

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.

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 short-listed 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.