VOX

My Reading Habits

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I'M OBSESSED with books.

I suspect most writers would look at that statement and say, 'Well, yeah. We're writers. It goes with the territory.' But when I use the word 'obsessed' I don't do so lightly. I think about books all the time. I think about them in bed at night, in the shower, when I'm cooking a meal, during country walks, on long car journeys. I think about books I've read and books I want to read. I compile lists in my head of books I want to buy and in what order.

Let's get down to stats. I normally read around ninety books a year. I *would* read more, but, you know, there's other things to consider…work, and family life, and exercise, and household chores. And I like to devote time to other forms of storytelling that interest me too — movies and TV series and audio dramas.

Of the ninety books I get through in an average year, though – and I know it's that many because since 1985 I've kept a reading diary – I try to maintain what I consider a healthy reading balance by juggling several different criteria. I like to read across several genres; I like to read a range of books whose publication dates span from the nineteenth century right up to the present day; I like to read different *types* of books: novels, novelisations, novellas, single-author collections, anthologies and nonfiction; and I like to read a fairly even mix of books written by both men and women.

Although I've written other things, I'm most commonly known as a horror writer. The fiction I write is dark, scary, and often (but not always) supernatural. The reason I write horror is because that's the genre I've always felt the most affinity for. To many, horror is a turn-off, either because it's too disturbing or too silly. To me, though, horror is by turns thrilling, imaginative, confrontational, harrowing and entertaining. When it comes to reading, therefore, that's still the genre I gravitate towards most readily, and not least because the best kind of horror fiction can provide us with unflinching, often excoriating insights into the human condition.

I don't *just* read horror, though. These days I also read plenty of crime fiction and plenty of general or what is known as 'literary' fiction — though as the word 'literary' means 'concerning the writing, study, or content of literature' then surely *all* fiction writing is, by definition, 'literary'?

Whatever I read, though, nonfiction aside, tends to have a thread of darkness or threat running through it. In real life I'm laid back, open-minded, and I hate all forms of aggression, cruelty and bigotry, but in my reading habits I'm attracted to stories about people *in extremis*. I like peril and menace, foreboding and terror.

One thing I'm definitely *not* is a book snob. I'm just as happy reading a movie or TV series novelisation, or a schlocky horror novel about giant killer crabs on the rampage, as I am reading Dickens or Ian McEwan or Margaret Atwood. Because when it boils right down to it, one type of fiction isn't so very different from another. As long as what you're reading captivates you, and absorbs you, and transports you, then it's all good.