On Not Being a Voracious Reader

Published by

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How We Read: Tales, Fury, Nothing, Sound.

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My long-term roommate is a voracious reader, of the sort I was as a child and thought I always would be. The sort of person who has a book to read on the bus and a second one in her purse in case she gets through it too quickly, plus a few on the Kindle for backup. She uses the public library’s hold system as a private reading list in a way that isn’t quite what the original designers intended, but no one’s called her out on it yet. She has a knack for leaving the right books on the kitchen table when I’m having a hard time or just because she thinks I’ll like them. She makes my world bigger, and I am grateful. It’s an act of love that I don’t think I repay very well with the academic tomes I sometimes leave there for breakfast reading. I got through André Vauchez’s Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages that way one semester, a few pages at a time, and a good chunk of Charles Taylor’s A Secular Age.¹ She did

gleefully Instagram a pile of books from my saints phase a little while ago (the shiny gold cover of Robert Bartlett’s *Why Can The Dead Do Such Great Things?* next to Laura Ackerman Smoller’s award-winning — and illustrated — *The Saint and the Chopped-Up Baby*) so I know that she’s getting *something* out of it sometimes. But piling up books and reading them are different things, and I feel I do much more of the former than the latter these days.

I grew up a bookish child in a bookish family. I don’t know whether I actually remember learning to read or whether it’s one of those memories that builds itself up out of stories you’ve been told. It was September, cold enough for one sweater, just starting to get dark outside. There was a burr bush at the base of the old apple tree in the backyard, and it looked so fluffy and pillowy that I just had to fling myself backwards into it, and I do remember that mid-air feeling of “maybe I shouldn’t be doing this,” but by then of course it was too late. When I was extracted, with some tears and panic, my hair was a tangleful of burrs. My mother took me inside and sat me down on the floor with a pile of books (my favourite toy) to play with. She removed the burrs and I figured out phonics. I was three and a half years old.

Reading was prohibited at the dinner table or while crossing the road; anywhere else was fair game. One brother tried taping paperbacks to the outside of the shower; I experimented with hanging up laundry with *Harry Potter* in one hand. When my youngest brother was

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Dragging his heels on reading one summer, our mother set up a sticker reward system in which everyone in the house got a treat for every ten books that he read aloud. His three elder siblings chased him around the house with piles of picture books: “Thomas, we want a chocolate!” The family legend of the great-great-grandmother who gave herself pneumonia by staying up late in the week before Christmas trying to read all the books she was giving to people never seemed terribly implausible. Reading was something we did, like breathing. It was who I was, and who we were.

The voracious reading slowed for me — never stopped, but slowed to a trickle — when I started a creative writing program at an arts high school in eleventh grade. There wasn’t time, for one thing. I was commuting with my father over an hour each way, and I get carsick; most often I’d just sleep. There was the homework and studying, a bit of a shock to the system after two years of homeschooling and no tests. There was the perpetual sleep deprivation as I learned how to write poetry under the pressure of a deadline, and how to pull my first all-nighters. But it was also something of a conscious choice. In my daily writing, I found myself taking on the voices of the authors I was reading too easily, the same way that I was imprinting on accents I heard in movies at the time. With one-off writing practices it wasn’t a problem; our training came in part from emulating specific elements of things that we read as a group. But in longer pieces, things that needed weeks or months to create, I couldn’t keep the style of the writing stable. I needed to draw back and find my own writer’s voice. There was a sense of loss as I did that, but also a sense of excitement and discovery. I had to admit that it worked.
It is one of the few regrets of my life that in a ruthless bout of post–high school tidying up, I went through my Literary Arts binders and threw away everything that we’d read in those two years. At the time, I was sure I’d remember the names of things I’d want to come back to later, and that’s what the internet is for, right? There was also some existential purging going on. High school was good for me in many ways — I’d made friends for the first time since I was six, for one thing — but it had also stressed me out to the point that I’d pulled out all my eyebrows. The friends, bless ‘em, didn’t care. But anything that renders you shuddering with tears over the bathroom sink, struggling to summon the breath to repeat “you are a good and beautiful person who is worthy of love” to your swollen face in the mirror, is bound to leave behind a few demons to exorcise.

It’s hard to be articulate about something that doesn’t respond to reason. I don’t want to make a metaphor out of it, about reading and self-destruction or reading and loss of self, about idle hands and the devil’s work, about making one’s mark on the page. If I read for any length of time, there’ll be a pile of hair on the floor. That’s all. Trichotillomania has always been tied to my reading practice to some degree. Sometimes this has been a source of great distress and sometimes — most of the time, the past few years — it has simply been a fact of life. Keep a garbage can to the left of you while reading or writing. Wash your face with cold water when the pressure behind your eyelashes gets too intense. Generalized tugging is better than searching for targets. The best I can do to describe it is this: Feels wrong. Fix. Repeat. The last is the most important part. One day in grad school I came across a book in the university library that bore the unmistakeable traces of someone else doing
the same thing. Shaking with shame and recognition, I put it back on the shelf. I still haven’t read it.

If high school was bad for reading, university was worse. When I was truly reading all the time for school, as it seemed in undergrad, it was the last thing I wanted to do for fun. I say that, and yet . . . I remember saying rapturously to my father on the commute home in first or second year that all you really need for a university is a big library and some places for discussion. There were the required readings in undergrad: kneeling in front of the kitchen fireplace past midnight in first year, one chocolate chip per chapter of the Bible; standing over an art history textbook perched on the corner of the table in second; in an English bed with Don Juan in third; in my grandmother’s empty house with Gitta Sereny’s Into that Darkness in fourth year, in the midst of a snowstorm, while the grandmother in question descended further into dementia at home. Course reserves photocopied and skimmed before an 8:30 class, my early morning buddy with his breakfast burrito doing the same thing across the table. Dante season in second year, the spring that I turned eighteen: Inferno in the passport office; Purgatory in the library with the Doré illustrations spread out before me and Sayers’ translation in my lap; the ending of Paradise under the grubby skylight beneath the library on a hectic morning in March.

