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READING, PENNSYLVANIA

I have only spent a few hours in the flesh in Reading Pennsylvania, but have spent many hours of my life reading. At an early age, my dear Dad first admonished me to read. In one of his infrequent forays into direct advice, Dad said one day that I should read all I could – “It could teach me a lot.” I knew this was good advice, considering the source, but I had only the vaguest notion what Dad meant. Dad was in his early 30s, stuck with only a high school education, three kids and a dead-end career running luncheonettes on meager capital. