



My Reading Habits

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SAMUEL PEPYS SAUNTERED INTO my life during my late teens, and promptly occupied the best chair in the room. Twenty years later, I still have not finished with him. We chat, usually during bouts of insomnia (mine), or whilst waiting for builders or deliveries. Pepys is a friend, a constant. His trips to buy new lace, his frustration with his colleagues, his love of pies. I now almost don't want to finish his Diaries — and I've only got the shorter version.

As for the rest; well. I'm afraid that every time I try to impose structure on my reading, the books won't have it. I've kept a reading journal over the past ten years or so, now into its third volume. The last number I inked into it was 1,118, William Golding's *Rites of Passage*, which I read for the sole reason that it belonged to my wife, and we are merging our libraries. We rooted out all the doubles (and, in some cases, trebles); but we couldn't bear to give them away. They lurk now in the cupboard in the downstairs loo.

I have a holding pattern. The books I want to read within the next few weeks jostle on my desk. Some of them are charmers, like the second book of Patrick Leigh Fermor's travel trilogy. Why haven't I started it yet? I have no idea. Some of them are serious. Primo Levi, with whom I must engage. But when?

The books are alive. A history of forgotten countries was by the inkpot yesterday. Today I swear it's crept up towards the printer. It wants



something from me. They slip and slide over each other, whistling and looking for a way in.

Review copies stalk into my life, disrupting the others, like lions approaching a water hole. The rest scatter, hiding behind the lexicons until they have gone. Phew! Didn't like the look of *that* memoir, they whisper. Research books (for how many projects, in how many stages of hopeful beginning or disappointed end?) skulk in corners. All those academic tomes on Greek epic, tragedy, Roman history, their contents gutted, now lie empty and sad. A biography of Queen Victoria's youngest son, half begun, the bookmark still only ten pages in, *begging* me to begin work on that children's book I hoped it would inspire. But when?

Books written by friends have a special, honoured shelf to themselves. Histories, biographies, novels, memoirs. Some of them write quite a lot. I vote we ask the Prime Minister to insert another month into the year so we can catch up with our reading. The Romans used to do it, after all.

My teaching books — short stories, novels, dozens of them, are the noisiest, the sprawlingest. They have a habit of physically reproducing themselves. I find myself in charge of a whole ravenous pack of Raymond Carvers. *Darling, Ali Smith's made a mess on the carpet again! Don't let Elizabeth Bowen into the kitchen!*

Please don't ever recommend a book to me. I'm sorry — I know you want me to read the latest bestseller. But I still haven't read *all* of Iris Murdoch's novels. And I must, I must! And I'm half way through a 1,000-page history of Prussia. I've reached Frederick the Great. I was going to read it tonight, but Hilary Mantel's just arrived, and Samuel Pepys is looking rather cross...