



Sara Wheeler

My Reading Habits

I SPEND A LOT OF TIME IN extreme environments where books of length are essential, preferably printed on bible paper (forget electronic devices: cold sucks out the juice before the end of chapter 1). Tolstoy's doorstops were made for polar whiteouts. I read *War and Peace* at the South Pole, looking through the plastic porthole of a tent at hundreds of kilometres of shimmering flat ice as a thousand horses galloped over the plain at Borodino. And I always pack my *Book of English Poetry*, edited by G. B. Harrison and much repaired with duct tape ('To Sara, from Nan, Christmas 1974'). If I run out of reading material, I learn the poems by heart.

My choice is very often conditioned by what I am writing. When I was working on *O My America!* I picked US authors who conjure a sense of place — Eudora Welty on the Delta, Erskine Caldwell on Georgia, Willa Cather on the red earth of Nebraska. Reading merges, I often find, with the rest of life.

All reading is a dialectic — the reader responds to the writer and engages with her. I feel, often, a personal relationship with a writer — that she's next to me on the sofa in front of the fire. So, it seems, have others. 'I can see already', Virginia Woolf wrote in a letter to a friend after reading all George Eliot, 'that no one else has ever known her as I know her'. The companionship of a book is more reliable than that other kind of companionship. 'I re-read your book the other day', Jean Rhys wrote to an author she knew. 'It made me feel a lot less lonely.'



Then there is that curious business of returning to a book. Don't you find you sometimes respond entirely differently second-time around? It is surely not the dead writer who has changed... And I am fascinated by my own long-forgotten marginalia (I never read without a pen in my hand). Why did I underline that unremarkable sentence? And who was 'Carlos. Cartagena 456 2730'?

Writing an introduction to a reissue of a classic must be one of my favourite occupations. It gives me the opportunity to spend a day in bed revisiting an all-time favourite (a Freya Stark, for example), then the next day at my desk composing three or four thousand words, and reading bits of the book a third time. Even the business of reviewing has its pleasures, if more of the lucky dip variety.

Some speak of books as escapism. It's true that sometimes I choose an author as a comforting diversion. I zipped through eight Muriel Sparks on the trot last year when life had put the boot in. But is it really an escape? Sometimes it seems that living is more of an escape from the truth glimpsed, albeit sometimes through a glass darkly, in the pages of a good book. To quote Woolf again, 'I think heaven must be one continuous unexhausted reading.'