

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley reflects on what it means to be a reader.

Reading is a majority skill but a minority art' – or so novelist Julian Barnes claims.

This is my second article to review books on reading, but it needs no apology, given the importance of reading, both as skill and as art. And interesting new books on reading continue to appear. Indeed, there are so many of them currently that, in order to do justice to them, I shall devote both this and my next article to this subject. I will also quote more extensively than usual, as the writers so often express themselves more eloquently than I ever could myself.



Stop What You're Doing and Read This!

This is a collection of ten essays, mostly by fiction writers and poets such as Jeanette Winterson and Blake Morrison, and some reading researchers like Maryanne Wolf and Nicholas Carr. It is an inspirational book where each writer describes and explains the importance reading has had for them in their personal and professional lives. As stated in the Foreword, the book

'argues unapologetically for the paramount importance of books and reading in a fast-moving, dislocated, technology-obsessed world'.

For Zadie Smith, the discovery of reading was her escape route from a council estate into higher education and a career as a novelist. The poet Blake Morrison offers us *Twelve Thoughts About Reading*. He reminds us that *'When a poem or story is working, we don't just identify with the persona ... we become them'*. He goes on to say that *'The therapeutic element in writing doesn't come from pouring things out ... but in finding the right words, ordering the experience, and making the story available to others'*.

Carmen Callil, the founder of Virago Books, describes her exploration as a nine year old of her dead father's vast and eccentric library. *'Books of peculiarity and wonder sat on those shelves.'* She describes how she founded Virago to make available to others *'books that needed to be published, books forgotten or neglected ... perfectly certain that there were thousands like me who would buy and read them'*.

Tim Parks, in *Mindful Reading*, makes a case for a more attentive kind of reading as against the rush to gobble up words. He refers to the pleasure of enchantment. *'It is a wonderful thing to let*

go of your own way of telling yourself the world and allow someone else to do it for you.' But, *'the second pleasure is awareness, wakefulness: the capacity to see, feel and consciously register all that is going on around you and inside you ... What I'm talking about then is a pleasure that combines relaxation and effort, immersion and detachment, letting go and being vigilant – consciously savouring ...'* He has an eloquent conclusion which goes to the heart of reading: *'... the excitement of reading is the precarious one of being alive now ... and reacting from moment to moment ... to someone else's elusive construction of the precarious business of being alive now.'*

Looking at reading from a writer's perspective, Mark Haddon advises: *'Select the right words and put them in the right order and you run a cable into the hearts of strangers. Strangers in China, strangers not yet born.'* And of readers, he says: *'Reading is primarily a symptom. Of a healthy imagination, of our interest in this and other worlds, of our ability to be still and quiet, of our ability to dream during daylight.'*





In his essay, Michael Rosen re-visits *Great Expectations* as read aloud by his father. And Jane Davis, working for *The Reader Organisation*, gives an inspirational account of her community work in the *Get Into Reading* programme (see <http://thereader.org.uk/get-into-reading>). She makes a powerful case for the redemptive power of reading together among deprived and sometimes severely disturbed people.

My personal favourite is Jeannette Winterson's essay *A Bed. A Book. A Mountain*. This is a passionate, persuasive and eloquent statement of the need for books. 'A book is a door; on the other side is somewhere else ... To cross the threshold of a book is to make a journey in total time. I don't think of reading as leisure time, or wasted time and especially not as downtime.' For her, too, books were an escape from a deprived childhood and she is adamant in her claim that '... we need words not empty information. Not babble. Not data. We need a language capable of simple, beautiful expression yet containing complex thought that yields up our feelings instead of depriving us of them'.

This is a book I shall want to return to. It warrants re-reading. If you only read one book this spring, make it this one!



Reading Like a Writer

In *Reading Like a Writer*, Francine Prose explains that she 'learned to write by writing and, by example, by reading books'. This kind of writer education 'often involves a kind of osmosis' rather than formal instruction, and requires us to 'put every word on trial for its life'. So this book is an extended exercise in close reading, which assists us both in becoming more practised readers and, if we aspire to it, in developing as better writers, too.

Her method is to focus on a particular aspect of the writer's craft in each chapter, and to offer perceptive commentary on the extended texts she

has chosen. The chapters offer a steady progression from *Close Reading*, through *Words, Sentences, Paragraphs, Narration, Character, Dialogue, Details, Gesture*, and she rounds off with a lovely chapter, *Learning from Chekhov*, and an inspiring chapter to encourage the faint-hearted, *Reading for Courage*.

Her choice of texts is wide-ranging and includes both classic authors, from Jane Austen, George Eliot, Chekhov, Melville, von Kleist and Flaubert, through modernist writers such as Joyce, Hemingway, Beckett, Katherine Mansfield, Henry James, Kafka, Elizabeth Bowen, Henry Green and Virginia Woolf, to contemporary writers such as Alice Munro and Philip Roth. The texts are so skilfully chosen and her commentary so illuminating that I found myself wanting to go back and re-read these works again (or in some cases, as new discoveries, to read them for the first time).



I can only offer a flavour of the book by a few quotes. From *Sentences*: '... I'll hear writers say that there are other writers they would read if for no other reason than to marvel at the skill with which they can put together sentences that move us to read closely, to disassemble them and reassemble them, much in the way a mechanic might learn about an engine by taking it apart.' Or *Dialogue*: '... dialogue usually contains as much or even more subtext than it does text.' Her discussion of dialogue in Jane Austen and Henry Green really helps us get inside those texts.

She takes an appropriately independent view of style guides and rules for writers: 'If the culture sets up a series of rules that the writer is instructed to observe, reading will show you how these rules have been ignored in the past, and the happy outcome. So ... literature not only breaks rules, but makes us realise that there are none.'

Whether you are a reader, a teacher or an aspiring writer, this book will reward your reading of it. It is absolutely superb, and made me wish I had had the author as my teacher.



A Reader on Reading

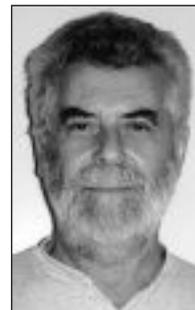
I found this book by Alberto Manguel slightly disappointing. For one thing, the title is misleading. It is made up of articles and essays, some of them published previously. Many of them are not really about reading except in the most tenuous sense. The style and content is more than a little recherché and precious, sometimes narcissistically self-absorbed as he displays his undoubted erudition. Nonetheless, there are some rewarding chapters, including *In Praise of Words*, *A Brief History of the Page and How Pinocchio Learned to Read*. *Reading White for Black* deals with translation issues, and *St Augustine's Computer* with the tension between books and the internet, as does the final chapter, *The End of Reading*. One of the most powerful chapters is *The Perseverance of Truth*, about the need to resist political pressure on writers to conform and validate lies. He is similarly critical of authority in other chapters, too. I will close with a quote from one of them. 'Be sensible and good,' the Blue Fairy tells Pinocchio in the end, "and you'll be happy." Many a political slogan can be reduced to this inane piece of advice. To step outside that constricted vocabulary of what society considers "sensible and good" into a vaster, richer and above all more ambiguous one is terrifying, because this other realm of words has no boundaries and is equivalent to thought, emotion, intuition.' 

Barnes, J 'My life as a bibliophile' *Guardian Saturday Review* 2012

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Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

yelamoo@yahoo.co.uk