

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley reflects on reading in an electronic age.

In this, my third article on books about reading, I have chosen to focus on two essentially 'humane' titles. These are books which convey something of the complex reality of the act of reading from a very personal viewpoint. I had originally intended also to include Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* and Stanislas Dehaene's *Reading in the Brain*. Both are highly significant books which enhance our understanding, in the former case, of the effects of instant, electronic communication on more deliberate forms of reading and, in the other, of how brain science is changing our perceptions of what happens when we read. Both are books well worth reading. I chose not to include them this time, partly for reasons of space and partly to remind myself of the original purpose of *Over the wall*. This series was not originally conceived to review highly technical, professional books but, rather, to stimulate readers' awareness of a wide range of books which touch, however peripherally, on the teaching we do and on the kind of people we are.

The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction

In *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*, Alan Jacobs makes an impassioned case for reading for the sheer pleasure it brings. He takes a strong stand against the idea of reading as some kind of duty – what he calls the 'eat-your-vegetables lists of approved texts'. This attitude has little to do with reading – rather with 'having read' (and ticked titles off the list). By contrast, he advocates 'reading at whim'. 'Read what gives you delight ... and do so without shame.' He disapproves both of the admonitions of 'experts' like Harold Bloom, who turn reading into a moral imperative, and of scientific approaches like Dehaene's: 'When I encountered [their] accounts of these psychological processes, I was nearly disabled as a reader.'

He writes compellingly about the need to develop a readerly response to what we read, and quotes the 18th-century scientist Lichtenberg: 'A book is like a mirror: if an ass looks in, you can't expect an apostle to look out.' To do this, we need to re-discover the relish of 'slow'. 'It's what you're reading that matters, and how you're reading it, not

the speed with which you're getting through it.' What is more, '... if you think of reading in this way, as a means of uploading data, then reading will always seem too slow'.

Jacobs has some interesting things to say about Kindle too, not all of them negative, but he is critical of the claims of proponents of multi-tasking. For him, we do not multi-task, we shift back and forth among tasks, leading to 'continuous partial attention'. A key quote from David Foster Wallace emphasises the development of conscious choice, rather than information-grazing: '... learning how to think really means learning how to exercise some control over **how** and **what** you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience.'

A large part of the book dwells on the importance of developing different modes of reading for different purposes and on the ability to screen out the important from the welter of information that targets us. Jacobs is also clear that becoming a reader should be separated from the academic learning of how to read – it has nothing to do with the institutional rituals of 'education'. He doubts whether it can be taught, but knows it can be acquired, if only by a minority.



Like Susan Hill (see below) Jacobs advocates more silence, and emphasises the importance of solitude in the act of reading, but acknowledges the importance of the social dimensions of reading, through sharing books with other like-minded people, whether in reading groups or in virtual environments. Like Hill, he also recommends re-reading, partly for the way it enables us to re-evaluate the same book at two different points in time.

Inevitably, as readers, we critically evaluate what we read. He recommends the generous suggestions of W H Auden: *'For an adult reader, the possible verdicts are five: I can see this is good and I like it; I can see this is good but I don't like it; I can see this is good and, though at present I don't like it, I believe with perseverance I shall come to like it; I can see that this is trash but I like it; I can see that this is trash and I don't like it.'*

Apart from its accessible style and pungent, thought-provoking opinions, this book also refers to a very wide range of other books touching on reading – many of which I shall want to read!



Howard's End is on the Landing

Susan Hill's book is a pleasure trove for readers. It arose when she was looking for a book which was not where she remembered it being. Her search through her bookshelves made her realise how many books she had not read, so she devoted a year to catching up: *'I wanted to re-possess my books. A book which is left on the shelf is a dead thing but it is also a chrysalis, an inanimate object packed with the potential to burst into new life.'*

The book is an inspiring ramble – and sometimes a romp – through the land of books. It is highly personal, and blends the books themselves with the places and circumstances in which they were read, the authors she has also met and her evaluations. Her journey *'inevitably led to my thinking, remembering, ordering, assessing, my entire book reading life'*. And later in the book she reflects: *'Just as my genes and the soul within me make me uniquely me, so I am the unique sum of the books I have read. I am my literary DNA.'*



Some of the chapters (all of them short and written in an engagingly accessible style) refer to writers: Charles Dickens, Kingsley Amis, Jane Austen, Ian Fleming, Roald Dahl, Iris Murdoch, the Angry Young Men, Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen, W G Sebald, Arnold Wesker, Anthony Bowen, Thomas Hardy. Others are more focused on genres: travel writing, humour, diaries, the short story, children's books, anthologies, picture books, spiritual books. Still others deal with reading-related topics such as libraries, the key importance of book titles, the value and pleasure of learning poems by heart, on scribbling in the margins, on book covers, on setting up her own small publishing company ...

On the act and art of reading she is forceful, and even scathing at times. On internet reading she states: *'Too much internet usage fragments the brain and dissipates concentration so that after a while, one's ability to spend long focused hours immersed in a single subject becomes blunted. Information comes pre-digested in small pieces, one grazes on endless ready-meals and snacks of the mind, and the result is mental malnutrition.'* She asserts that getting back to proper reading was *'like diving into a deep, cool ocean after flitting about in the shallows. Slow reading as opposed to Gobbling up'*. In her chapter 'Slow, slow, slow-slow, slow' she questions, *'Why has reading turned into a form of speed-dating?'* Fast reading, she contends, *'will not allow the book to burrow down into our memory and become part of ourselves, the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom and vicarious experience which helps to form us as complete human beings'*. She has strong views about unreadable (for her) books: *'I am bored by Jane Austen.'* A whole

chapter is devoted to books not read and never to be read or re-read. But she recognises, quoting Lord David Cecil, that *'you cannot force a taste on someone else, you cannot argue people into enjoyment'*. (Surely a strong case for allowing learners to choose what they read!)

Her book stirred the fallen leaves of memory for me, and had me reaching back into my own bookshelves, and looking forward to books I have not yet read.



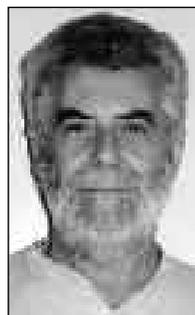
The Extensive Reading (ER) movement has tended to emphasise copious and, therefore, fast reading as a way of reinforcing, acquiring and extending target language proficiency. This is undoubtedly valid, and well-substantiated by research. However, these two books remind us that there is also a reflective side to reading. Where both ER and these books share common ground is in the sheer enjoyment that reading can furnish. **ETp**

Carr, N *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think, Read and Remember* Atlantic Books 2009

Dehaene, S *Reading in the Brain* Penguin Books 2009

Hill, S *Howard's End is on the Landing* Profile Books 2009

Jacobs, A *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* OUP 2011



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*.

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It really worked for me!

Did you get inspired by something you read in ETp? Did you do something similar with your students? Did it really work in practice? Do share it with us ...

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