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opening extract from

The Rights of the Reader

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1

Birth of the Alchemist

One

You can't make someone read. Just like you can't make them fall in love, or dream...

You can try, of course. "Go on, love me!" "Dream!" "Read! Read! Read goddammit, I'm telling you to read!" "Go to your room and read!"

What happens next?

Nothing.



The young reader nods off over their book. The window suddenly looked, wide open, onto somewhere more tantalizing; they flew out that way to escape it. But they sleep warily: the book is still open in front of them. If we opened their bedroom door, we'd find them sitting at the desk, dutifully reading. Even if we tiptoed upstairs they'd hear us coming.

"Do you like it, then?"

They can't say no. That would be a crime. Books are sacred, how can you not like reading? No, they'll tell us the descriptions are too long.

Reassured, we head back down to the television. Their remark might even provoke a heated debate with our friends.

"They think the descriptions are too long. They've got a point, of course. We live in an audio-visual age, but the novelists of the nineteenth century had to describe everything..."

"That's no reason to let them skip half the book!"

Why waste our energy? They've gone back to sleep.

Two

Their reluctance to read is all the harder to understand if you're of a generation, a time, a background, a family, where everyone always tried to stop you reading.

"Stop reading for goodness' sake, you'll strain your eyes!"

"Why don't you go outside and play? It's a beautiful day."



"Lights out! It's late!"

Yes, the weather was always too good for reading. And the night too dark.

It's interesting that even back then reading was rarely a

matter of choice. So it became a subversive act. You didn't just discover a novel, you were disobeying your parents too. A double victory. The happy memory of reading time snatched under the bedclothes by torchlight. How fast Anna Karenina galloped towards her Vronski in the dead of night! They were in love, how romantic; and they were in love in spite of the ban on reading, even better. They were in love in spite of Mum and Dad, maths homework, a French essay, a bedroom that needed tidying. They were too in love to go down for supper. They loved each other more than pudding. They were too head over heels to join in the football or go mushroom picking. They had chosen each other, and preferred each other to anyone else. My God, how beautiful love is.

And how short that novel was.

Three

To be fair, we parents didn't set out to turn reading into a chore. All we thought about, in the beginning, was our children's enjoyment. We were in a state of grace during those early years. Our total sense of wonder in the face of a new life transformed us into geniuses. For them, we became storytellers. As soon as they emerged blinking into the world of language, we told them stories. It was a talent we didn't know we had. Their enjoyment inspired us. Their happiness gave us voice. We created character after character, adventure after adventure, ratcheting up the plots. We invented a whole world for them, like the ageing Tolkien for his grandchildren. On the border of day and night, we became their novelist.



Not that it would have mattered if we'd had no talent for storytelling. If we'd told them other people's stories, badly, groping for words, mispronouncing names, mixing up adventures, muddling the beginning of one with the ending of another... Even if we hadn't made up stories at all, if we'd just read aloud, we'd still have been their personal novelists, their special storytellers helping them slip into their dreamy pyjamas every evening before dissolving under the sheets of night. More than that, we were the Book.

Remember that intimacy. There's nothing like it.

How we loved scaring just for the thrill of consoling! And how desperately they wanted to be scared! They weren't fooled, even then, but they trembled all the same. They were real readers, in other words. What a playful partnership we formed: they the cunning readers, we the book!

Four

We taught our young readers everything about books, when they didn't know how to read. We opened their minds to the infinite richness of imaginary things, introduced them to the joys of vertical travel; we gave them the power to go anywhere, delivered them from Chronos, plunged them into the fabulously crowded solitude of the reader... The stories we read them were full of brothers, sisters, parents, imaginary twins, teams of guardian angels, fleets of special friends to protect them from their sorrows, but who in turn found protection from their own fictional demons in the worried beating of the children's hearts. The children became their reciprocal angels: readers. Without them, the characters' world could not exist. Without the characters, the children were weighed down by their own reality. And so they discovered the paradoxical virtue of reading, which is to abstract ourselves from the world in order to make sense of it.

They returned from these voyages unable to speak. It was morning, and we were getting on with something else. To be honest, we didn't really bother trying to find out what they'd brought back from the other side. Innocently, they cultivated this mystery. It was their own private world. Their personal relationship with Snow White, or



whichever of the seven dwarves they were on close terms with, demanded secrecy. The reader's greatest pleasure: the silence after the story has been read.

Yes, we taught them everything about books.

As readers they were ready for anything.

So ready, and let's not forget this, they were desperate to learn how to read.

Five

What great teachers we were, when we didn't worry about our methods.

Six

Look at them now, years later, in their bedroom, with a book they're not reading. The urge to be somewhere else is a murky screen between them and the open page, blurring the lines. There they are, by the window, behind the closed door. Page forty-eight. They don't want to think about how long it's taken them to reach this forty-eighth page. The book contains exactly four hundred and forty-six of them. Call it five hundred. Five hundred pages! If only there was more dialogue. Not that it would make much difference. The pages are crammed with lines, squeezed between tiny margins; black paragraphs stacked on top of one another; here and there the relief of a conversation – speech marks, like an oasis, denoting one character talking to another. But the other person doesn't reply. And then there's a run of twelve pages. Twelve pages of black ink! It's suffocating. Totally suffocating. Fucking hell. They swear. Sorry, but they swear. Stupid-bloody-fucking-pile-of-shit-of-a-book. Page forty-eight... If only they could remember what those first forty-seven pages were about. But they don't dare ask themselves the question someone else is bound to put to them sooner or later.