And then there were the non-required readings. Being a commuter student meant that I had a lot of time to kill on campus and, too shy to cross the threshold of the common room until fourth year, I killed that time dead in the library. I wouldn’t even make it to a desk sometimes, slipping one

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item after another off the shelf and devouring them right there in the stacks, greedy, luxuriating in the freedom of choice. The first few years were spent catching up on all the poets I’d discovered in passing in high school. Michael Ondaatje, Leonard Cohen, Michael Crummey — I guess that one CanLit class did stick with me. My best friend was doing a theatre degree in Toronto; I went down to visit her in November of first year, saw a play by Daniel MacIvor, and spent the next few years browsing the Canadian theatre section whenever I had time, eventually branching out into Europe. I was very nearly late for a Hindu Aesthetics class because I was lingering over something by Christopher Fry. I was so mad at the prof who lent me his copy of *The Nine Tailors* when he learned I’d done bell ringing on my year abroad.  

I was secretly grateful for the sanction to screw up my sleep schedule over something with a plot, but didn’t he know that late October was no time to be giving a fourth-year student extra pages to read? Summers were for novels, a few, sometimes painfully. School-time was for poetry, plays, short stories, snatched in the times when I was surrounded by books, too tired for schoolwork, but unable to think of anything to do but read.

I’ve been a student for over two decades now. The rhythms of the school year have shaped nearly all of my life, and even when I lose my student status (*deo volente*) I suspect it will take some time for September to lose the sense of new beginnings, and early summer the sense of release from captivity. As a child, the end of the school year was marked by cupcakes and a trip to the library. I carefully planned out my first book of summer each year in high school and undergrad. I remember some of those

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books distinctly, and the feeling that went with them: a bit self-conscious and awkward settling into it, like the first walk without a jacket, or the first swim in the lake. Tongue-in-cheek summer reading lists from professors (E.M. Forster’s *A Room With a View*, recommended as a follow-up to the *Divine Comedy* with the tagline “On finding happiness in Florence”). Gifts that had piled up over the school year (Thomas King’s *Medicine River*, handed down from a friend’s English course on “The Canadian Small Town”). Guilt trips that had spanned the better half of a decade (A.S. Byatt’s *Possession*, recommended by a teacher at my high school audition: the first thing I read after undergrad, which simultaneously made me weep for the creative parts of myself that I’d forgotten and confirmed that I was doing exactly the right thing in going to graduate school).5

Grad school, and the later years of the PhD especially, comes with a certain amount of unmooring from that temporal structure, not to mention a few other things. The post-grading palate cleanser fulfills something of the same function as the first book of summer, perhaps, but to a large extent the distinctions between term times and holidays are blurred. After all, you can always be writing your thesis; can always be reading another article, another book, another shamefully neglected classic in your field. Even the awestruck, hungry library browsing has had to be curtailed. I remember the feeling of heartbreak when a venerable committee member told me that the directive he’d given me as a master’s student to “waste time in the library” was

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over, and now it was time for “seek and destroy missions only.” Pleasure reading, these last few years, has come to feel like an act of defiance against the voice in the head that chants “you ought, you ought.”

I say that I’m not a voracious reader, and yet the whole breakfast book thing started because if I don’t have something to turn the pages of for the four minutes it takes me to eat my toast, I will pick up The Joy of Cooking and start reading it, which is often entertaining (clambake for twenty on the beach?!), but occasionally nauseating for a life-long vegetarian. That’s a grad school development. Maybe it’s because I’m reading less and writing more, so there’s room to want it again. Maybe it’s because the act of reading calms the urge to be doing something useful, and my morning brain will accept instruction on the dangers and delights of rosin-boiled potatoes as a substitute for something work-related.

Breakfast books aside, my work reading tends to be deliberate and active. It needs both hands free, and a couple of pieces of equipment, for note-taking, or bookmarking endnotes, or looking things up in passing. It’s best done in the library, occasionally at home on the couch or at the table, but never in bed, and best not on the computer if I want to focus or remember. I pay more attention if I’m leaning forward in my chair — a technique I learned for test-taking in early undergrad, but it works here too, much to the detriment of my back. No matter how much I’m enjoying myself, which I genuinely am quite often, I’ve always got an eye on the page numbers, counting down to the end.

Grad school pleasure reading, on the other hand, comes with less ceremony and more serendipity. I lose
an afternoon to an unplanned novel now and then, like
the piece of fluff my roommate left out for me recently,
which had eerie echoes of my own life right down to the
contra dancing, devoured in one sitting in a sunny kitchen
chair. An email arrives in my inbox at a variable time each
morning, containing a single poem selected by a man I’ve
never met. Sometimes I smuggle home a collection of
short stories or a handful of graphic novels to keep on my
bedside table, where academic literature is not supposed to
sit (this rule is flexible; I am weak): Ursula K. Le Guin and
A.K. Summers; Lucy Knisley and Joey Comeau and Mona
Awad, and, and, and . . . Every once in a while a line catches
me sideways, makes me gasp a little and sway. Remember-
ing that I do love the language. Remembering what it’s like
to breathe deeply.