

∞ READING ROUND ∞

Life-Changing Literature

Umi Sinha

WHEN I WAS SIX, we moved from Bombay (now Mumbai) to Lonavala, a small hill-station where my father had been put in command of an inland naval engineering base. The Captain's House was a long bungalow with a glassed-in verandah that ran along the front of the house. All the rooms, which were arranged in a row, opened onto this verandah. Heavy rain fell like bullets onto the corrugated roof.

My father was busy with work and the social events that are part of naval life. My English mother worked in Bombay and only came home at weekends, but she also ran the Naval Officers' Wives Association. Our ayah (nanny) preferred to spend her time with the other servants in the kitchen and servants' quarters at the back of the house, so my younger sister and I were left to entertain ourselves. In my memory, the house is always bathed in a shadowy grey light, as though we were living underwater, and spookily silent.

In those days – the late 1950s – there was no television and, unlike my brother who spent all day out having adventures, my sister and I were not allowed to go out without our ayah. I spent my time reading the piles of books we received for birthdays and Christmas — European and Russian fairy tales, children's books like *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Around the World in 80 Days*, and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. As we grew older we were given abbreviated versions of Dickens and the Brontës. When I'd finished my books I turned to my mother's library, which contained thousands of books. She was an eclectic reader

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and, unusually for those days, had a collection of literature from all around the world, including Africa, the Middle-east and, of course, India.

My method was to pick a book at random, attracted by the title (books were mostly cloth- or leather-bound and had no cover images then, although they often had illustrations). I'd read a few paragraphs. If it seemed interesting I continued. If not, I put it back. By seven I'd worked my way through most of Walter Scott's novels, skipping pages of description and Scottish dialect. I read Alexander Dumas, Rider Haggard, Fenimore Cooper and Zane Grey. Then I moved on to the unabridged versions of the classics, including the Russians.

So while my childhood was physically constrained, and in many ways lonely, in my mind I travelled widely and learnt much about people — how varied life was in different parts of the world and sections of society, but also how much we shared in common. I learnt a lot about cruelty and injustice, something that has helped to shape my opinions and attitudes. A therapist once asked me who my role models had been, since my parents seemed to be so absent. I thought about it for a moment and then said 'Books'. It was the greatest gift they could have given me.