

∞ READING ROUND ∞

My Reading Habits

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LIKE MANY PEOPLE, I've always enjoyed reading for pleasure. But for a long time I thought I had a slightly odd way of reading. It's only over time that I've discovered how important reading is to me, and how it's become a foundation for my life.

Growing up in a single-parent family on a council estate in a rural Norfolk town, we didn't own many books. What we did have, however, was a wonderful library within walking distance. Each week, the kind librarian would set aside the latest Mrs Pepperpot for me to enjoy. The escapades of this unwillingly miniaturised grown-up as she evaded giant cats, clambered over skyscraping grass, and attempted to carry out small tasks such as shopping while only as large as a pepper pot, entranced me. Here was a world transformed, yet entirely recognisable. I marvelled at how the text on the page could conjure such a rich imaginative landscape — one where emotions and visceral reactions felt just as real to me as in daily life.

As I progressed through school, university, and work, I maintained a fascination with reading. I say fascination with, rather than 'pleasure in', as that's how it struck me. Of course I read for enjoyment, escape, information, learning, to walk for a few hours in other landscapes and other lives, but at the heart of it all I was trying to figure out how it was done. I felt like I was trying to read from underneath! Like an amateur magician keenly observing repeated tricks, I wanted to understand how simply putting together ordinary words in a particular order created such a powerful effect on me.

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When I began to study creative writing at evening classes after work, I felt like the safe had been cracked open and all the jewels lay there for my taking. This was how literature was made. Word by word, thought by thought, image by image, sentence by sentence. It was possible to learn the tools of the trade, improve with them, and make steps towards writing for myself.

While trying my hand at short stories, scripts, drama, and poetry, I fell in love with the heightened concision of poems. What a curious world to belong to! This strange universe of short lines and sometimes unusual shapes or even prose-looking poems was a revelation to me. I'd try and see what strands drew a poem together, what patterns it contained, how it moved and danced on the page. I wanted to be the person who magicked it into creation. I wanted to understand how that felt.

Over time, as I experimented, talked to people, attended creative-writing sessions, and read even more voraciously than ever, the joys of creating with words grew for me. Every writer will tell you that reading is the foundation of their work. It energises us, reassures us, challenges us. It allows us to explore what it's like to be in the world, in all its magical difficulty. And, for me, it's an immensely life-affirming and enriching occupation.