
FRIENDS OF THE OBERLIN COLLEGE LIBRARY

MICHAEL DIRDA



LOOKING FOR A GOOD TIME
READING, LIBRARIES, AND THE WORLD OF BOOKS

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An Address

by

MICHAEL DIRDA, '70

at the
Annual Dinner
of the
Friends of the Oberlin College Library
September 28, 2002

Root Room, Carnegie Building
Oberlin College
Oberlin, Ohio

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Published by the Friends of the Oberlin College Library
January 2003

Introduction

It is my pleasure to introduce to you Michael Dirda, writer and senior editor for The Washington Post's Book World, winner of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Distinguished Criticism, 1970 graduate of Oberlin College, and one of contemporary America's great readers and lovers of books.

Michael Dirda's passion for a wide range of literary genres inspires the reviews and essays that appear weekly in Book World: commentary on American and European literature; intellectual history; biographies; fantasy and crime fiction; children's books; indeed, exciting writing of all kinds find a place in Book World's pages.

Over the past decade, Michael has also written a monthly column for Book World called "Readings," in which he explores all manner of subjects related to books and reading, such as collecting modern first editions; rediscovering neglected novels; the thrill of ghost stories; shopping for books at antique stores and book fairs; advice to graduating seniors; and much more. The columns often venture into more personal topics, like turning 50; favorite college and high school teachers; and failed attempts to inspire his sons to read as much as he would like.

I particularly enjoyed reading Michael's tribute to his favorite teachers at Oberlin: Barry McGill, Andrew Bongiorno, Bob Neil, Mathis Szykowski, Vinio Rossi, Warren Taylor, Richard Spear, David Young, and Marcia Colish. Michael makes each of them – and Oberlin – come alive in his essay, "The Learning Channels." All of us will recognize his opening: "February always felt bleakest in Oberlin – cold rain alternated with wet snow, the gray sky never changed for weeks, and we would shiver in our swamp coats and parkas while wading across the muddy quad toward the breakfast line at Dascomb. After wolfing down some cereal and coffee, most of us would then race – nearly always late – to an 8 o'clock art class in Hall Auditorium, a practice room at the Conservatory, a lecture in Peters or King."

And about Marcia Colish, who "taught the richest, most mind-expanding course of my entire academic career: 'The Intellectual History of the Middle Ages'." "I realize now that she could scarcely have been more than 30, but there was no doubting her vast learning even then. She spoke machine-gun fast in a brassy voice, and you had to focus to keep up with her plum-packed lectures. Exhilarating hardly described Colish's class, but a course, no matter how good, is almost as evanescent as a ballet. Once it's over, it's over. Or so I

thought until 1998, when Yale brought out the first volume in its new series, "The Yale Intellectual History of the West." Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400, by Marcia L. Colish, is clearly based on the class I took so many years ago, and it should instantly become the standard introduction to its subject. Colish's prose is hardly sparkling, and she can be acutely demanding at times (she loves medieval philosophy more than most of us ever will), but between the covers of this hefty, densely written volume is a whole lost world of culture and wisdom. I've read two-thirds of the book, and my copy is already stippled with stars, checks, underlining, and all the ornamentation of intensive study. What's more, every so often a phrase or fact suddenly delivers a minor epiphany, and I can hear Colish's voice and feel myself – for a brief, cozy moment – scribbling away in my college notebook. It's a good feeling, especially on a cold, gray winter morning in February."

Selections from Michael Dirda's Book World columns over the years have been collected in his book, Readings: Essays and Literary Entertainments, published in 2000 by Indiana University Press. It is a wonderful anthology about humans' relationship with literature and more specifically about the author's love of books and his passion for reading. Michael's writings have also appeared in many other publications including The Atlantic, Times Literary Supplement, Connoisseur, and The Chronicle of Higher Education. As you have no doubt gathered, he is a reader with remarkably catholic interests and tastes, including serious interest in detective novels and science fiction. He frequently conducts public conversations with visiting writers for the Smithsonian. He is currently on leave from The Washington Post and working on a memoir, tentatively entitled One Reader's Beginnings, and also on Excursions, a collection of critical essays.

