



My Reading Habits

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I'VE ALWAYS BEEN RATHER shy of fessing up to what I'm reading. It's not just that I'm generally reading five books at once, so that if I ever forget myself and answer honestly, people's eyes tend to glaze over. It's not just that I often want to retort, *what do you care what I'm reading? It's nobody's business but my own*. But the sordid truth is, I don't have reading habits so much as *a reading habit*. Omnivorous, discriminate, insatiable. Formed in childhood and unbreakable to this day.

One of my earliest memories is reading the side of the cornflakes packet, over and over. Those variety packs of six small cereal boxes blew my mind. I was the child who could get a book out of the library in the morning and swap it for another before closing time. Days spent in university libraries were one long silent orgy of discovery. I read whatever I liked, no one knew or cared to tell me what was good or bad, improving or taboo. So I sucked up *Undersea Adventures*, dipped into *Mein Kampf*, pored over Emily Dickinson.

It was only once I moved into self-consciously cultured circles that I realised there were people who displayed the books they had read to others, either on the shelf or in conversation, in order to be taken seriously, as a mark of belonging, or superiority. People who always bought the Booker winner, and religiously wrote down the title of every book they ever read; who thought of reading as a form of self-improvement, a practice they really ought to keep up, like a healthy diet and regular exercise, for good psychic health and social standing.



But if my reading is the mirror of myself, how I attend to my soul, then god help me, I say.

My reading is profligate, promiscuous, a hopeless addiction that has grown chronic over the years. The evidence mounts behind the closed door of my bedroom. Broken-backed volumes that slip from my hand in the middle of the night accrete over days and weeks on the rag rug by my bed. Every so often, in order to get in and out of bed without breaking my neck, I stack this rubble into piles in the corner.

There's no rhyme or reason to any of it, just a giant, night-time pick-'n'-mix binge. But like the pricking in my thumbs I get when I pass a charity shop and just know I will strike lucky, whatever the instinct is that makes me pick up one book rather than another usually leads me to a sentence or an image or a revelation that mainlines directly into my own writing.

So when friends or students ask, as they do: *What are you reading?* I might reply: *World of Interiors*. Or *Her Body and Other Parties*. The latest *Lee Child*. *Mushroom Farming Made Easy*. Whatever's on the top of the pile.