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Buried in Books

A Reader's Anthology

Written by Julie Rugg

Published by Frances Lincoln Limited

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BURIED IN BOOKS

A Reader's Anthology

Julie Rugg

FRANCES LINCOLN LIMITED
PUBLISHERS

For Chris

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INTRODUCTION

Booklovers would like to appear sage and superior. In reality, the mania associated with acquiring, reading and simply messing about with books can be downright grubby. I have myself succumbed to the worst symptoms of this mania and have come through the other side a touch wiser but still – like a recovering addict – prone to spectacular lapses. Too often I wander out of a second-hand bookshop with a blush and a bag that is just a little too heavy. When I got home I hide the purchases by spreading them about on existing piles of books, so my husband won't notice. It's a method learned from the tunnellers in The Great Escape, and I heartily recommend it.

Hunting down fellow bibliomaniacs is an agreeable compulsion, and anthologising their behaviour through the ages has become something of an addiction. Some people I have come to like tremendously. Hugh Walpole, for example, began modestly as an unstoppable reader but his passion for collecting accelerated exponentially as his income increased. At the end of his life he was said to have possessed 30,000 volumes. The sheer bulk of his collection overcame all attempts to order and catalogue: he simply waded about in books. If he couldn't place his hand on the title he wanted, he bought another copy and as a consequence his collection contained many duplicates. It was the same for William Gladstone, who bought and sold whole libraries at a time; book dealers were often able to sell his own books back to him, and he didn't notice. I wonder if this was better or worse than the mania of librarian Antonio Magliabechi, who died in

1714. He appeared to know exactly where in the world every book was at any given time. I can forgive Hugh and even Mr Gladstone, since both were monumental, marathon readers to whom respect is due. Magliabechi, on the other hand, is just a little bit spooky. The fact that he also liked spiders more than people is something of a giveaway.

Despite sharing in many of the manic elements of book love, I have to confess that I am a rubbish reader. I'm impatient and I skip. I try and pretend that this is because I'm discerning but often I can be just lazy. In the majority of the novels I read – especially ones written by Iris Murdoch – I forget who everyone is unless I make a plan and I tend not to make plans very often. The Forsyte Saga defeated me entirely, even though it provided a plan so I didn't have to make one. But now and again a writer throws my complacency and I have to listen and think very hard indeed: each sentence is just so very good it can't be bolted. I try and do those kinds of book maybe just three or four times a year, and I sneak back and re-read on special occasions. It doesn't do to be spoiled.

Two things keep me reading and have me addicted for sure. First, I can't resist a good tale. I like stories where people lose everything in order to find out who they are; I like books that inadvertently, accidentally, educate me about something I didn't even know I knew nothing about; I like books that plunge into a foreign landscape and leave the reader to hack their way through; I love stories that have an 'oh my God!' twist or even two. I still remember that cracking big shock that's in The Moonstone. Even not very good books with a fine plot will have me – like Henry Crabb Robinson - speeding to the end just to see how it all plays out.

The second thing that keeps me reading is the absolute clarity that some writers achieve. It's the point that has me saying loud in my head, 'yes, that's like it is.' George Eliot is like that: her people are immediately real, and I'm not sure

if any other author has been so perceptive. But many, many books will have at least one observation, one analogy, one single turn of phrase that makes the entire read worthwhile. So I will always plump for the tomes that I hope are orchards, with truths there to pluck from every page. However, junk is fine too and I'm happy with any detective who has a drink problem, Victorian melodrama or – when things are looking otherwise bleak – something that nearly won the Booker ten years ago, picked up in a library sale. Other people's taste in reading-to-pass-the-time is impossible to fathom, and it's best not to judge.

Of all the themes in this collection, I have most enjoyed the forays into the literature of bookselling and dealing. There are few great or even adequate novels where this is a central concern, and coming very highly recommended are: Laurence Block's series featuring the bookshop-owning burglar Bernie Rhodenbarr; Perez-Reverte's Dumas Club; Iain Sinclair's visceral but rather involved White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings, and – if you can get hold of a copy – Driff's Guide to Bookdealers. This is not a novel, but remains a remarkably good read. Driff was a grumpy old man long before grumpy was fashionable. Indeed, my first great book binge happened through the summer of '86 in London, when Driff was always in my pocket. This was the very best way to discover the mustier byways of the capital and further afield too.

