

∞ READING ROUND ∞

My Reading Habits

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MY READING HABITS are tyrannical. Though I retain a hankering for total reading freedom – to read whatever I like, to give up on books if I want to, to lightly come and go – the truth is that a terrible self-consciousness set in long ago, compelling me to keep records, set targets, organise, measure, report, collect and archive. Psychoanalysis would probably help but, like most neurotics, I'm deeply attached to my neurosis.

I still permit myself *some* freedom in my reading. I like fiction and poetry and don't force myself to read nonfiction. I follow my nose in sniffing out new books, new authors, and allow myself to get excited by anything that comes my way. But that's the limit of it. Once I'm hooked by a book, my habits assert themselves.

I'll want to buy a nice edition. Mainly I get my books from secondhand stores, the quality of production tends to be better – higher grade paper, thread-sewn binding, thicker boards – and I like the book to have its original jacket or cover design. Though it needn't be a first edition, I love the period flavour of a book as it first appeared.

Then I'll want to put a protective plastic jacket on it, the sort of things libraries use. I buy them in bulk from Book Protector House and they are delivered to me in brown paper packages, like pornography.

My excitement about a book immediately becomes excitement about its author: I'll want to get hold of their other books at once (and treat them

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in the same way), though often my book-buying craze exceeds my author craze, and when it burns out I'm left with hastily bought books of theirs still unread.

Once I'm reading, like most readers I love to lose myself in a book. But I can drift, get distracted. So, to sharpen my focus, I take notes, which I write very neatly in pencil on a blank page at the end. Then, when I've finished, I use these notes to help me write a piece about the book, imagining trying to give someone a flavour of it. The piece has to be less than 350 words, regardless of the book's length. This habit is recent, only fifteen years old, but already immovable.

An older habit is to keep a simple record of everything I've read: I've been doing this since 1988. Other habits have grown round it. I count the number of books I've read and make a note of that too (it's not so many, an average of sixty a year). Then I choose the authors who have given me the greatest excitement that year – there's usually half a dozen or so – and elevate them to my 'wall of fame', photocopying a picture of them to add to a large montage of author faces which grows steadily above my desk.

It would doubtless take a lot of very expensive psychoanalysis to shift these habits. The more hideous truth is that I don't want to shift them. Even as I finish this piece I'm looking forward to fitting a length of *Adaptaroll* to my 1966 edition of Gadda's crime classic *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana*.