

∞ READING ROUND ∞

My Reading Habits

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FULL DISCLOSURE: for a writer, my reading habits are poor. I have a pile of books by my bedside, but they seem to be the same ones I dusted several months ago. The pile contains a biography of a poet, a history of popular music, a John Le Carré novel, and several poetry collections. Yes, I'm getting through them, but I'm not as dedicated a reader as I ought to be, and it does occasionally worry me that I don't read more assiduously. I'm fortunate that I have the ability to turn up the heat on this slow-cooker approach to reading. This is called for when I receive an occasional commission to write a book review, usually of a recent poetry collection. In these circumstances I can usually turn a review round quickly after some intense close reading.

It wasn't always thus; in my student years I caught the bus into lectures, an hour there and an hour back. That's ten hours reading time per week, for thirty-six weeks in the year, for the best part of three years. In this time I devoured hundreds of books — Stan Barstow, Solzhenitsyn, John Buchan. My reading tastes found their boundaries and solidified into a modest though unconventional literary education. However, and with the best will in the world, the list of books I intend to get stuck into now exceeds the likely reading time left to me. In the spirit of what the Japanese call *Tsundoku* I continue to acquire books to add to the pile despite the dwindling time. I'm sure this scenario is not unfamiliar to you.

However, my greatest pleasure lies not in a regime of planned reading but in the accidental or opportunistic experiences afforded by waiting

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rooms and reception areas. You've all been in one, and you all know the kind of reading materials that await you there. My appetite for this stems back, I think, to the gentleman's barber I used to visit in my teens back in the late 1970s and early 80s, in which there were teetering piles of magazines to while away the time before you were beckoned forward to the leatherette throne for your monthly trim. John the barber seemed to have just two interests beyond haircuts, if his magazines were any indication — golf, and glamour photography, two subjects that rarely overlap. That was maybe the start of what I referred to earlier as an unconventional literary education.

What I learned from these formative reading experiences taught me the power of vernacular as a signifier of literary authenticity. The poetry I write often borrows from the rich micro-lexicons of a specialism. I find myself absorbing the language of chess from columns in the broadsheets. I find poetic inspiration in the lingua franca of farming, or physiotherapy or Formula One. I relish visits to my dentist knowing that a new poem might emerge from a casual reading of *The People's Friend* or *Angling Times*.

Is this opportunistic reading a bad habit? Maybe, but to borrow from Kipling, 'What do they know of poetry, who only poetry know?'. Pass me that copy of *Practical Caravanner* would you? I feel a poem coming on.