Michael Dirda is a native of Lorain, and graduated from the College with highest honors in English. He earned a master's degree and a doctorate in comparative literature at Cornell, and has taught at American University, George Mason University, and the University of Central Florida.

Michael's talk this evening is entitled "Looking for a Good Time: Reading, Libraries, and the World of Books." It is very nice to have him back in Oberlin.

Nancy Dye
President

LOOKING FOR A GOOD TIME
READING, LIBRARIES, AND THE WORLD OF BOOKS

During the past 24 years and more I have been happy and rewarded in my life at *The Washington Post Book World*, and yet I have periodically daydreamed about the road not taken. From my late teens through my late twenties, I had expected to become a college professor at someplace like Oberlin, or even at Oberlin itself, teaching world literature by day, working on critical articles and books by night, traveling each summer to Europe, dashing off a comic novel or mystery during the leisurely shipboard crossing, almost certainly winning a few thousand francs each evening at poker in the ship's elegantly appointed casino. In France I would naturally own a secluded house in Provence, bottle a much appreciated Merlot from my own vineyard, and take occasional side-trips in June or July to the Cote d'Azur and Italy. On one of these last I would doubtless find myself on the train to Venice when a jade-eyed Eurasian beauty would, breathlessly, sit down beside me, the silk of her sheath dress rustling, lay her long red fingernails across my cheek, and whisper "Beware of the man with the scar," and then dash off, leaving behind a small package. Inside, of course, there would be a canister containing microfilm, or possibly the statue of a black bird, at which point I would finally notice the fat man in the panama hat and white suit. "Sir," he would hiss, "I have been after that little item for some time now and would be greatly obliged if you would hand it over to me." As I wondered what to do, the train would suddenly jerk to a screeching emergency stop, and in the confusion I would turn around to see an elderly German, soberly dressed in black, who would smile with weariness as he reached into his jacket for the 9mm Glock as I jumped from the dining car into the North Italian countryside and the shots rang out behind me. . . .

As you can see, I've always suspected that I had missed out on quite a lot by not becoming a college professor—as I am sure any of the distinguished teachers here at Oberlin can testify.

But it is possible that I have slightly over-idealized the academic life. Of course, I have been known to advocate more than a few outmoded romantic ideas in my time. For example, to receive a

diploma from my own ideal college, a young person would need to possess a beautiful handwriting, knowledge of classical Greek, skill in watercolor painting, the ability to play a musical instrument (electric guitar excluded), a sound grasp of mathematics and at least the fundamentals of ballroom dancing. These are, I should add, skills that I myself conspicuously lack, which may account for my own profound sense of being undereducated.

So given, then, that I come to you as primarily a Reader rather than a literary scholar or bibliographical authority, please indulge me as I offer some of my thoughts on “reading, libraries and the world of books.” Be warned: Much of what follows is highly personal and anecdotal.



Harried businessmen drop into friendly bars, neglected housewives try on cashmere and silk, adolescents simply mope. I do none of these things. When the world is too much with me and there’s a damp November in my soul, I go to the library.

I’m not entirely sure why libraries cheer me up so. Part of the reason is no doubt that they represent the clean, well-lighted place, refuge from messy life’s disorder, haven from the psyche’s storms and swells.

There is just something reassuring about rooms full of books. What reader hasn’t occasionally fantasized about a quiet life as a small-town librarian in one of those picture-postcard New England villages? Stroll to work under majestic chestnut trees. Spend the day amid dark mahogany tables and beautifully arranged bookshelves. Tell ghost stories and tall tales during Saturday children’s hour and then help middle schoolers research term papers on Lavoisier, the industrial products of Portugal, the history of aluminum. Maybe even smile at the codgers asleep behind opened newspapers in the periodical room, or listen to the susurrations of soft voices, the giggles of teenaged girls, whispering about the boys at the next table. A rewarding quiet existence, in need of a Thomas Gray to write its elegy.

Indeed, visiting the library naturally leads us “far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife” and away from the hubbub and

heartaches of the daily whirl, so that we begin to think about other more serious and lofty matters. What, in fact, do we really want from life? Instead of the usual dreams of riches, power and celebrity, books often excite a wish to better ourselves, to practice a kind of noble ambition, to accomplish something worthy of a Darwin or a Du Bois, a Proust or a Welty; above all, literature and history inspire us to want to live lives of consequence. Even the mere presence of great books can make one eager to measure up to them. As Bertrand Russell once said, they “rouse and stimulate the love of mental adventure.”

