Howards End is on the Landing

A Year of Reading from Home

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Extract

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Starting Point

IT BEGAN LIKE THIS. I went to the shelves on the landing to look for a book I knew was there. It was not. But plenty of others were and among them I noticed at least a dozen I realised I had never read.

I pursued the elusive book through several rooms and did not find it in any of them, but each time I did find at least a dozen, perhaps two dozen, perhaps two hundred, that I had never read.

And then I picked out a book I had read but had forgotten I owned. And another and another. After that came the books I had read, knew I owned and realised that I wanted to read again.

I found the book I was looking for in the end, but by then it had become far more than a book. It marked the start of a journey through my own library.

Some people give up drink for January or chocolate for Lent, others decide to live for a year on just a pound a day, or without buying any new clothes. Their reasons may be financial (to save money), physical (to lose weight), or spiritual (to become more

holy). I decided to spend a year reading only books already on my shelves for several reasons.*

The journey through my own books involved giving up buying new ones, and that will seem a perverse act for someone who is both an author and a publisher. But this was a personal journey, not a mission. I felt the need to get to know my own books again, but I am not about to persuade other people to abandon the purchase of new ones.

I wanted to repossess my books, to explore what I had accumulated over a lifetime of reading, and to map this house of many volumes. There are enough here to divert, instruct, entertain, amaze, amuse, edify, improve, enrich me for far longer than a year and every one of them deserves to be taken down and dusted off, opened and read. A book which is left on a shelf is a dead thing but it is also a chrysalis, an inanimate object packed with the potential to burst into new life. Wandering through the house that day looking for one elusive book, my eyes were opened to how much of that life was stored here, neglected or ignored.

The start of the journey also coincided with my decision to curtail my use of the internet, which can have an insidious, corrosive effect. Too much internet usage fragments the brain and dissipates concentration so that after a while, one's ability to spend long, focused hours immersed in a single subject becomes blunted. Information comes pre-digested in small pieces, one grazes on endless ready-meals and snacks of the mind, and the result is mental malnutrition.

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*(There were one or two caveats. I would borrow academic books from libraries and I would read some of the books sent by literary editors, for review.)

The internet can also have a pernicious influence on reading because it is full of book-related gossip and chatter on which it is fatally easy to waste time that should be spent actually paying close, careful attention to the books themselves, whether writing them or reading them.

Rationing it strictly gave me back more than time. Within a few days, my attention span increased again, my butterfly-brain settled down and I was able to spend longer periods concentrating on single topics, difficult long books, subjects requiring my full focus. It was like diving into a deep, cool ocean after flitting about in the shallows, Slow Reading as against Gobbling-up.

I did not begin my year of reading from home in order to save money, but of course that is what happened. I buy too many books, excusing impulse purchases on the vague grounds that buying a new paperback is better for me than buying a bar of chocolate. But that depends on the quality of the paperback. I wanted to reacquaint myself with old books and resist the pressure to buy something because it was new, because it was in the top twenty or shortlisted for the Booker Prize or even the Nobel, for that matter, or recommended by Richard and Judy or discounted, heavily promoted or chattered about on the internet. A friend joined a book club because she wanted to expand her literary horizons and left it because the only titles ever chosen were the latest hyped or shortlisted novels. There is no doubt that of the thousands of new books published every year many are excellent and some will stand the test of time. A few will become classics. But I wanted to stand back and let the dust settle on everything new, while I set off on a journey through my books.

What follows is a description of that journey, which has also and

inevitably led to my thinking, remembering, ordering, assessing, my entire book-reading life. I have let myself recall places where I read, bookshelves of the past, gone back in my imagination to libraries I used to know, and know intimately, libraries I visited daily and which contributed to forming me, changing me, helping me to grow. Books lead to people, of course. Over the past fifty years I have had the privilege of meeting some of the great writers of our time. As a young writer I was very lucky to be introduced to people whose work already meant a great deal to me and many of them gave me help and advice at a stage in my career when it was invaluable. So many taught me a lesson I have tried never to forget – that the young need encouragement. They also need a few allowances made for naivety and bumptiousness. This book is not an autobiography in the usual sense but it is a record of so much more than just reading, more than just books. Name-dropping is a tiresome, if harmless, trait. But I have been encouraged and inspired by many people in the world of books, not all of whose names I remember (or perhaps even knew): librarians, bookshop staff, school and university teachers, fellow readers, correspondents. I salute them, too, for I owe them so much.

