

# ∞ READING ROUND ∞

## My Reading Habits

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I HAVE A CONFESSION TO MAKE. I don't have any reading habits at all. When I think of reading habits, I think of discipline and work, of talks I must have had at some point, from teachers or university professors, about the sort of things I *should* read. About how I might structure my approach to reading, or what should lead to what, or how reading might get me better marks or even make me a better person.

Goodbye to all that. When I think of reading, I think of enthusiasm, chaos, joy. I think of dropping one book, half-read, on the carpet, because I've spotted something on a shelf I suddenly want to read. I think of holding one book in my left hand and another in my right, flipping from book to book, while making a mental note of another I'm really keen to get to. I think of a swimming pool full of open books and me standing above them on a diving board like Tom Daley, looking down at all that absolutely gorgeous print, those layers on layers of ideas, trying to decide just where I should dive in.

Take now, for example. I'm somewhat immersed in Adam Nicolson's book, *The Making of Poetry*, about the friendship of Wordsworth and Coleridge and their creation of the poems in Lyrical Ballads. I love books like this, which pick you up out of the life you're leading and put you down in a different part of history. These sorts of books allow you to share the experiences of great poets, making them breathing, clothed, even mud-stained human beings, who you can sit in a room and chew the fat with for as long as you like.

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But at the same time, I'm also reading Saba Sams's story collection, *Send Nudes*, which is about as contemporary as it's possible to get. The stories outline the emotional realities of twenty-first century living in a way that's immediate and compelling. I love short stories for the way that collections can be dipped into, the way that a character or situation can grab you immediately, and more than that for the incredible after-impact short stories can have, the way that good stories get bigger in your mind after reading, the way you carry them emotionally into the next stage of your life.

And of course, I'm reading poetry. Sitting on a train and dipping into my bag for *Send Nudes*, I realise that I've left it in the living room, where I was last reading it, but that a collection of Seamus Heaney's has been left in my bag, for just such a moment as this. On the way from my village to Cardiff, my body sits on a train, but my heart is in rural Ireland, spending time with Heaney's childhood and family.

That's what reading allows: quality time with good people, even when you're alone. All of the books I mention here were recommended to me by friends, and in the course of the reading the authors and the people they write about have become friends too. Many of my favourite reading experiences have happened not alone but in the company of others: a poem read to me by a teacher when I was in secondary school, or the experience of reading a poem to a class, and finding my love of a line or stanza challenged and deepened by the responses of others.

This is why I'm so looking forward to being involved with the *Reading Round* scheme: the opportunity to experience great writing in a room full of people. Much as I admire Olympic divers, I always feel that the most beautiful event of all is the synchronised dive, the two athletes moving in perfect simultaneity through the air. Up here on the diving board, it's windy as all hell, but the views of all those books down there, filling the pool, are beautiful. I hope that lots of readers will join me up here, for the dive. I'm so looking forward to leaping.