Yes, mental adventure . . . and isn't that the very definition of reading?

Today the omnipresence of paperbacks and the easy availability of most common titles, as well as the flashy glamour of the Internet, may occasionally dispel some of the mystery and romance surrounding the library. Try, though, to remember your own first visit to the children's reading room: row after serried row of picture books and young adult novels, colorful, enticing, magical . . . and free for the taking (so long as you had a library card). Even now watch a 6-year-old studying the picture albums. See how she weighs a book's worth by its title or cover illustration, perhaps pauses to murmur aloud its opening sentence, then thoughtfully places *The Big Orange Splot* or *Jumanji* or *Dinosaur Bob* on the pile of the chosen for check-out that week. I will never forget the sheer astonishment I felt as a boy when a kindly librarian informed me that I could take home as many books as I could carry. It was like being told one could pocket all the penny candy in the jar, buy all the Barbies or G.I. Joes in the store.

For me, as for most people who work or go to school, libraries also provide a subdued form of nightlife. Over the years hardly a week has gone by that I haven't made an after-dinner trek toward some distantly lighted book-lined building. The night air nips, my shoulders scrunch into my coat, my books bulk heavily under my arm. In strobe light glimpses I can see myself—child, teenager, man—in a succession of similar moments: following my father into the awesome main library in Lorain, plodding through snow to the Carnegie stacks here at Oberlin or at Cornell, stepping out for a quick stroll to the Cleveland Park branch library around the corner

from where I first lived in Washington, DC. Though the backdrop varies, the excitement remains constant, a connective tissue linking the boy of 9 eagerly clutching *Treasure Island* with the grown man almost as eagerly reading Stevenson's biography.

I first thought of this talk as a look-back on "The World That Books Made" because it increasingly seems that we are approaching a radical transformation in the way that people read, or should I say, access texts. Nowadays, the most important room in a school or at a college is no longer the library but the computer lab. More accurately, the library is turning more and more into a computer lab, a media center. Even young children now go online for basic information about sea turtles or North Dakota, not to a worn edition of *Compton's Picture Encyclopedia*, shelved in a dark oak bookcase near a white-haired librarian's desk. Once, schools encouraged reading as the key to academic success; nowadays, more and more of them emphasize computer literacy over traditional literacy.

Even though I am a book person, I certainly don't believe that the advent of digital technology spells the end of art and literature. And yet I can't help but feel a certain—what?—melancholy at this now inevitable cultural shift. In my lifetime the once obvious sovereignty of books has been shaken by the more popular appeal of, successively, movies, television, videos, and the Internet. For many young people, printed matter no longer possesses glamour; intellectual and cultural excitement lies elsewhere. I suspect that within fifty or a hundred years books as we know them will become quaint collectibles: E-books or their successors will allow us to download any writing we wish and display it in an appealing way. No doubt the technology will even be waterproofed, so that we can peruse our hand-held version of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in the bathtub.

I don't bewail any of these developments. My real regret lies elsewhere. I sense that the focused reading of books, the valuing of the kind of scholarship achieved through years spent in libraries, is no longer central to our culture. We absorb information, often in bits and pieces and sound bites; but the slow, steady interaction with a book, while sitting quietly in a chair, the passion for story that good

novels generate in a reader, what has been called the pleasure of the text—this entire approach to learning seems increasingly, to use a pop phrase, “at risk.” Similarly, even a basic knowledge of history, classical mythology, and the world’s literatures now strikes many people as charmingly antiquarian. Or irrelevant. Or sort of cute. The reading of books is none of these.

“One of the more frightening things about our age,” wrote the poet and critic Randall Jarrell, is “that much of the body of common knowledge that educated people (and many uneducated people) once had, has disappeared or is rapidly disappearing. Fairy tales, myths, proverbs, history—the Bible and Shakespeare and Dickens, the *Odyssey* and *Gulliver’s Travels*—these and all the things like them are surprisingly often things that most of an audience won’t understand an allusion to, a joke about. These things were the ground on which the people of the past came together. Much of the wit or charm or elevation of any writing or conversation with an atmosphere depends upon this presupposed easily and affectionately remembered body of common knowledge; because of it we understand things, feel about things, as human beings and not as human animals.”