The journey began one early autumn afternoon, in the old farmhouse where I live, surrounded by the gently rising hills and graceful trees, the ploughed and planted fields, the hedgerows and flower borders and orchards and old stone walls, the deer and birds and hedgehogs and rabbits, the foxes and badgers and moths and bees of Gloucestershire. I climbed two flights of elm-wood stairs to the top landing in search of a book, and found myself embarked on a year of travelling through the books of a lifetime.

No Order, No Order

I SOMETIMES WONDER if the books came into this house or if the house grew around them. Either way, they feel as organic a part of it as the beams, the Aga in the kitchen, the wood burner in the sitting room, or the old pine wardrobe that arrived in half a dozen sections and had to be assembled once it was in the right bedroom. The bookshelves were built or bought to fit not only whole walls but nooks and crannies and have filled up in the same slightly haphazard way over the years. I can think of only one shelf which was made to measure, for very small books, mainly the Oxford World's Classics series printed on fine paper and published in demy octavo. The old words for book sizes are still in use – Demy, Quarto, Royal – just like the old names for paper sizes, though others go alongside them: B Format, and A2, A3. I hope those of us who learned pints and quarts, feet and inches, pounds and ounces, let alone pecks and bushels, can be forgiven a fondness for the old-fashioned terminology.

Next to the World's Classics on the shelf above the door is a long

row of small square Observer Books, which I started to collect as a child, alongside the I Spy series. The Observer books of Moths, Birds' Eggs, Aeroplanes, Trees, Churches, Archaeology, Ferns, Mosses … I sometimes take a handful down and pore over forgotten facts about the Tiger Hawk Moth or the Wild Service Tree, the Saddleback Church and the Spitfire. Someone once told me that these were the sort of books that boys like because they are essentially lists and boys like lists more than girls do. I wonder.

I know people whose books are housed in something resembling public libraries, one or two whose books are even catalogued, in card indexes, on spreadsheets or even on infernal systems on websites where it is possible to log your own library and arrange virtual books on virtual shelves.

I know people who own thousands of books and can tell you the exact spot where every single one of them is shelved. They colour coordinate them, or arrange them by alphabet or author or subject. Well, that is what collectors enjoy doing, with books arranged like stamps in albums. Good luck to them. My father's sock drawer was just the same.

Alas, there is no plan to the housing of the books here, no classification system, no order – or rather, there is an order, one that has come about by a process of accumulation and illogic, and the small but constant shifts and changes in family life, activity and volume-acquisition. It works. Yes, books do go missing. I take one from its place, wander into another room and put it down, leave it on my bedside or the kitchen table. In a rare fit of helpfulness, someone else may even put it back on a shelf, though probably not the one from which it came.

But if I were an orderly person with a Dewey decimal

classification system, I would never have gone hunting for the elusive book, reached the second-floor landing, and the start of this journey.

A book collector would be better organised, but I am not a book collector.

I have spent my life working with books in numerous ways. I have accumulated a wide assortment of them over sixty-plus years and many, many have gone – lent or left, sold or given away, for there is nothing essentially sacred about a book just because it is printed on paper and bound between covers. Only look at the rubbish available in book form. Some are quickly read, been, gone. You don't read many thrillers twice. Others served a temporary practical need – your cat was having kittens and you needed to know how to look after them; you were travelling to Denmark and wanted a guide. But the kittens grew up and the cat was neutered and you will never visit Denmark again. Pass the thriller to a friend, give the cat book to the charity shop, sell the guide to Denmark on eBay. You don't have to pay its rent just because it is a book.

When I did not find my elusive title upstairs, I came down to the room I call the Small Dark Den. I would not want to spend a year in it, but it has such an eclectic mixture on its shelves that I could probably spend one just reading books taken from it.

It's an odd room and one that, uniquely in this house, gets little natural light – it faces north, and the side of a stone barn, and it's overshadowed by an old walnut tree. No amount of Brilliant White emulsion ever made it lighter so we gave up and lined the walls with bookshelves instead. The SDD also houses the piano which no one now ever plays, and the television on which I watch rubbish.

The Small Dark Den has a long row of dull-looking, uniform

books bound in porridge-coloured card with hessian on the spine and titles in black Times Roman. They are old plays published by the Malone Society, they belong to the Shakespeare Professor, and I have never read a single one nor will I, even in this year. But the titles made me take a few down and open them.

The Wisdom of Dr Dodypoll (1600)
[Actus Prima. A Curtaine drawne. Earl Lassinbergh is discovered (like a Painter) painting Lucilia, who sits working on a piece of Cushion worke.]
The Play of the Wether
(A new and a very merry interlude of all manner wethers made by John Heywood.)
The Hog Hath Lost his Pearl
The Downfall of Robert, Earl of Huntingdon
The Faithfull Friends
An Interlude called Lusty Juventus
The Queen of Corsica
The Shepherd's Paradise
The Pardoner and the Friar and the Four Ps

On and on they run and if they were novels I would be reading them, but Elizabethan plays are not as enticing as their titles and if they were any good we would have heard of them, as we have heard of *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *Dr Faustus*.

These books are facsimiles, too, and several are printed in old Gothic font which is almost impossible for modern eyes to take in.

Ah, fonts. Typeface. Hot metal. Typography. Printing Presses. We'll be here all night. In the Small Dark Den there is a book called

An Alphabet of Fonts and sometimes I look through it and gaze at their beauty and the subtle, subtle differences between each one. If you ask me to choose my favourite I would need three – Garamond, Perpetua and one other. But that is hard to find. It was designed by Ralph Beyer for the new Coventry Cathedral, consecrated in 1962, and it is not a font you can order from your printer, but if you go to the Cathedral you will see it everywhere, on the lettering carved on stone, and the Orders of Service. It is strange to have a font, of all things, bound up with your life, but this one speaks to me of places and people and a time, all precious to me; if you cut me open, I daresay that whatever is carved upon my heart will be in Ralph Beyer lettering.

The titles of the old plays reprinted by the Malone Society are in Times Roman, the font everyone recognises, the classic font and one which serves almost every purpose and always looks handsome, though I prefer Garamond. But whatever the font, it must have a serif or I cannot read much of it. There is a long modern novel on one of the shelves of the Small Dark Den that I certainly should read. It came to me with recommendations from all sides, but I can't read it because it is printed in a sans serif font, Arial, probably, and I simply cannot force my eyes to take it in for more than a few lines. Why should that be? Do others agree with me? Do publishers think about these things? This one does.

Publishers also think about titles, but I wonder, with both my author's and my publisher's hats on, if we think about them quite enough. I love book titles and they're important. Many a new novel has sunk without trace because it has a dull, unmemorable title. *One of Us*. *Two by Two. Far and Near*. I made those up but you could find plenty like it and if you saw them in a shop your eye would

slide over them; if someone recommended one you would instantly forget what it was called.

A good title beckons, attracts, seduces, remains. I have plenty of favourite titles though oddly enough they are not necessarily attached to favourite books. A good title makes a pattern, has a rhythm and can be rolled very satisfactorily round in the mouth, even recited like a verse to cheer up dull moments.

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter
The Ballad of the Sad Café
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall
Salmon Fishing in the Yemen
Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy
The Mysterious Affair at Styles
A Woman's Guide to Adultery
All Fun and Games until Somebody loses an Eye
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time
Agatha Raisin and the Quiche of Death
We Need to Talk About Kevin
If on a Winter's Night a Traveller…
Flaubert's Parrot
The Man with the Golden Gun
The Scarlet Letter
The Hound of the Baskervilles
The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie
The Earth Hums in B Flat

They all have a certain ring. They make you want to read the book. I could have begun my year of reading from home anywhere in

the house, anywhere on the shelves. I had no agenda to follow, no lists to tick off, no syllabus or plan to follow. I began more or less at random by taking down a box of books that was sitting next to the Malone Society Classics in the SDD.

In 1985 Penguin celebrated their fiftieth year by publishing a set of their first ten titles from 1935 in a handsome box. I had two sets, one of which I have left on the shelf untouched and still muffled in its original shrink-wrap. These things are sometimes worth keeping.

I am cynical about anniversaries. Publishers, like the BBC, make a fuss about the tenth or the twenty-fifth or the centenary since they started imprint X or first published author Y or bound in the colour Z but it's often just a pretext for a self-congratulatory party and some re-jacketing – the general public isn't much interested. But I was very aware of the Penguin 1935–85 set because it was issued the year my third daughter was born and my husband gave me one as a present, for reading-while-feeding. I associate the books with sitting up in the middle of the night quietly reading Mary Webb's *Gone to Earth* and Compton Mackenzie's *Carnival* by the soft light of the nursery lamp. (The other titles in the set are André Maurois' *Ariel*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Eric Linklater's *Poet's Pub*, *William* by E.H.Young, and Agatha Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.)

Now, on a golden day in late September, I took two books out to a deckchair in the garden. The first apples were thumping down. The last swallows were dipping and soaring, dipping and soaring over the pond. A dragonfly hovered, its electric-blue back catching the sunlight. There had been an early mist and cobwebs draped over the long grass like parasols caught and held on their four corners. The air smelled of damp earth.

I opened the first slim paperback, a perfect facsimile with its green jacket and old-fashioned print.

> *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* by Dorothy L. Sayers.
>
> 'What in the world, Wimsey, are you doing in this Morgue?' demanded Captain Fentiman, flinging aside the *Evening Banner* with the air of a man released from an irksome duty.
>
> 'Oh, I wouldn't call it that,' retorted Wimsey amiably. 'Funeral Parlour at the very least. Look at the marble. Look at the furnishings. Look at the palms and the chaste bronze nude in the corner.'
>
> 'Yes, and look at the corpses. Place always reminds me of that old thing in *Punch*, you know "Waiter, take away Lord Whatsisname, he's been dead two days".'

The opening lines set the scene, The Bellona Club in London St James's, and a world which I would say no longer exists – except that it does. Walk into the Athenaeum, Whites or Brooks's and you walk back into the world Wimsey knew so well, with the deep, high-backed leather armchairs, the smoking room, heavy curtains at the tall windows, the round mahogany tables set out with newspapers and journals, neatly edge to edge, the slightly hushed voices, and, somewhere offstage, the clink of china and the faint pat of playing cards on green baize. Sayers is one of a clutch of writers belonging to what is always known as The Golden Age of the Detective Story. When did the detective story, beloved of and sometimes written by, Oxford and Cambridge dons, metamorphose into the Crime Novel? Probably not until the end of the twentieth century, though in America great novelists and stylists

like Raymond Chandler are better described as crime or even thriller-writers than writers of detective stories.