Edinburgh also used to be a great place for a book trawl and may still be yet. I hear that West Port Books is under new ownership: its dark, looming shelves invariably contained something worth buying as did the shop round the corner from there, owned by a guy who – somewhat predictably – always wore a kilt. But there's still McNaughtan's down the stairs opposite the much lauded Valvona and Crolla at the top of Leith Walk, or there was last time I looked and I hope it thrives. There are fewer and fewer towns and cities that

contain a string of truly excellent second-hand book shops, where it's possible to swap a couple of notes for an armful of unexpected treasure. I've heard it said that you can shop for books on the internet, but it sounds like a passionless exercise: a mere marriage of convenience. In reality, many readers do not know they want a book until they see it, touch it, smell it and fall a little in love with its promise. I know I'm not the only person who's bought a book just because of the way it sits in my hand.

This leads me to the contention that simply messing around with books is one of the very best ways to pass time that there is. Not necessarily reading, but just ambling about the house nonchalantly moving an armful of books from one place to another or creating a mountain of open volumes that's then abandoned because an entire other mountain in another room looks more interesting. Someone re-ordering their record collection by date or by alphabet or by genre will understand a similar compulsion in a house full of books. When books come into a house in a constant trickle there's always re-shelving to be done and failures to weed out, borrowings to go back to their owners and the awful decision to be made about what to read next.

Another theme I like that's emerged from the most recent travels in the world of bookishness is tales about the mistreatment of books. For a booklover, these are like mini-horror stories that send a little frisson of fear down the spine. It is clear that Coleridge was a serial offender, but it's impossible not to smile at Lamb's despair on finding that yet another of his volumes had caught the poet's attention, knowing the book won't be returned in any fit state. Some people are unremitting in the protection they afford the books they own. The habit of buying from jumble sales means that I tend not to be too distracted by bumps and foxing and sunning and all the other charming words used by proper book people.

However, having to use a university library means that I frequently handle books where the text has been highlighted enthusiastically. Some students seem unaware that using a neon-coloured pen is not the same as reading. It always makes me cringe, and puts me in mind of graffiti on the underground.

But this maltreatment is a reminder that each book has a life. Some are very short. A lot of contemporary political biographies go from printer to warehouse to shop to pulp factory before the ink is dry, and it's sad to see a book that will never, ever be loved or even welcomed. I can't recall offhand a whole novel about a book's life, but it could be a worthy tale. I have in my possession just one valuable and extremely arcane antiquarian book, which dates from 1839. I hear rumours that Gladstone read the book – not this very one, as far as I know – and it would be nice to think that my copy travelled a little in elevated circles before coming to rest on my shelf. Suddenly I wonder where the book was during the war and whether it had any close calls or if it just sat in a library somewhere for a hundred years, subject only to the flick of a feather duster.

Library books probably have a more thrilling life than most. Jules Verne had the vision of a library where books would leave the shelves and then be handed on from reader to reader and only eventually return to the shelves, years later, and not a little dog-eared. I used to pencil my name in books as I bought them, and then erase the mark when I passed it on. Now I leave the mark, because I've come to like reading the names and inscriptions and notes left inside books as they move from owner to owner. I've even been tempted to buy a book because it has a remarkably stylish bookplate: who wouldn't want to be associated – albeit remotely – with someone who has impeccable taste? Even post-war municipal library markings can have a utilitarian allure.

I feel mute with shame at the realisation that the last anthology made rather more jokes at the expense of librarians than really should have been the case. This collection aims to underline my true belief that librarianship is a noble calling. All the knowledge of the world is made freely accessible by libraries, to anyone with the wit to wander into them; it's librarians who smooth the pathway. I can't pretend to be even nearly as useful. The closest I have been to the job of librarian is as a volunteer who delivered books to remarkably genteel housebound ladies in Stirling. As might be expected, they were consumed by an appetite for violent crime novels although one customer had an inexplicable liking for Miss Read. The ladies pushed aside the tasking, involved and essentially wearying selection of South American novels I literally pedalled from door to door and brightened up when a new James Lee Burke fell out of the basket.

