

Reading for Pleasure

Confessions of a lowbrow

WILLIAM THOMSON

For as long as I can remember I have been a compulsive reader. At a pinch I will read anything from Gorky to a Government pamphlet, and take about the same amount of delight from each. I always have one or two paperbacks with me wherever I go: in my car, in my case, and certainly in my overcoat pocket. A book is as much a necessity in my wider travels as shaving kit, aspirin, and needle and thread. The books that I prefer are those which give me simple pleasure. It is a matter of little consequence that they rarely figure on the lists of "My 20 best books" in the learned journals or upmarket Sunday newspapers, compiled by erudite, educated, and eminent persons. On the contrary, my favourites tend to be found, often grubby, dogeared, and a bit the worse for wear, on bookcases at the back of the house or in the bedroom, and hardly at all on the shelves which are exposed to the public eye. In other words, I am an unashamed lowbrow. Yet I feel if reading material has a silent majority, my books will be in there among them, satisfactorily holding their own.

Murderers and spies

I have always been an avid reader of detective stories. Perhaps the puzzle, violence, observations on human nature, deductions, and final solution have something in common with the practice of medicine. Can this be the attraction? Almost everything written by Agatha Christie appeals to me, with the exception of her later books. Her dénouements are superb; her flashes of insight into human motivation illuminating, and her clues, her red herrings, and even her mistakes are always enjoyable. Unlike many of this genre, I can read them several times over. On the whole, I prefer Miss Marple to Hercule Poirot, perhaps because one is so English and the other so foreign. Even so, if I had to choose a favourite it would be *Five Little Pigs*. In this, Poirot solves a 16-year-old murder mystery by conversing at some length with the five principal characters.

An unusual, gifted, and little known author of detective stories is Robert van Gulik. He created Judge Dee, a magistrate in China over 1300 years ago. His descriptions of that civilisation, its people and class structure, social habits and customs, and its legal formalities are as interesting as his intricate and subtle story lines. Dee and his four lieutenants—Sergeant Hoong, Tao Gan, Ma Joong, and Chiao Tai—will repay many times over any slight effort required to make their acquaintance. As a start, I recommend *The Chinese Nail Murders*, in which a primitive necropsy helps solve the mystery.

Raymond Chandler, one of the progenitors of the rough, wise-cracking, private eye school of heroes, has now become a cult figure. This, together with the cinematic interpretation of his works, has diluted much of my early enjoyment of his

writings. Nevertheless, *The Simple Art of Murder*, a collection of his short stories culled from the pulp magazines of the 'thirties, still has a place on my bookshelf. His literary successor is Ross Macdonald, and for those who wish to sample his true flavour, *The Zebra Striped Hearse*, a murder set in the Pacific pallisades of Southern California, can hardly be bettered. Of others, let me say I like Dorothy L Sayers's books, flawed because her characters are so good while her plots are so poor; the atmosphere of Simenon, with Paris streets and French countryside, which overcomes repeatedly an often shallow construction; and the technical skill of Ed McBain—working within the surroundings of an American police department—which progresses his plots so successfully.

At one time I was quite taken up with Ian Fleming and Alistair MacLean, but I would not now go out of my way to read them a second time. On the other hand, the espionage tales of Simon Harvester stand up easily to the test of a second read. He writes about believable people doing difficult work in a hostile environment, without glamour, mock heroics, or technical gimmicks. His spies have colds, abdominal upsets, and are usually frightened. His settings are unusual. *Shadows in a Hidden Land*, for example, is placed in Sinkiang; and *Siberian Road* is in that most inhospitable of places.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy by John le Carré was an experience. I read it in a caravan on a cold wet English summer's day and hardly looked out of the window. It really has to be read twice, at the one sitting, for everything to fall into place. Other spy stories that I have read in similar conditions, such as long train journeys, strange hotels, and learned lectures have been those of Andrew York who created England's official "eliminator": they have a fine pace to them and quickly take the reader away from his surroundings. The Boysie Oakes adventures of John Gardner, too, have a nice off-beat sense of humour in that his hero is so cowardly that he hires others to do his dirty work for him. But for sheer ingenuity of plot and the creation of a heroine out of Woman's Lib by Freudian Aggression, few can equal Peter O'Donnell and his *Modesty Blaise* tales—for example, grown-up Siamese twins in a fight to the death with a weaponless woman in front of an audience of hardened mercenaries (*Sabre-Tooth*).

