

∞ READING ROUND ∞

My Reading Habits

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FOR YEARS NOW, I've watched a local man walk home from work whilst reading a book held out in front of him. Admittedly he walks rather slowly, but I still don't understand how this is possible.

He must have excellent peripheral vision — that is, the ability to see things outside of his direct line of sight. But can you lose yourself completely in a book if you have to be aware of everything else going on around you? If you're trying, at the same time, not to stumble on a stone or walk into a lamppost?

I prefer complete silence – and stillness – to properly enjoy a book. This is the only way I can immerse myself fully in its world. I remember how amazed I was when my best friend at school would open a book hidden beneath her desk and sink into another world until the bell rang for the end of the lesson. Even had I been brave enough to risk the punishment, I would never have been able to enjoy my book in the middle of a noisy classroom.

I don't come from a bookish family, so my addiction to reading was a surprise. My mother read cookbooks, my brother read comics, and my sister preferred talking to reading — and still does. At home, my first picture books were lined up around the edges of our bedroom, and I would lie flat on my stomach examining the spines and lettering, trying to decide which world I wanted to fall into that day. When I got older, I'd arrive home from school and dash off my homework at top speed so that I could settle down to what really mattered: reading.

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Even then, there was something special about holding a book in my hands — the weight of it, the feel of the paper, the cracking of the spine, the marks and dog-eared corners. A book often has its own character too. For example, I will forever associate the smell of cigarettes with Raymond Carver, because that's the smell that leapt off the page as soon as I opened a library copy of his collected stories. Not particularly pleasant perhaps, but certainly atmospheric.

Now I have books upstairs and downstairs, books that I read at bedtime and others I read first thing in the morning before starting my working day. When I read now, it's difficult to switch off my writer's brain, which is forever assessing and analysing structure and characterisation, the choice of one word over another. This is not an ideal way to read for pleasure, though, so occasionally I'll make a deal with myself: read the book purely for pleasure first; then, if you need to, read it again with your writer's hat on. This is an effort to be simply a reader, and not a writer who's reading. A reader without that added peripheral vision. But, for better or worse, I'm not sure this will ever be possible again.