Jarrell makes the case for literature as an adornment to life, as a means to better and more fully enjoy ourselves. But books are far more powerful and disturbing than he suggests here. In his defense of the traditional great books—what he calls “The Western Canon”—Harold Bloom, with his usual plangency, writes: “The true use of Shakespeare or of Cervantes, of Homer or of Dante, of Chaucer or of Rabelais, is to augment one’s own growing inner self. Reading deeply in the canon will not make one a better or worse person, a more useful or more harmful citizen. The mind’s dialogue with itself is not primarily a social reality. All that the Western canon can bring one is the proper use of one’s solitude, that solitude whose final form is one’s confrontation with one’s own mortality.”

Lest you imagine that I am a wholly reactionary defender of the canon, let me reassure you that I am one who agrees with Ezra Pound, at least on this matter: “The tradition,” wrote Pound, “is a beauty which we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us.” No works should be unduly revered, however; books are machines to

think with and universities need to keep our reading fresh by discovering new ways to interpret the great works of the past and by rediscovering books that have been neglected, marginalized and half forgotten. Still, it is wise to keep in mind Italo Calvino's informed defense of the great works of the past: "The classics are books which, upon reading, we find even fresher, more unexpected, and more marvelous than we had thought from hearing about them."

Yet, all this said, reading can be more than a matter of common culture or the means by which one may form, in Cardinal Newman's words, "a habit of mind . . . of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom." Among modern writers Kafka best expresses what the right books can do *to* us, as well as *for* us:

"The books we need are of the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation—a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us."



Still, many people simply don't seem to care for books at all. So perhaps we should start again with the basics: Why read?

Tom Clancy, author of *The Hunt for Red October* and numerous other techno-thrillers, gave one of the most succinct answers to this question: "The only way to do all the things you'd like to do is read." The really great tragedy of life is that we are essentially linear beings caught in a hypertext world—and none of us gets more than one chance to play the game. Robert Frost observed that "two roads diverged in a yellow wood" and he was sorry that he couldn't travel both. In fact, the world is chockablock with intersections and there are myriad roads we'd like to go down and can't. If you want to become the best bond attorney in New York or the greatest swordsman in all France or tend a bar in Key West, you probably can't also become a Buddhist monk or the finest soprano since Callas. Life is made of choices. Yet people, alas, are made of yearnings.

But through books everything becomes possible, in a way. Reading allows us to escape from the seemingly inflexible boundaries

of our personal selves. By turning the pages of James Salter's *The Hunters* I know the exhilaration of a fighter pilot in Korea. By reading Annie Proulx's *Accordion Crimes* I can relive the immigrant experience in America, among Italian, Poles, Germans, and Mexicans. By plunging into Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* I can enter a modern Africa haunted by ancient spirits. Such novels don't just open the world to us, they open us up too. Sometimes it can even seem that the characters in certain particularly superb books—people like Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina, Leopold Bloom or Elizabeth Bennet—are even more real than we ourselves. They certainly will live longer than any of us here today.

Do you want to experience the essence of reading? Consider a single moment of epiphany. When Sherlock Holmes probes a country doctor about the brutal and uncanny death of Sir Henry Baskerville, the medical practitioner answers that yes, he did see something unusual near the body. Footprints. "A man's or a woman's?" asks the great detective and receives one of the most thrilling answers in all literature. "Mr. Holmes, they were the footprints of a gigantic hound." No one who ever starts *The Hound of the Baskervilles* at age 12 or 50 ever wonders again about the pleasure and value of reading.

Stories instruct us about other lives and, by so doing, about ourselves. But so does nonfiction. I myself have little head for philosophy, but I love maxims and aphorisms. Emerson, Nietzsche, La Rochefoucauld—these are among my favorite authors, especially for late-night reading. Take Emerson, who makes almost every one of his sentences a quotation: "The louder he talked of his honor, the faster we counted our spoons." "In skating over thin ice, our safety is in our speed." "After 30 a man gets up sad every morning." If fiction and history tend to enlarge us by revealing other lives and the consequences of certain moral decisions, these sorts of witty and worldly reflections proffer consolation by reminding us that we are not alone; others have felt as we do. Take La Rochefoucauld: "One is never as unhappy as one thinks, nor as happy as one hopes." "In the misfortunes of our best friends, we always find something which is not displeasing to us." "There are good marriages, but no delicious ones." My favorite French aphorism about love—a subject of near

universal interest—is, so far as I know, anonymous: “In love there is always one who kisses and one who offers the cheek.”

Naturally, people always complain that they have no time to read. But surely this is not so much a question of busy lifestyles as it is of priorities. Do you have time to watch ‘Seinfeld’ or ‘Law and Order’ reruns, go to the movies, jog around the block, skim through People magazine, drive out to dinner? You can find time to read, if you really want, and it’s not that hard to do.

I ride the Washington subway to and from work so that I can spend nearly a half an hour with my book each way. I have a neighbor who even reads as he walks home from the Metro, his novel before his eyes, while he relies on some sort of ESP to alert him to potholes and traffic. I often do domestic chores in the evening or help with my noisy offspring’s homework, so my time isn’t my own again until after 10. But I read for an hour then, sometimes a little more. And often that’s pretty much it. This hardly seems a demanding reading schedule. But it does give me a minimum of two hours with a book each day. If you adopted some variant of this plan from Monday through Friday, you could spend 10 hours a week reading—more than enough to get through one good book, maybe two, especially if you throw in a few more hours on the weekend. I can’t imagine any educated person who would want to read less than this, and most of you, I hope, will try to read even more.

But I suspect that many people are put off reading books—or at least serious books—because they imagine it as some kind of exercise or sacred ritual, an activity requiring preparation and training and absolute quiet. Piffle. Don’t make turning a few pages a big deal. You should read just as you brush your teeth. In fact, I know one woman who reads Dick Francis and Ruth Rendell thrillers while brushing her teeth. Carry a book with you whenever you go anywhere. Waiting rooms, check-out lines, dull sports events, long speeches—all provide a few minutes, and sometimes longer, in which to escape the burdens of this world outside and enjoy the peace, or excitement, of the typeset page.

In my case, I often carry around selections from Pope or Milton, Pascal’s *Pensées* or some other favorite book that’s easy to dip into. Lately, I periodically turn to a collection titled *Wodehouse*

Nuggets—choice sentences from the comic novels of P.G. Wodehouse:

“He drank coffee with the air of a man who regretted it was not hemlock.”

“Like so many substantial citizens of America, he had married young and kept on marrying, springing from blonde to blonde like the chamois of the Alps leaping from crag to crag.”

“He groaned slightly and winced, like Prometheus watching his vulture dropping in for lunch.”

“In the evening of his life Uncle Frederick, Lord Ickenham, still retained, together with a juvenile waistline, the bright enthusiasms and the fresh, unspoiled mental outlook of a slightly inebriated undergraduate.”

There is, of course, for students a certain biblio-paradox: One is required to read certain books—yet the imposition of duty often destroys the surrender to pleasure. Long ago Plato wrote, “Knowledge which is acquired under compulsion obtains no hold on the mind.” We have all seen the reactions. By and large, if you force a young person to open a particular book, he or she will do so grudgingly. Occasionally, a good novel or poet can win over even the recalcitrant, but most of the time an unwilling reader will merely slump down before the required text with a kind of deep-space weariness. You can almost hear the mental sighs. Another book! There have been so many, many books already. Will there be no end? Then again, other students will approach the chosen volume gingerly, as though it were some alien artifact they had never encountered before in this sector of the galaxy. Still others will be even more cautious, as though the book were liable to inflict a sudden and hideous form of disabling injury. And yet still others will display the time-honored adolescent combination of boredom, lethargy and free-floating belligerence which makes abundantly clear that the actual turning of a single page must be an unfathomably complex process almost certainly foredoomed to utter and complete failure.

