

# ∞ READING ROUND ∞

## My Reading Habits

---

Michael Bird

AS A READER, I have bad habits, I think. Certainly, compared to my eating or exercise habits, my reading routines are all over the place. The three or four pages of a recent novel I'll often be turning at night as I fall asleep remind me of the individual matchsticks from which a patient hobbyist can spend years constructing a skyscraper or a cathedral. Even in this respect, I'm like the cathedral-builder who leaves the nave unroofed. Books get laid aside to finish later, other books begun. Would I want someone to read *my* books this way?

I buy books that attract me for one reason or another but which I then don't read for years, sometimes ever. I could say that I 'read' these books more like objects; the bookshelf becomes a collage of histories, of different places, and whatever it was I was planning to do or read at those times. Usually, as I walk out of a bookshop, there will be a brief, calm vision of a parallel life, a kind of slow-time paradise in which I'm reading this new book, with its new-book smell, interesting title and cover design, for as long as I want, without distraction or interruption.

One possible reason – or excuse – for habits like these is that, for much of the waking day, I'm either in reading mode or its opposite, writing. When I've written this page, I'll print it out and read it over, go back, at the end of the day print and read again. In a couple of weeks I will have started work on my next book, reading for research – that's to say, in a foraging spirit – a strangely intuitive, compulsive and faintly ruthless process, driven as much by what I'm searching for as by what the writers I'm reading have to say.

## ∞ READING ROUND ∞

I would like to turn the tables. I would like to read more often in the same way that I swim, slipping into another element, uncomplicatedly open to its strangeness and welcome. When I was eight or even eighteen years old, this just happened. I could stay with a book, immerse myself in its world, let it take me wherever it led. It does still occasionally work this way, on a long train journey or a holiday. But as a daily habit? I wish.

I can say this, though. If not entirely zero-waste, I've noticed that little of my reading material ultimately seems to get lost or discarded. A surprising amount of it – books, blogs, magazine articles, research papers, poems – ends up coming in useful, one way or another. As an example of how to say or frame something, or how not to; as a piece of information or verbal music; as a voice to listen to or argue with; as a fragment kept. It all feeds an inveterate habit of *reading into* things, though I haven't decided – for the purposes of everyday life – whether to add this habit to the 'bad' list or the 'good'.