The winter's night settles in. The theme music for the TV news rises through the floorboards. Another half-hour

till supper. Books are extraordinarily compact. You can't make a hole in them. And they're meant to be hard to burn. Fire can't get between the pages. Lack of oxygen. This is what they think about in the margins. Their own exceedingly wide margins. A book is thick, compact, dense, a blunt instrument. Page forty-eight or one hundred and forty-eight, what's the difference? The landscape's the same. They can see the teacher's lips mouthing the title. They can hear all their friends asking, "How many pages?"

"Three or four hundred."

(Liar.)

"When's it for?"

Naming the fateful day sets off a chorus of protest. "A fortnight? We've got to read four hundred" – five hundred – "pages in a fortnight! But we'll never make it, sir!"

Sir is not about to negotiate.

A book is a blunt instrument and a block of eternity. It's the physical manifestation of boredom. A book. "The book." They never call it anything else in their essays: the book, a book, the books, some books.

"In his book *Les Pensées*, Pascal tells us that..."

The teacher can use all the red ink he likes pointing out it's not the right terminology. That you should talk about a novel, an essay, a collection of short stories, a volume of poetry. The word "book" by itself means everything and nothing. A telephone directory is a book, so is a dictionary, a travel guide, a stamp album, an accounts ledger...

Nothing doing. The word will write itself again in their next essay.

"In his book *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert tells us that..."

Because, from their lonely perspective, a book is a book. And each book weighs down on them like an encyclopaedia, the hardback kind we used to tuck under children's bottoms so they were high enough to reach the table.

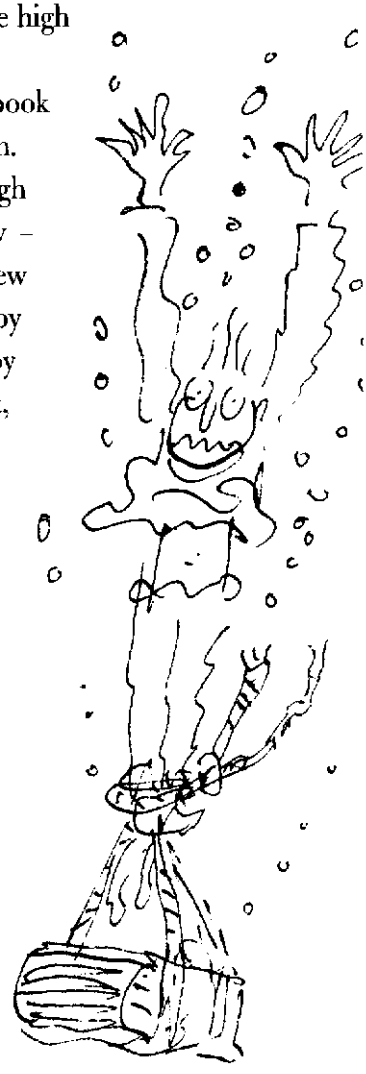
Each time, the weight of the book gets the young reader down. They were light-hearted enough when they sat down just now – full of resolve. But after a few pages they were overwhelmed by the painfully familiar weight, by boredom, by unbearable effort, by all the going nowhere.

Their drooping eyelids warn of shipwreck any minute now.

Their resolve has foundered on the rock of page forty-eight.

The book drags them down.

Together they sink.



Seven

Downstairs, round the TV, the argument about the corrupting power of television is gaining momentum.

"I just can't believe how stupid and vulgar and violent programmes are today. You can't turn the television on without seeing..."

"Take Japanese animations. Have you ever *seen* a Japanese animation?"

"It's not just the programmes, it's the medium itself. It's passive. It makes the viewer lazy."

"Yes, you switch it on, sit down..."

"You channel-hop."

"You can't focus on anything."

"At least that way you miss the ads."

"Doesn't work any more. They've synchronized the programmes. You escape one ad and end up watching another."

"Sometimes the same one!"

Silence: a shared moment of adult brilliance.

Then somebody, *mezza voce*: "But reading is different, reading is something you *do*."

"Absolutely, reading is active. 'The act of reading.' I couldn't agree more."

"But with TV, and cinema for that matter, everything's handed to you on a plate, nothing has to be

worked at, they just spoon-feed you. The picture, the sound, the scenery, the atmospheric music in case you haven't understood what the director's on about..."

"The creaking door that tells you to be scared stiff..."

"You have to imagine it all when you're reading... Reading is endlessly creative."

Silence again. (Between these endlessly creative people.)

Then: "What I find shocking is the average number of hours a kid spends watching TV compared to the number they spend in French lessons. I've seen the statistics."

"They must be staggering."

"One hour of French for every six or seven in front of the TV. And that's not counting the cinema. A child (not ours, of course) spends on average two hours a day in front of the telly, and eight to ten at the weekend. Making a grand total of thirty-six hours, compared to five hours of French lessons per week."

"No wonder school can't compete."

A third silence.

This time at the thought of such an impossible gulf.