The world of Lord Peter Wimsey is quintessentially English, 1920s and 30s. And *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* is a classic example. As in the ancient *Punch* joke quoted in the opening lines, the body of General Fentiman is found, apparently asleep but actually dead, in one of those deep armchairs and at first it is assumed that he died of natural causes – old man, bitter weather, dickey heart. But Wimsey is not satisfied that this is the case and sets out, with his sidekick Bunter – a sort of amateur-detective's Jeeves – to unravel the mystery. When the police become involved, it is naturally in the person of Wimsey's friend Inspector Parker, who allows Lord Peter the most extraordinary licence, not to mention undercover police assistance. This is the world of the monocle concealing a powerful magnifying lens, and the collapsible ruler concealed inside the walking-cane, as it is also the rather moving world of Great War veterans, Club servants with only one arm, and a vital clue in the form of the absence, on the victim's overcoat, of an Armistice Day poppy. The plotting is meticulous, though the identity of the murderer eminently guessable; every man and woman wears a hat and gloves; and solicitors refuse to entertain the notion of having their offices invaded by the telephone.

When I was 18, I went up to King's College, London, to read English, which at that time progressed in an entirely linear, chronological way from Anglo-Saxon to Dickens. Thereafter, various aspects of modern literature could be taken as Special Options and one of them was the Detective Story, taken seriously by academics even then, and much favoured. Dorothy L. Sayers featured on the

syllabus, along with other women – Marjorie Allingham, Ngaio Marsh, Christie. I did not take the option myself but I read a good many of those detective stories as light relief from the rigours of Beowulf, Chaucer and Marlowe, Pope and Dryden.

They were almost always either the green Penguins, or the bright yellow detective stories published by Victor Gollancz in uniform, extremely ugly, jackets which never had pictures on them but were strictly lettering only. The Gollancz books I borrowed either from the old red-brick pile that was then the Kensington Public Library, or from somewhere far more illustrious, the august London Library in St James's Square.

The green Penguin detective stories were in a bookcase in the hostel where I lived for my three undergraduate years, opposite the Natural History Museum. It was run by a minor order of rather haughty and snobbish nuns, and one of them had brought her father's collection of Penguin Books into the house when he died. I was told it contained every Penguin detective story issued and I can well believe it. I read my way steadily through the lot, as did my room-mate, a music student from my native Yorkshire who became my instant and lasting best friend. Many of them were set in a London which then (1960) had barely changed since the time in which they were written. The docks were still the docks, and the Port of London one of the busiest commercial ports in the world; the river that ran past my college was packed with working boats and barges. Fleet Street was down the road and the printing presses still produced the papers from there – turn up a side alley and a door opening off the street looked down into a Dante's Inferno of noise and roaring machinery. There were bowler hats in the City and in all the lawyers' offices and barristers' Chambers of Gray's

Inn and Temple; boys with stubs of pencils behind their ears running about with early evening papers, shouting the headlines; costermongers in Covent Garden, and flowers in the flower market. Walk through King Street and someone would throw you a cheerful apple, further along, a carnation. In winter, roast-chestnut braziers glowed through the fog. The London Particular was in its dying days and it was not pleasant, though it has grown golden in the memory. It was dangerous, it tasted foul, it penetrated your lungs and turned a minor cold into bronchitis. But it is the pea-souper of *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club*, with old men tottering through it to the lantern which gleams its fuzzy welcome out of the whiteness, that, reading the book now, I can taste on my tongue.

Today's crime novel and police procedural is far more graphic than the detective story ever was and yet there is an exhumation in The Bellona Club which, with its subtle suggestions and hints of little things heard and seen as the men go about their grim work is, somehow infinitely more unsettling than a full-on description by one of today's popular writers of a headless handless, disembowelled murder victim.

I finished the Sayers novel while still sitting in the autumn sun and made a note to look for more. Wimsey has never been my favourite fictional detective. The silly-ass pose sits better on Bertie Wooster, whose chinless features never concealed a razor-sharp brain, and the Wimsey–Harriet Vane love story is embarrassing, but when I put the Bellona Club back in its box, I went in search of *The Nine Tailors* (probably Sayers' masterpiece) and *Murder Must Advertise.* They were not in the Small Dark Den. (I found them much later and in quite another corner of the house.)

Meanwhile, let us cross the den and open a small door which,

like the one in the back of the wardrobe that led into Narnia, now gives out not into our hall, as it really should, but into the book stacks of the London Library.