Books, it has always seemed to me, must be read with passion or they are hardly worth reading at all. “You don’t read for understanding,” asserted the critic Marvin Mudrick, “you read for excitement. Understanding is a product of excitement.” The boy or girl who eagerly devours *Mad* magazine, *X-Men* comics and the

statistics on the backs of baseball cards may grow up to love books. All those who feel compelled to read—whether the terminally bored or the goody-goody A student who dutifully follows the prescribed official curriculum, or the unwilling member of his spouse's book club—all these will probably come to regard the viewing of public television as the absolute acme of personal cultural achievement.



My own need to read is, I'm convinced, entirely based on pleasure. Let me indulge in some mildly sentimental autobiography.

My mother taught me to read sometime before I began kindergarten. Even now, more than four decades later, I can remember scrunching in her lap as she turned the pages of a Little Golden Book. I can still see the hot-water wrinkles on her rough fingers; she usually finished washing dishes a few minutes before we sat down together, leaning heavily against the heat register on cold winter evenings. "Look, Michael, see the fluffy bunnies and the little puppies. How cute they are!" She would point at the simple words and make me say them aloud; sometimes she'd laugh over the mischievous little animals in their brightly colored world. "Ahhhhh, how pretty." Reading, it was plain to me at 4, gave my hardworking mother a lot of joy.

And that I suppose is the simplest explanation as to why reading gradually came to mean so much to me too. The warmth of the heater, the capacious lap, a quiet quarter-hour before bedtime—books were not only special, they were an outward and visible sign of my mother's love. Not that we owned many books: one or two broken-backed collections of fairy tales, a few volumes of stories about loquacious and invariably naughty forest creatures, a big omnibus of "three-minute stories" bought at the local A&P. Yet when my mother read these books, they all seemed far more enthralling than any mere classic of children's literature.

By contrast, my steelworker father, believing in education mainly as a way up in the world, eventually built two substantial bookcases in our dining room. At meals he could glance up from his newspaper and see them, loaded with the books he never opened. To stock the shelves, he scavenged castoff boxes of tattered nonfiction,

picked up remainders at department stores if the titles sounded good, like *The Werewolf of Paris* or *Danger is My Destiny*. My mother acquired the *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Encyclopedia* from that same A&P—and the first volume of half a dozen other reference sets. Back then, an encyclopedia might offer its initial volume for a come-on price of 59 cents; Mom would purchase that volume and then cancel her order. Who would pay \$10 for each of the subsequent 25 volumes? Ridiculous. And so my sisters and I wrote our school reports on artichokes, asteroids, and aardvarks, Alaska and Antarctica.

As I grew older, I would take down the books from these family shelves. There was Samuel Shellabarger's *Captain from Castile*; a faded blue volume of Cellini's cloak-and-rapier *Memoirs*; numerous titles on how to make more money, one with the unforgettable advice: Find a need and fill it. There was George Sisler on baseball, a volume of Keats's poetry, Ivy Compton-Burnett's *A Father and His Fate* (my dad would sometimes moodily murmur its title aloud); a little green-backed collection of five Shakespeare tragedies; several historical novels by F. Van Wyck Mason and Thomas B. Costain; an omnibus of Captain Horatio Hornblower adventures; a big anthology of short stories titled *The Golden Argosy* in which I read "The Lady or the Tiger?" and "The Damned Thing" and "The Monkey's Paw," and not least a first American edition of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. "Could have picked up a couple dozen of them," Dad said years later, when I told him the book was then worth two or three hundred bucks; "they were on a table at O'Neil's department store, 29 cents each." This then was a family collection gathered entirely at random, without thought of merit, only of price. And yet one would be hard put to imagine a better set of books for a young boy or girl eager to read.

In that high-minded era, our city library disdained many popular juvenile series, in particular the innumerable exploits of the Hardy Boys and Tarzan; still one could always unearth yet one more new adventure of these resourceful heroes in the cluttered basements of neighbors and relatives. To this day, I remember a certain fall afternoon, a paper bag of candy corn and the sun streaming onto the glorious pages of *Tom Swift in the Caves of Nuclear Fire*. Life has been downhill ever since.

