Reading for Pleasure

More worlds per pound

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I am not the sort of person who likes books for the sake of their binding. I possess no first editions nor do I desire to. For me the value of a book is in the world I enter inside its covers. I buy mostly paperbacks; more worlds per pound. I hardly remember my father without a book in his hand. He was the sort of husband of whom C S Lewis said, "they were made for wives to talk at; it helps them to concentrate on their reading." He read indiscriminately; murder, mystery, cowboys, comedy, science fiction; any world but the real one.

I was brought up on Blyton, Biggles, and Bunter and now that my own children are of a suitable age I was disappointed to find that only Enid Blyton is still easily available, and many of her books are frowned on by librarians and the like. I did manage to find one Biggles book but was upset by the amount that he smoked. I am sure he must only recently have taken up the habit; I remember him as much more wholesome.

My children introduced me to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C S Lewis. I was just too old to catch this the first time around and, in fact, was pleased to read it when I was old enough to catch the nuances that must surely pass the children by. Thus captivated, I read the seven books of the Narnia series in three afternoons. C S Lewis was a stickler for the correct use of English. Such people are frequently criticised for restricting freedom of expression and the growth of the language. Lewis's children's books give the lie to these arguments. They are vivid and imaginative and make you turn the pages over. They also contain a profound theology. Jill's encounter with Aslan in *The Silver Chair* is the perfect allegory of Christian conversion. The juxtaposition of free will and irresistible grace is marvellously done and allows us to apprehend what is beyond our comprehension.

In his books for grown-ups C S Lewis is the master of style. Much of what I read these days seems almost wilfully opaque. Lewis demonstrates that profundity and obscurity are not synonymous. While I do not always agree with his theology (belief in purgatory, for instance), I return to his books, especially the autobiographical *Surprised by Joy* and *A Grief Observed*, with eagerness for his clear prose and limpid reasoning.

I first learnt about J R Tolkien when he died in a Bournemouth nursing home. I began with his children's book *The Hobbit*. It is a book of wonderful invention, exciting chases, and wicked villains. Above all it is full of fun and good humour. *The Lord of the Rings* is not a children's book: it is a morality tale for adults. The villains are irredeemably black and the heroes impossibly white. The picture of evil that it creates produces a sense of horror I have seldom met in literature.

Tolkien claimed to detest allegory and for that reason one

should be circumspect in interpreting *The Lord of the Rings* allegorically, but I find it hard to believe that he did not weave elements of the Christ figure into his heroes. Gandalf the worker of wonders is killed and yet returns in a changed and supernatural form. Frodo's suffering in Mordor surely echoes the Passion of Christ. Frodo, the ring bearer, is wounded in the hand in the final act of salvation. Aragorn's return in glory to Minas Tirith is clearly a picture of the return of Christ the King.

The Silmarillion was completed after Tolkien's death by his son. It puts together various background writings that fill in the gaps in the mythology of Middle Earth. It is totally lacking in humour and very boring. It should never have been published.

In my early teenage years I seldom read anything but science fiction but as science fact has overtaken the fiction I find too many of the plots painfully realistic and almost always pessimistic. For its more hopeful scenarios I prefer fantasy.

The chronicles of Thomas Covenant, Unbeliever, concern a successful author who in the midst of his success contracts leprosy. His wife deserts him; his friends despise him. In moments of anguish he is hurled against his will into a world of feudalism and magic where good and evil do battle in a plainer way than here.

Lord Foul's Bane, *The Illearth War*, and *The Power that Preserves* undoubtedly derive from Tolkien. Stephen Donaldson, the author, is the son of an American missionary who worked in a leper colony. He understands leprosy both pathologically and psychologically. I would guess from his bitter description of a fundamentalist healing meeting that he has rejected his father's faith. Yet something remains. He creates a world where predestination does battle with free will, ponders over the problem of evil in a world made by a good God, and agonises over a love that cannot abolish suffering.

Spy fiction and spiritual undertones

I have been a fan of Graham Greene since I was a teenager and have read even the minor pre-war entertainments. *The Human Factor*, the latest to appear in paperback, returns to the spyland more recently occupied by Le Carré. He brings to it a typical black humour and a very good joke about Smarties.

Greene parades his Catholicism pretty plainly in most of his books, and much of their character derives from that. The confessional is central to many of his themes and so is need for a continual cleansing. As with the Catholic Mass a perpetual sacrifice is necessary. The spectre of past sins continually hounds the protagonists and their shabby attempts at atonement are poor parodies of the real thing.

Le Carré himself has an unsuspected religious element in his books. His father was a Baptist lay preacher in Poole but he himself was sent to the high Anglican school at Sherborne. The tension that this produced is nicely reflected in *Murder of Quality*, when Smiley turns detective to solve the murder of the "chapel" wife who fails to fit in at the Anglo-Catholic school.

In *The Honorable Schoolboy* there is a brilliantly observed interview with a retired Baptist missionary that conjures up memories of draughty church halls with bare floorboards and wall-mounted gas fires. Towards the end of the interview the spell is broken. The missionary says that he is praying for his dead wife's soul. It is wrong and out of character; he never would, not after being trained by the China Inland Mission. Le Carré's style is important. He is writing about something that is mysterious, confusing, and misleading. In his world unaccountable things happen. The reader needs to be perplexed. How he creates this atmosphere and still remains readable is beyond me. The television version of *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* created the same atmosphere in a totally different way, but by going for the atmosphere rather than slavishly following the book it was a very satisfactory adaptation.

Le Carré's style seems to work only for his particular genre. His one attempt at mainstream fiction *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover* was a disaster.

