to have their long lunch breaks in large towns where there lurk, properly concealed down narrow streets, those dusty pleasure grounds—second-hand bookshops. I used to think that they flourished best in seaside towns or spas where the residents are all in or behind bathchairs, but the barristers of the Midlands circuit say that Aylesbury is particularly good. Certainly no bathchair could survive amid Aylesbury's traffic. Bognor Regis has an excellent example, though possibly becoming too upmarket. I presume that because a large proportion of Bognor's population are in the process of turning permanent retirement into eternal rest there is a constant supply of books being disposed of by executors. Hence the pandemic of hysterical novels with sensationally lurid covers. Old ladies of unquestionable respectability seem to indulge in vicarious vice and violence that would have caused raised eyebrows even in prohibition Chicago. The old gentlemen, on the other hand, seem to have a more sober taste but I have reason to believe that this taste is inflicted on them by the old ladies to prevent them from becoming too frisky.

Rules of the jungle

Sadly, like real pubs, proper old bookshops are becoming rarer. The aged crone, as dust covered as her wares, who knitted some shroud-like garment except when staring malevolently at those intruders who disturbed her and her dust, now occupies her shroud—where no wind can reach her dust. Her place has been taken either by girls who type at 60 and talk at 120 words a minute simultaneously, or by young men economising on razor blades, whose knowledge of their wares seems to consist of a fleeting acquaintance with Captain Marvel. These places are the hunting ground of the real book fanatic. They resemble a jungle and the rules of the jungle apply. The geography is usually complex as the shelves, of amateur construction, have been crammed into two rooms, a passage, and often a basement originally designed for a quite different purpose. The shelves are always arranged to hold the maximum number of books and customers are expected to be emaciated contortionists with telescopic legs. The proprietor, of course, has the same problem as the professor: he knows that half his stock is rubbish. Unlike the professor, he knows which half but he hangs on to it—partly because he does not want his customers to have too easy a time, but mostly because it would cost too much to dispose of it. This is why the sort of books

that you might conceivably want to read are sandwiched between prewar medical texts, theological potboilers, and novels that nobody reads, written by authors that nobody has ever heard of. The mixture is spiced with several copies of Arthur Bryant's *Years of Endurance*, and at least five volumes of Winston Churchill's *History of the Second World War*. Many books are still in the cardboard boxes that they came in and any attempt to disinter them is certain to rouse the proprietor from her torpor—a serious error, because there is an inner sanctum where those who have bookwormed their way into her favour are allowed to browse among the first editions and other literary exotica.

The novice asks for a particular book and is either snubbed or charged extra: about 10 of the former to one of the latter. He then sidles off to inspect the shelves and reads all the titles at eye level. This is not entirely unrewarding. There may be a happy concatenation of titles like *Inspector West Investigates*, *Gray's Anatomy*, *Under the Red Robe*, or *Biggles Fails to Return*, *From Normandy to the Baltic*, *Without my Cloak*. Inside the least desirable titles are the splendid dedications from well-meaning relations that ensured that nothing else in the book was ever read. These are frivolities. The serious bookhound spends a couple of minutes feeling out the likely shelves and then climbs a ladder or goes down on his knees. Once upon a time somebody tried to arrange the books under subject matter, and the novels into alphabetical order of authors. The labels remain, but their relevance must have ceased shortly after the person who put them there was removed to the local psychiatric hospital.

It is interesting that there is always at least one shelf that proclaims itself devoted to mysticism. I like to think that this was a euphemism for "beyond classification." Just as reading the titles on the shelves is a waste of time, so also is reading the titles of the books unless you are intending to stay until the rain stops. You must develop the facility for spotting the readable book by the appearance of the cover. A thick layer of dust, for instance, indicates that nobody else has thought it worth withdrawing. An immaculate dustcover gives the same message. Go for the one with a slightly greasy back and scuffed top that shows it has been well handled. It is thus that you will find such gems as *The Man with Two Left Feet*, by P G Wodehouse, in which Bertie Wooster makes his debut under, for some unexplained reason, an assumed name; *The Twelfth*, by J K Stanford, which does for grouse shooting what *England their England* did for cricket; or my favourite medical book, *A Cure for Serpents* by Alberto Denti di Pirajno, a fascinating mixture of worldliness and benevolence, the ingredients of true humanity. I search with an open mind because I have never found a book that I have actually been looking for, but it must be possible to run particular books to ground—I once asked a barrister friend to find me hardback copies of two Hornblower novels and he produced them within the fortnight. This may be an example of the different ways in which legal and medical minds work.

Mutations and subspecies

Bookshops are living organisms and are therefore subject to the laws of Darwin. There are a number of mutations from the parent stock. There is the move toward respectability, wherein the shelves are further apart and filled with important works of literature (as opposed to mere books) such as first, special, or illustrated editions or signed copies. The stock is not so much to be read as to be admired by visitors. The staff, if male, is knowledgeable and polite but tends to be rather precious—somewhat like a resting actor. Women staff tend to spend a lot of time on the telephone discussing the events of the night before with other Sloane Rangers. I used to worry that my presence disturbed their conversation but I discovered that my fears were groundless because the flow continued unabated, even when I was standing right beside the young lady with an intended purchase in my hand. The difference between this sort of place and its progenitor is similar to that between a rough shoot and a home counties pheasant syndicate. If you want to pay through the nose to have the birds sent over you, this is the place for you.