With a small coterie of exceptions, women are noticeably absent from literary accounts of bibliomania. Amongst the quotations here, women are usually only present to be impressed by bookishness and on no account can be allowed to display any of the nerdier bibliophilic symptoms. Perhaps this is because men can continue to indulge manic behaviours long into adult life, but women invariably have to grow up. It was something of a relief when my own particularly virulent strain of the book disease was cured by having a family. Prams have no place in second-hand bookshops – literally, there's usually no room to get one in – and tend to get in the way when barging forward into the bunfight of a Feed the Minds or Christian Aid book sale. Prams can be useful as a means of book transport, but then it is tiresome deciding where to leave the baby. Having a family also meant I had to stop the remarkably complex and fastidious method I had pursued – since a teenager – of recording and cataloguing my purchases. Some kind of barrier was shattered when my

baby was born. I called up Oxfam: they carted away sacks full of books, and I didn't even write down what I'd given them! This put an unforgiveable hole in my scrupulously maintained data relating to my own bookish behaviour, and I still don't feel quite right about it.

All of which brings us back to the fact that book love so often evokes the most egregious vices. An acquaintance of mine who is otherwise generous with their time and even money is downright mean when it comes to books. They laud a book to the degree that wanting to read it becomes a physical ache, waft their hand towards it sitting invitingly on their shelf, but on no account does the book ever leave their possession. One careful owner. Other people I know are very clear about the impression they want books to give of their intellectual capacities. In all the academic offices I've been in, I've never found a copy of Foucauld that shows any sign of having been read; Baudrillard looks similarly pristine. And I must confess that I have myself stolen a book. It was Three Men in a Boat and I took it from a library cupboard while I was in the school dinner queue. I was snorting within the first few lines, and simply couldn't put it back. I still have the book, and reread it every couple of years. I could argue that I rescued rather than stole it, since the last stamp had been some time in the fifties: the book had been criminally underappreciated.

The collection ends in shadow. Faint-hearted book lovers might well conclude at chapter thirteen, and continue no further. The thought of having nothing to read is a terror too great to be borne. Almost all the situations where I have found myself with nothing to read have involved long-delayed trains, usually very late at night. Things have sometimes worked out ok. On one occasion my only book was Trainspotting. I finished it with many miles to go, and no other book in my bag. I mentally shrugged and turned back to page one and

started again. It was actually better the second time, and had GNER not failed I would never have found that out. On a three-week trek around Mexico I took a selection of junk and books I wanted to be seen reading. I had bolted all the junk by the time I got to the departure lounge. This left me with The Making of the English Working Classes. I couldn't get much beyond it being about Methodism and, until I found another traveller willing to swap their junk books for mine, I was compelled to read and re-read my guide book. It was not a holiday I would care to repeat.

This introduction finishes with two housekeeping notes. First, all the quotations here are fully referenced, and the bibliography indicates just how troublesome is the task of securing permissions. Thanks and even more thanks are due to the living authors who have so graciously given up quotations with little more than a murmur of good wishes. The big corporate estate-holders are scary monsters operated by surprisingly nice people, and so thanks too for their sleek efficiency. There's an index of authors, to help in the search for favourites. There is a subject index too, since a well-indexed book is both a friend and a resource; however, I would make no claims for it being even remotely reliable.

Second, acknowledgements can be a complex business. Here I simply thank Lynda Murphy, and not just for reading Hardy so I didn't have to.

1. 'A CHARMING ECCENTRICITY'

Degrees of bibliomania

The love of books is a charming eccentricity: it is respectable, it is innocent, it proves that you have an honest soul, a contented mind.

Jules Janin, quoted by E.V. Lucas in 'The guide supreme' (1936).

It is always more pleasant to meet with one who is a bookman than with one who is not. I always feel safe and comfortable and happy in the presence of any one who is really fond of reading.

W. Robertson Nicoll, *A Bookman's Letters* (1913).

I'm a reader for lots of reasons. On the whole, I tend to hang out with readers, and I'm scared they wouldn't want to hang out with me if I stopped.

Nick Hornby, The Polysyllabic Spree (2006).

It's not that I don't like people. It's just that when I'm in the company of others – even my nearest and dearest – there always comes a moment when I'd rather be reading a book.

Maureen Corrigan, Leave Me Alone: I'm Reading (2005).

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