Long and isolated

I like large novels. There is something satisfying about the look of them. A sense that here in front of you is a jolly good read, not one of these slim *oeuvres d'estime* that can be finished between supper and bedtime, but a book that can be guaranteed to keep you going for days at a time. In particular, I enjoy those set in unusual, exotic, or historic places. Long tales such as James A Michener's *Hawaii*, the story of the development of this fascinating island as seen through the eyes of four different cultures. I liked it a lot. Other large books which have whiled away a winter evening and taken my fancy are *Green Dolphin Country*, Elizabeth Goudge's best-selling novel of the pioneering days of New Zealand; *Uhuru* by Robert Ruark, a tale of Africa

in unrest; and *Advise and Consent* by Allen Drury, which gives a remarkable insight into the workings of top American power politics. This type of book is usually researched so thoroughly and so accurately that the technical or historical detail adds immeasurably to the reader's interest.

Most of John O'Hara's stories are a joy. His dialogue is the literary equivalent of perfect pitch. It is so good that one is made to feel like an eavesdropper in someone else's home. My own favourites are *Ten North Frederick*, about an American middle-class family at the turn of the century; and *From the Terrace*, the saga of a successful business man. On the other hand, I take no pleasure at all from the bulky American book with the stereotyped plot. This usually follows the line of an ambitious boy from the wrong side of the tracks who marries a rich girl—usually the boss's daughter—and who ends up with endless money and power, a beautiful mistress, a now alcoholic wife, and a wayward son. Naturally, he is not happy. Nevertheless, there seem to be very few large English novels which have the vitality and drive of their American counterparts. One which can withstand this comparison, however, is *World From Rough Stones* by Malcolm Macdonald. It is the detailed story of the development of canals in Victorian England, of the men who planned and financed them, and of the navvies who dug them out. As a superb trick, the author has incorporated as one of his main characters the hero of what is probably England's most notorious and best known work of pornography. But, in my opinion, with the exception of a very few others, the long English novel fails to compare favourably with its American equivalent.

The isolated book is often ignored in articles of this type and that is a pity. By an isolated book, what I have in mind is the one work which is never repeated in quality, sympathy with its subject, or empathy with a particular reader. I have come across some of these books in unusual places such as jumble sales, secondhand shops, holiday homes, and hotel lounges. I never seem to find them in my local public library. Among them are: *The Last Hurrah* (Edwin O'Connor), a story of the aging mayor of an American city, fighting his last election; *The Lights of Skaro* (David Dodge), two young reporters fleeing from an oppressive Iron Curtain country; *The Sleeper* (Holly Roth), the first time I came across this type of spy; *The Ascent of D 11* (Andrew Garve), a man and a woman of opposing political beliefs united in a dangerous climb; *The Hanging Man* (Whit Masterson), another superb mountaineering yarn; and *Young Man with a Horn* (Dorothy Baker), a story of the early days of jazz music, based on the life of trumpet player Bix Beiderbecke. *The Crowthers of Bankdam* by Thomas Armstrong is probably the best in this category. This sprawling novel of the Yorkshire wool trade, spanning three generations, was never again equalled by the author, although it inspired about half a dozen sequels or associated books. His characters take over the story and have a fierce vitality that overflows the pages and the print.