By the time I finished elementary school my tastes had shifted to grown-up novels of a fast-moving sort: Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu thrillers, the science fiction of Robert Heinlein, the adventures of James Bond. Not that I only read fiction. One of the greatest true life adventure classics opens this way: "The order to abandon ship was given at 5 p.m." Alfred Lansing's *Endurance* is the incredible story of Sir Ernest Shackleton's epic struggle to save his men after disaster strikes the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1915. Before the last page, a year and a half later, three open boats will have been dragged by a score of men some 350 miles across shifting ice; five crew members, including Shackleton, will sail one of those boats over 870 miles of polar water, ultimately crossing the Drake Passage, once described as "the most dreaded waters in the world"; and finally three of the least exhausted men, again including Shackleton, will slowly make their way across the comparably dreaded mountains of the Antarctic's South Georgia, with only a rope and a carpenter's hammer. The most amazing part? Not a man died: Shackleton returned and saved them all.

And so to this day I particularly love tales of adventure and mystery. In my mind, here is how a story ought to begin:

"The talk had veered round to runes and curses and witches, one bleak December evening, where a few of us sat warm in easy chairs round the cheery fire of the Billiards Club. 'Do you believe in witches?' one of us said to Jorkens. 'It isn't what I believe in that matters so much,' said Jorkens; 'only what I have seen.'"

Would anyone, could anyone willingly stop reading at this point?

Lord Dunsany's "club" tales of Joseph Jorkens, ghost stories by writers like M.R. James, Sheridan Le Fanu and Algernon Blackwood, Stevenson's *New Arabian Nights*, Jules Verne's leisurely 19th-century science fiction, G.K. Chesterton's philosophical whodunits, the metaphysical fables of Borges, the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Gideon Fell and Miss Marple—these are the proper books for wet autumn evenings, when we yearn for a tale that, in poet Sir Philip Sidney's words, "holdeth children from play and old men from the chimney corner."

Yet much as I loved reading as a kid, I might easily have ended up a steelworker at National Tube in Lorain, like my father and grandfather before me, were it not for a day that changed the course of my life. Bear with me for one last story.

The weed of crime, according to *The Shadow*, bears bitter fruit. But not always. One afternoon some 40 years ago, a 13-year-old boy was lingering in the book section of O'Neil's department store, surreptitiously turning the pages of *Tarzan the Untamed*. The Grosset & Dunlap editions of Lord Greystoke's adventures (\$1.50 each) cost too much to actually buy, except on the rarest and flushiest of occasions, but no store officials seemed to care if an obviously devoted student of the apeman simply stood there, in that quiet corner, and read through an entire novel in the course of a lazy summer day.

I was to meet my mother, bargain shopper extraordinaire, out in the parking lot at 5 p.m. Rather to my surprise I finished that Burroughs masterwork with half an hour to spare, examined the various Hardy Boys selections and found I knew them all. A bit antsy by now, I started to roam through the store when, what to my wondering eyes should appear, but a virgin stand of paperbacks. Having recently lost sleep over a Pyramid edition of *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*—and shuddered hopefully for days at the prospect of thuggees crouching in Ohio oaks—I raced toward the wire rack, thinking that maybe, just maybe, the announced sequel might be there, even now awaiting my trembling fingers. But, it turned out, I would need to defer to another day the company of that satanic archfiend with a brow like Shakespeare's.

Instead I discovered that the revolving rack was stocked entirely with plastic bags, each containing three coverless paperbacks and each bag priced at some ridiculously low figure like 25 cents. I now realize that the store had stripped the paperbacks and sent the covers back for credit. Instead of discarding the mutilated books, which was what the law requires, O'Neil's had decided to sell them at a reduced package rate. None of this profiteering would have mattered to me then. All I cared about was the opportunity to buy three paperbacks cheap.

It didn't take me long, however, before I saw my problem.

Edward S. Aaron's *Assignment: Ankara*, the latest Sam Durrell spy thriller, was in one bag; the funny-sounding *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?* by someone named William Peter Blatty was in another (years later Blatty was to become famous for his novel *The Exorcist*). I certainly didn't want to shell out cash for any more bags than was absolutely necessary.

At this point you need to know that I have always carried a pocketknife.