A second subspecies is the sale counter in the shop that sells new books. The fascination of this collection is not so much that it might contain something that you want to read, but that you can wonder how any publisher agreed to bring out such guaranteed non-sellers. You will find books on West African witchcraft, old railways, macrame, matchbox collecting, Chinese poetry, panzer badges 1943–44, biographies of last year's pop stars or eminent unknowns like Sir John Brunner. You may have a preview of what is likely to be available by seeing what the book clubs are offering, three for £1, in the *Observer* colour supplement. Even so, I did in one such shop find a copy of Geoffrey Haggard's *Wooster's World*, a gazetteer of Bertie and Jeeves that has given me hours of pleasure.

Another growth, more of a sucker than a branch of the parent stem, is the shop where you can buy or even hire "adult" books and magazines. Why these publications call themselves

adult without falling foul of the Trade Descriptions Act, I don't know. You can also buy films. The one that I remember with a frisson of horror was a four-minute black and white 8 mm of a certain Chesty Morgan (84-23-36—I know that the *BMJ* is heavily into SI units but Ms Morgan just has to be an exception). It was in a place like this that I finally found a copy of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Both the cover and the proprietor informed me that it was by the author of *Lolita*. In fact, the sexual content is minimal and homosexual, and the book is a whodunnit of such complexity as to constitute a whatisit. I expect the proprietor was delighted to be shot of what, to his eyes, seemed such a dud book and must be pleased that I have not come back to complain or to have a third of the price refunded.

If you just want books to read the best value is undoubtedly the antique shop in name—but junk shop, in fact. The owner has to take several books in the process of house clearing or buying an auctioned bookcase. The books are usually the offers of the Reprint Society or the Companion Book Club. John Masters, C S Forester, and Ian Fleming would be representative of the novelists, who tend to write about actions rather than descriptions or psychological analyses. I have always had a particularly high regard for the prose style of John Masters. It is like a piece of old silver, smooth, polished, and no fancy work to distract the eye and become tarnished. Representative of the non-fiction authors would be Peter Fleming, whose *Bayonets to Lhasa* is a splendid foray into the sideshows of the imperial circus, and Alan Moorehead, whose *Blue Nile* and *White Nile* are not only very good reading but go a long way to explaining why modern Africa is in the mess that it is. For those, like me, who loathe travelling I would recommend a two-week Mediterranean tour taking in Corfu (*My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell), the Middle East (*Unofficial History* by Field-Marshal Bill Slim and *The Back Garden of Allah* by Jarvis), a detour down the Nile with Alan Moorehead, and back to the coast with A D D Pirajno; total cost is between £5 and £10. Who needs Thos Cook?

CHANCE, COINCIDENCE, SERENDIPITY

Heart murmurs mimicked

When I was a student at the London Hospital Dr Lewis Smith, my chief, used to demonstrate the murmurs found in patients with aortic regurgitation through imitating the changed systolic and diastolic sounds as "ruff-duff," comparing the noise to that produced by a steam engine in free gear halted in Cambridge Heath station. I was never told why it should be happening specially at Cambridge Heath, but presumed that, as a student, he had lodged in the vicinity and, as he entrained for Whitechapel each morning, had recognised the similarity of the sound to that of the heart of a patient of his who suffered from aortic regurgitation.

I had never passed through the station myself, nor was I sure of its location, but one night in 1941, during a heavy bombardment of London by enemy planes, on finding it difficult to return from a consultation in Essex I entered a train which I was told would take me to Liverpool Street station. I stepped into the compartment adjoining the engine and relaxed in the poorly lit carriage (the lights were heavily masked in those war days). We stopped at several intervening stations. At one of them I became instantly aware of the peculiar cadence emitted by the stationary engine; yes, it was "ruff-duff" as described by my chief. Curiosity compelled me to look out of the window, but the signs designating place names had been removed in case of invasion by the enemy. Presently, a railway porter passed by, and in answer to my inquiry as to the name of the station he replied "Cambridge Heath." The chuckle born of that coincidence lingered with me even after the devastation from that night's bombing met me on my return to London.

A corner bed in Turner ward at the London Hospital was adjacent to a windowed door which led to a balcony rimmed with a wrought-iron protective railing; being a hot summer's day this door remained open. The bed was occupied by a male patient with a peculiar murmur in the aortic area, which was about to be demonstrated to a gathering of medical students. It was explained to them that the murmur heard in systole and early diastole had a characteristic ring which had earned for it the label of "dovecote murmur," and arose from a rupture of one of the aortic cusps. I imitated the sound as "woo-oo, woo-oo." Instantly the sound was repeated on the balcony by a pigeon seated on the railing. Surely a rare coincidence, which appeared to confirm the correctness of the vocal similarity.

At the first outpatients' session after one Christmas a small boy of 8 attended with his mother. She recited the story of how the boy and his younger sister had set out to confirm that it was mummy and daddy and not Father Christmas who filled their Christmas stockings on Christmas Eve, so, on being woken up early in the morning by a noise, they rose to investigate. Treading the stair silently the little girl drew the boy's attention to another recurring noise which they concluded was arising from the boy's chest. Later the parents confirmed that it was so, and decided to visit the hospital to seek the cause. This time the murmur was in the mitral area and was confined to systole. It had the same rough character as the aortic murmur described above, but being systolic only in its timing, it was a recurring "woo"—a sort of demi-dovecote murmur—which told of a rupture of a mitral valve cusp. Asking the boy whether he believed in Father Christmas, he answered, "No, its a fake, as I had thought." An instance of discovery and sagacity—serendipity—in the very young.—WILLIAM EVANS.