Poetry, non-fiction, humour, and bed

Sad to say, poetry does little for me and even Shakespeare leaves me unmoved and a little lost. In spite of this, I like the verses of Ogden Nash. His quirky rhymes and eccentric ideas give me a positive sense of exuberance. There are many examples of his work that I would love to quote, but the law of copyright inhibits me. Nevertheless, there may be hope. I heard Fulton Mackay recite beautifully some stanzas of the American poet Delmore Schwartz. It brought me to tears. Although I have searched everywhere I cannot find the actual poem. Still, I have read several others from his pen in the process. They have a quality that strikes a chord and makes me think that with a little more application I could become responsive to this art form.

As befits a self-confessed lowbrow, my views concern mainly fiction, for that is mostly what I read for relaxation and pleasure.

Yet many works of non-fiction figure in my collection. To describe them in detail would require a separate article but let me mention briefly *The Guinness Book of Records* which can be dipped into at any time for an entrancing five minutes; and *The Book of Lists*, a marvellous find in a Dallas hotel shop one scorching afternoon. It gives lists of hundreds of things from the world's 10 longest rivers to 20 famous people who died young; and from the 10 most sensational thefts to the 10 most beautiful words in the English language. Need I say more? Finally *Pears Cyclopaedia* and *Whitaker's Almanack*. Both are crammed full of useful and esoteric bits of knowledge.

Written humour is notoriously difficult to appreciate and what amuses one person leaves another with a frozen face. I find the short pieces of Patrick Campbell great fun, and also the essays of S J Perelman, who wrote for the Marx Brothers. Being Scottish, the Para Handy stories of Neil Munro, which describe the adventures of a small trading vessel and its idiosyncratic crew off the west coast of Scotland, never fail to make me laugh. Longer works are not easy to find, but *England, Their England*, A G MacDonnell's famous book must be mentioned. Many of his scenes, particularly the cricket match, are now minor classics of their kind. Unfortunately, P G Wodehouse is now so dated that the power he exercised over me when I was young no longer has its magic. Possible exceptions to this are the golfing short stories, as in *The Clicking of Cuthbert*, which have a sort of immortality for those who suffer from the game.

In the last analysis written humour, like beauty, may be in the eye of the beholder, and it may be found in the most unexpected places, even in the New Testament. If I might quote without irreverence: "The tax gatherers and other bad characters were all crowding in. . . ." An experience many will feel they have endured.

There are certain books which are best read in bed after a hard day's work. They are usually quiet works of some atmosphere, with a simple non-taxing story line, and written in clear undemanding prose. Several such books spring to mind and many are on my bedside table, but none can match the novels of Maurice Walsh. His men are unequivocal heroes and his heroines are all ladies. A few pages and I am back in the hills of Scotland on a drowsy afternoon, a summer haze on the purple slopes, and a fishing rod to hand. In the distance there is the buzz of insects, the chuckle of a gentle stream, and the soft splash of a queuing trout. Above, the lonely cry of a wayward gull and . . . sleep.

CHANCE, COINCIDENCE, SERENDIPITY

A ready believer gets it partly right

In April 1964 I was invited to address a gathering of London's business executives under the chairmanship of Lord Hill. The title of my talk was "Optimism in Heart Disease."

A week later my wife went to shop at Harrods and proceeded to its restaurant for lunch. Presently, the waitress approached and asked if she minded another sharing her table. My wife readily acquiesced, and the lady when seated immediately engaged my wife in conversation. She mentioned that she seldom walked and usually travelled by car, but that morning she had parked her car near Marble Arch in order to take a brisk walk across Hyde Park. She explained that she had read in the *Daily Telegraph* that a Dr William Evans had said that exercise was good for the heart. She added, "I feel better already." Her heart took a leap when her dining companion revealed her identity. It should be known that exercise has no effect on the heart save that it makes it beat faster, but in any therapy directed to the heart it is well to remember that the mind and heart are close companions so that attention to the former through reassurance and encouragement to do more, is often the greater need.—WILLIAM EVANS.