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CULTURAL COMMENT

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THE PLEASURE OF READING TO IMPRESS YOURSELF

BY REBECCA MEAD

PHOTOGRAPH BY FERDINANDO SCIANNA/MAGNUM

Not long ago, I unearthed a notebook I had long ago misplaced: a small blue ledger in which, for a period of about four years, I recorded the title of each book I was reading as I finished it. The record begins in mid-July of 1983, around the outset of the summer break before my penultimate year of high school, and the first book listed is "Dr. Zhivago," by Boris Pasternak. I don't remember reading that book, or why I thought that the reading of it merited the instigation of a list. Likely, I had a sense that Russian literature was important, but nobody had yet pointed me in the direction of Tolstoy. Next up was Maxim Gorky, "The Life of a Useless Man." (Ditto.) Before the month was out, I had torn through "Lady Chatterley's Lover" in a single day—I certainly remember *that* experience—and had also dispatched with "A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man."

Leafing through the notebook provides me with the pleasure of recovering a cache of long-lost photographs. Some of the images are out of focus, some feature individuals whose names have long been forgotten, and others provide moments of sharp recognition. In February, 1984, under the influence of a boyfriend who fancied himself a Wildean wit, I read "The Importance of Being Earnest." (You never forget your first aphorist.) That March, I read "The Trial," which I vaguely recall being recommended to me by some other young man of high seriousness and literary inclination—but precisely which such young man now escapes me. The May that I was seventeen, I read "Middlemarch" in the space of two weeks, a reminder of how little else there was to do in my narrow English coastal town. The Wildean boyfriend lived, exotically enough, in distant London, a useful arrangement if one is developing a taste for nineteenth-century novels. A couple of months later, I consumed "Daniel Deronda" in two weeks, too.

I made no record of what I thought of any of these books; in my private Goodreads list, there is no starring system. There's no indication of why I chose the works I did, though since I bought most of my books cheaply, in secondhand shops, the selection was somewhat dictated by availability. (That probably explains why my first Henry James, in July, 1984, was "The Europeans," rather than "The Portrait of a Lady.") Most of them were not assigned texts, at least in the years before I went to university, though there is a certain inevitability about the appearance of many of them: it is axiomatic that a young woman who reads will discover "The Bell Jar," as I did in September, 1984. This was a curriculum stumbled into: a few titles culled from the shelves at home; others coming my way from friends at school; and yet others recommended mostly by the Penguin Classics logo on their spine.

My list has its limitations. It's weighted toward classics of English literature from the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, and, apart from excursions into the Russians and Europeans, it doesn't range very widely geographically. There was little contemporary literature on it until I discovered the riches of the Picador paperback imprint, while at college. (Milan Kundera, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Gabriel García Márquez, Italo Calvino, Ian McEwan.) The notebook fizzles out in 1987, around my twenty-first birthday, by which time I was not only studying literature but also reviewing books for a student magazine. One of those was the last title on my list: "Mensonge," a satire of literary post-structuralism, by the British campus novelist Malcolm Bradbury. That it was this book that killed off my catalogue—which in my college years encompassed Chaucer, Dante, Milton, Donne, Shelley, Coleridge, Eliot, Yeats—strikes me as what the deconstructionists used to call ludic.

After I found the notebook, I tweeted an image of one of its pages, which covered four months of my reading at the age of seventeen. Among the titles were "Great Expectations," "The Waves," three Austens, and two Fitzgeralds, as well as books by Elias Canetti, Dostoyevsky, and William Golding, for whom, the notebook reminds me, I had a particular taste at the time. One response: "No fun reads or guilty pleasures?"

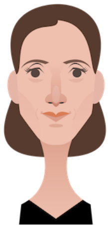
It's a common and easy enough distinction, this separation of books into those we read because we want to and those we read because we have to, and it serves as a useful marketing trope for publishers, especially when they are trying to get readers to take this book rather than that one to the beach. But it's a flawed and pernicious division. This linking of pleasure and guilt is intended as an enticement, not as an admonition: reading for guilty pleasure is like letting one's diet slide for a day—naughty but relatively harmless. The distinction partakes of a debased cultural Puritanism, which insists that the only fun to be had with a book is the frivolous kind, or that it's necessarily

a pleasure to read something accessible and easy. Associating pleasure and guilt in this way presumes an anterior, scolding authority—one which insists that reading must be work.

But there are pleasures to be had from books beyond being lightly entertained. There is the pleasure of being challenged; the pleasure of feeling one's range and capacities expanding; the pleasure of entering into an unfamiliar world, and being led into empathy with a consciousness very different from one's own; the pleasure of knowing what others have already thought it worth knowing, and entering a larger conversation. Among my catalogue are some books that I am sure I was—to use an expression applied to elementary-school children—decoding rather than reading. Such, I suspect, was the case with "Ulysses," a book I read at eighteen, without having first read "The Odyssey," which might have deepened my appreciation of Joyce. Even so—and especially when considering adolescence—we should not underestimate the very real pleasure of being pleased with oneself. What my notebook offers me is a portrait of the reader as a young woman, or at the very least, a sketch. I wanted to read well, but I also wanted to become well read. The notebook is a small record of accomplishment, but it's also an outline of large aspiration. There's pleasure in ambition, too.

We have become accustomed to hearing commercial novelists express frustration with the ways in which their books are taken less seriously than ones that are deemed literary: book reviewers don't pay them enough attention, while publishers give their works safe, predictable cover treatments. In this debate, academic arguments that have been conducted for more than a generation, about the validity or otherwise of a literary canon, meet the marketplace. The debate has its merits, but less discussed has been the converse consequence of the popular-literary distinction: that literary works, especially those not written last year, are placed at the opposite pole to fun.

My list reminds me of a time when I was more or less in ignorance of this proposition. It may not include any examples of what I later learned to call commercial fiction: I did not, for example, read "Hollywood Wives," by Jackie Collins, which had been published the same year that I started the list, and I am not sure I had even heard of it. But I can't imagine that it could have given me more delight than did the romantic travails that ironically unfold in "Emma," or that its satisfactions could possibly have been greater than those offered by the lyricism and very adult drama of "Tender is the Night." The fallacy that the pleasures offered by reading must necessarily be pleasures to which a self-defeating sense of shame is attached offers a very impoverished definition of gratification, whatever book we choose to pull from the shelf.



Rebecca Mead joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 1997.