The Honorable Schoolboy is set in the same location that Greene used in *The Quiet American*. For me they both have the strong spiritual undertones that are found in the best spy fiction. There is mystery and ritual and an overall morality but, especially, there is an arbitrariness. There is a plan that makes sense to some distant planner but to those on the ground appears random and without purpose.

There is a further element that adds drama and pathos. It is the way that free-will decisions made by the characters of these fictional worlds have unforeseen consequences that at the same time are important and significant in the overall picture. Nowhere is this better seen than in Len Deighton's antiwar book *Bomber*. Deighton's penchant is for detail. His search for accuracy is fastidious. The cumulative effect is overwhelming and shattering. One can well believe that the God of his world numbers the hairs on your head, but his purposes are not merely past finding out but callous and spiteful.

The real life Oliver Cromwell supposed that he could divine God's purposes and thought of himself as the instrument of the Lord. Lady Antonia Fraser's very sympathetic biography, *Cromwell, Our Chief of Men*, has surprisingly caught the essence of the man. It is surprising that an Irish Catholic should comprehend the Calvinistic Puritanism that drove our greatest Englishman.

The paradox of Cromwell is to reconcile the conceit he would

need for regicide and to overthrow the historic order with the benevolence of his reign. Why was he not the Idi Amin of the Middle Ages? Lady Antonia finds the solution in his Calvinism. He was chosen by God for a great purpose but he remembered that "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise." He appreciated that his election was not according to his merit but to God's mercy.

The Puritans have had a bad press in comparison with the Restoration regime of Charles II. Antonia Fraser demonstrates the tolerance and patronage of the Protector's rule. Three major poets—Marvell, Milton, and Dryden—were employed by the administration. Music was supported and opera introduced during the Commonwealth period.

Another historical character with a bad reputation is Calvin himself. We perceive him as a narrow embittered bigot, burning heretics and forbidding simple pleasures. A very different character emerges from John Pollock's biography *Jean Calvin*. He was a man of stupendous energy—he preached eight times a week for 24 years and wrote commentaries on the Bible that on my bookshelves amount to over 22 000 pages, but he was certainly no killjoy—his salary at Geneva included two casks of wine, and he had a reputation as a matchmaker among the young men.

John Pollock writes worthy, well-researched biographies; Wilberforce and Billy Graham are among his subjects but you end up knowing about the person rather than knowing him. Dr James Packer appreciated this problem when he wrote *Knowing God*. So many theological books teach one things about God but He remains a stranger. Packer writes so clearly and directly that God leaps from the page to meet the reader. Who said doctrine was dull? The chapter on adoption changed my life.

Knowing God was a study book for Joni Eareckson. She was an athletic young girl of 16 with everything to live for until she broke her neck by diving into shallow water. Her two books, *Joni* and *A Step Further*, tell of her struggle to come to terms with quadriplegia. She faced the arbitrariness that I mentioned earlier. Why should this happen to me? How can a supposedly loving God allow suffering like this? Her answers and her subsequent spiritual growth are in her books, which should be read by all who regard euthanasia as a valid alternative.

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A 63-year-old patient had a small carcinoid at the junction of jejunum removed. An enormous mass of malignant lymph nodes were fixed into the posterior abdominal wall, and a limited resection of the small intestine was performed. The patient has made quite a good recovery from the operation but has developed persistent diarrhoea and intense "flushing" of face after a small drink. Neither of these complications have responded to treatment. What is the latest treatment for carcinoid, and how can this patient's flushes and diarrhoea be prevented?

The comprehensive answer to this question would require more information on the individual case. What is the degree of general ill health? Is there malignant cachexia? What is the rate of progression of the tumour and its metastases? Are carcinoid heart disease and heart failure present? Are there hepatic metastases and what is their disposition? The answers to these questions would determine my approach. If the patient's general condition is very poor, surgery inadvisable, or the tumour fast growing then palliative drug treatment only is indicated. For flushing, phenoxybenzamine (10 mg two or three times a day) might help. If this is unsuccessful then one can try various drugs among which chlorpromazine, α -methyldopa, propranolol, and if there is evidence of histamine-induced flushing, diphenhydramine plus cimetidine, can occasionally be effective. Glucocorticoids—for example, prednisolone 5 mg four times a day—can be most effective for those unusual patients who present with severe and prolonged flushing accompanied by facial and orbital oedema, pronounced lacrimation, and sometimes salivary gland swelling, symptoms often

associated with atypical carcinoid tumours arising in the bronchus or pancreas. Generally, however, prednisolone treatment is not effective in the carcinoid flush. It is important to advise against alcohol if this is a potent flush precipitant. Diarrhoea is generally a little easier to treat than the flush. Codeine phosphate 30 mg three times a day may be effective. More "specific" is the serotonin-blocking agent, methysergide (2 mg four times a day), and some have found cyproheptadine useful. Non-specific "antidiarrhoeal" agents like diphenoxylate (Lomotil) or loperamide can also be effective, and occasionally it is necessary to use a morphine preparation to control very severe diarrhoea, particularly in the very advanced case. Parachlorophenylalanine, which inhibits the synthesis of 5-hydroxytryptamine, can occasionally alleviate diarrhoea. The patient quoted has a large mass of posterior abdominal wall lymph nodes, and if these could be removed it might lead to symptomatic improvement. It would be important, however, also to know whether there were hepatic metastases. Partial hepatectomy may relieve symptoms if the tumour is mainly disposed in one lobe. If not, enucleation of hepatic metastases may be effective. Other treatments that have been tried are therapeutic embolisation of the hepatic artery and cytotoxic drug treatment with or without prior hepatic artery ligation. These have been reported variably effective in a few cases, but the results of such treatment are difficult to evaluate.

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