

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
bids us farewell.



It is six years since I wrote the first *Over the wall* (Issue 62, May 2009). Since then, there have been 42 articles on topics as varied as solitude, humour, economics, emigration, fairy stories, science, nature, language and landscapes and, of course, reading. My aim, as set out in that first article, was to encourage teachers to read abundantly and widely outside the narrow confines of the professional literature in their field. I believed then, and still do, that teachers who do this are better informed and more alive, that their language competence is kept fresh, that they provide a positive role model to students, and that the ideas they are exposed to from outside the professional ghetto wall can stimulate thinking within it, and indirectly make them better teachers.

With these beliefs and intentions still in mind, in this last article in the series, I shall review books which celebrate in various ways the value of reading – and especially of the value of literature.

The Year of Reading Dangerously

The Year of Reading Dangerously by Andy Miller is a splendid romp. The author shares his one-year experience of reading through

his 'list of betterment' – 50 books he always felt he should have read but never had. In many ways, the book is not so much about the books he has read than about his reactions to them. So it is full of quirky introspections, diversions, musings and personal anecdotes about life and reading in general. It is humorous, irreverent, provocative, wise and moving, by turns. But above all, it is great fun to read.

A few quotes must suffice to convey something of the flavour. He gets off to a hilarious start: *'It is a true story of the year I spent reading some of the greatest and most famous books in the world, and two by Dan Brown.'* He reflects on the privilege of having *'... grown up in a prosperous country in an era when, for pretty much the first time in history, I could read whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted to'*. On the internet: *'The internet is the greatest library in the universe; unfortunately someone has removed all the 'no-talking' signs.'* About the value of reading: *'... however old you are, there might still be a book out there that will make you gush and garble and do something you might regret. It means you're still alive.'* About life and reading: *'We are creatures made as much by art as by experience, and what we read is the sum of both ... and life always breaks your heart – once they have begun, "the*

processes of decay are absolutely irreversible" – art is the equal and opposite reaction to that inevitable heartbreak.'

The Republic of Imagination

I reviewed Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in an earlier issue of ETp. In *The Republic of Imagination*, she returns to many of the same themes, but this time from the point of view of a 'free' American citizen rather than a repressed Iranian under the Islamic Republic's earlier years. She makes an impassioned plea for reading and literature in her introduction: *'Stories are not mere flights of fantasy or instruments of political power and control. They link us to our past, provide us with critical insight into the present and enable us to envision our lives not just as they are but as they should be or might become. ... Reading is a private act, but it joins across continents and time.'* She deplores the way the American dream has been hijacked by *'the doctrine of efficiency'* in all areas of life, especially in the area of education, where she identifies *'a mercenary and utilitarian attitude'*. This erosion of respect for ideas and imagination is ironically as damaging to true freedom as the repression of the

ayatollahs. America has ‘... the potential of squandering what is now so frequently taken for granted’. Nafisi argues that ‘... we must continue to read the great subversive books’. She quotes Nobel prize winner Joseph Brodsky: ‘*Though we can condemn the material suppression of literature ... we are powerless when it comes to its worst violation: that of not reading the books.*’

The rest of the book is based on chapters about Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* and Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, with an epilogue on James Baldwin. Nafisi uses these works to illustrate and expand on her introduction. In ‘Huck’, she defines the American as the eternal vagrant, moving on, and contrasts the current American republic of conformity with the original American republic of dreams. In ‘Babbitt’, she unleashes a scathing, incandescent stream of criticism of the current education system, dominated by The Common Core, which she sees as no more than ‘a vehicle for job creation’. In ‘Carson’, she characterises the typical misfit in American fiction: ‘... the isolation of individuals, leading to a sort of emotional and social autism’, suggesting that the cure is ‘... old-fashioned passion, a belief that one can give meaning to an otherwise meaningless life, the desire to create – to face the world, with its pain and grief, and not evade it’. The epilogue is full of superb quotes from Baldwin: ‘... because he did not believe in the vast grey sleep which was called security ...’ and ‘Societies are never able to examine or overhaul themselves ... This ferment, this disturbance is the responsibility and the necessity of writers.’ This is a significant book for our confused and compliant times and I highly recommend it.

The Child That Books Built

Francis Spufford’s book had been on my ‘to-read’ list for a long time, so it was a pleasure to tick it off at last. It is an autobiography of the author’s journey through books. Chapter 1, ‘Confessions of an English Fiction Eater’, describes how he became hooked on books, partly as a refuge from his sick younger sister

and mother. There are beautifully elegant descriptions of how he taught himself to read, aged six: ‘... the furze of black marks between the covers of *The Hobbit* grew lucid, and released a dragon.’ He speaks of ‘... times when a particular book, like a seed crystal, dropped into our minds when they were exactly ready for it, like a supersaturated solution, and we changed’. ‘*The book becomes part of the history of our self-understanding.*’

The remaining four chapters trace Spufford’s development from childhood through adolescence to young adulthood, intertwined symbiotically with the books that he read. Pages 64–76 are full of insights into the reading process: ‘*Rhythm precedes words altogether ...*’. He seems able elegantly to capture the elusive nature of the reading process: ‘*By the time I had reached *The Hobbit*’s last page ... writing had softened and lost the outlines of the printed alphabet, and become a transparent liquid ... flowing faster and faster until it reached me at the speed of thinking and I could not entirely distinguish the suggestions it was making from my own thoughts.*’ Along the way, he treats us to more detailed discussion of Piaget, Bettelheim, C S Lewis and Narnia, the Tolkien books, the Little House books, Ursula LeGuin and science fiction writing – even porn ... This is a gem of a book.



The habit of reading is an endangered pursuit in a world of electronic media and of instant and constant distraction. But it has its defenders, and even research findings are beginning to demonstrate its value.

Let me conclude with a quote from Virginia Woolf:

‘The true reason remains the inscrutable one – we get pleasure from reading. It is a complex and difficult pleasure; it varies from age to age and from book to book. But that pleasure is enough. Indeed, that pleasure is so great that one cannot doubt that without it the world would be a far inferior place from what it is.’

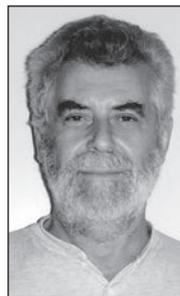
I would like to thank ETP, and Helena Gomm in particular, for hosting these reviews over the past six years or so. They have given structure and direction to my own reading, and enabled me to share my enthusiasms and hobbyhorses with colleagues. I do not propose to stop reading now that the series is ending, and I hope you will not either ... but it is time to move on. As a final farewell, let me borrow Ed Murrow’s famous closing line: ‘Good night and good luck.’ **ETP**



Miller, A *The Year of Reading Dangerously*
Fourth Estate 2014

Nafisi, A *The Republic of Imagination*
Windmill Books 2014

Spufford, F *The Child That Books Built*
Faber and Faber 2002



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