Picturing myself as the suave Cary Grant of "To Catch a Thief," I stealthily slit the top edge of two bags, matched up my treasures, and slid them together into a package that already contained something called *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, by one Clifton Fadiman. Then, while covering the untimely rip with my trembling palm and already beginning to sweat like Peter Lorre in "M," I plunked down a quarter at the checkout, smiled wanly at the cashier, and ran out into the parking lot. There I fully expected to hear the sound of approaching sirens, the baying of hounds.

Instead my mother, little knowing that she was driving the getaway car, pulled up in our newish '58 Ford, I jumped inside, panting, and we sped off—to another store, where she and my sisters just had to look for some arcane item of girl's clothing. I stayed in the car.

Not having actually stolen anything, I soon recovered my usual boisterous spirits and much later read, with pleasure, both the spy thriller and Blatty's hilarious memoir. But as I sat there then, pulse pounding, staring out at an emptying parking lot that seemed to symbolize my pitiful future life behind bars, I decided to look at the third of my ill-gotten goods, the volume I had acquired mainly through happenstance.

I still have the book, or rather its loose pages, now held together by a rubber band. These days Clifton Fadiman practically epitomizes American middlebrow culture. But for a young boy *The Lifetime Reading Plan*, a guide to 100 great books, did precisely what it was intended. It made classics sound as exciting as Tarzan or Fu Manchu. In short essays of 500 or 600 words Fadiman inspired, exhorted, enticed; sometimes he talked about an author's life, sometimes about a book's particular pleasures, often about its difficulties. But

always he made clear that reading a serious book—like *The Magic Mountain* or *The Poetics* or *Lost Illusions* or *Persuasion* or *The Oresteia*—was more than intellectually enriching or spiritually uplifting: it could be an adventure. For me that serendipitously acquired paperback might well have been emblazoned with Kipling’s quietly thrilling words from his classic spy novel *Kim*: “Here begins the Great Game.”

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Pleasure, instruction, escape, consolation, and beauty—Is there anything more wonderful than a book?

Alas, though, one carries away so little from even the greatest works of art. Of the longer classics I have read more than once and, in some instances, actually taught to students—*Hamlet*, *Walden*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Good Soldier*, *Lolita*, a few others—I am shocked at how little I retain, especially for one often credited with a good memory: only a handful of quotations, a spotty sense of plot. Obviously, were I to open these books again my understanding of them would prove—I hope—deeper than this: Familiarity with the action allows one, at the very least, to focus on the artistry. But stay away for a few years and even the most analyzed text utterly vanishes from the conscious mind. For example, I once read Stendhal’s *Life of Henry Brulard* 10 or 11 times in the mid-1970s; I literally studied my Garnier edition to pieces. Yet what remains of that beloved, much lived-with book now, 25 years later? Only the recollection of Stendhal’s autumnal sensibility—passionate, disappointed and forgiving.

The memory of a tone, the rhythm of an author’s sentences, the sorrow we felt on a novel’s last page—perhaps these are all that we can expect to keep from books. As we turn their pages they amuse, shock, inspire, console and instruct us; but after we return them to our shelves or to the library, they linger in our souls only like the distant images of childhood. Years ago our elementary school was the burning center of the universe, a place of anxiety, triumph and heartbreak. Now, if you should happen to visit yours as I did recently mine, it’s just a building whose windows one can peer into on an idle Saturday afternoon.

So is it with the novels and nonfiction we read long ago and now only vaguely recall. But while we can never, barring the occasional Proustian flashback, re-experience elementary school again, we can still reopen *A Lost Lady* or *Invisible Man* or *The Leopard* or *Fifth Business* or *Njal Saga* or *Nights at the Circus* or *The Master and Margarita* or *The Tale of Genji* or *Confessions of Zeno* or *The Bride of the Innisfallen* and plunge once more into the lived experience itself. Perhaps poems and stories, like paintings and music, truly exist only when we are actively engaged with them. Afterwards they lose their substance, grow wispy and vague, or find themselves diminished to little more than a few cold facts. The actual art, all that makes a great work funny, sorrowful and real, fades away, like a dream at morning.

Books only spring into real existence when they are being read or reread. To stay fully alive all the wonderful stories and writers I've mentioned today—and oh so many more—truly need readers. In other words, they need you. Please, please don't let them down. Visit and support the library. Keep turning those pages. Read.