

# ∞ READING ROUND ∞

## My Reading Habits

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WHEN I WAS A TEENAGER I discovered magic realism and it was like walking through the wardrobe into Narnia. There, it was hot and humid Columbia rather than the cold and heavily signposted Christian kingdom of Narnia. (Into which I also gladly disappeared.) There, astonishing things happened daily. The air of the rainforest was so thick that fish darted through it. Blood seemed to have a mind of its own and could flow from a man and find its way back to his mother. This happened not *as if* by magic. It was simply how it was, just as how in the novels of Jane Austen order must prevail.

We read novels seeking a strange form of communion that bears little resemblance to kinship. I had nothing in common with Macondo or the characters with which Gabriel García Márquez populated it in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I had nothing in common with the novels of Jane Austen either, nor the snow-and-silence-blanketed land of Narnia beyond a longing to try Turkish Delight along with every other child of C. S. Lewis. The fact is, I was a daughter of Indian immigrants growing up in middle-class, white, southwest London in the Thatcher years. I had nothing in common with anyone. And yet. By the time I set that small green Penguin paperback down I was, if not exactly a different person, a person set on a different path. I read magic realist novels obsessively for a few more years until I stopped all of a sudden, and was done. This is what it is to be young: to abandon and move on without thought or reflection. And this is why books are portals not just into the world, but into our own lives.

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Those were joyous reading years. I took off from Márquez and landed in Murakami. There, a melancholy Japanese man who mainlined lemon drops (it is my reading superpower to remember what characters eat and drink in novels) lost first his cat, then his wife, then his sense of meaning. After *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, I alighted in Rushdie. *Midnight's Children* was not only a book about our India, though I failed to see how exactly it was mine, it was the book about India. White people read it. It had won the Booker Prize. So I read *Midnight's Children* with appropriately high levels of awareness, never forgetting that I was a *British-Indian reading* *Midnight's Children*. Even so, I received it as a story about people rather than the birth of an independent India. Rushdie warned of this, writing that ‘when people use the term magic realism, usually they only mean “magic” and they don’t hear “realism”’. But we can only read the way we read in the times in which we find ourselves reading. I didn’t know my own history, or even that there was one *to be known*. I was not yet able to look out from behind my own eyes. All I could see was the magic.

And then I reached my destination. The beautiful, big-skied, bleeding mothercountry of Toni Morrison. Like all the greatest gifts in life, I swear she came to me rather than I to her. When I read *Beloved* the world tilted on its axis. It has never, thank god, tipped back. *Sixty million and more*, Morrison wrote in perhaps the most haunting and true epigraph ever written. Those words darted into my eyes like the fish in Macondo. Once inside me they grew, multiplied into vast bristling schools of thought, and altered my perspective for good.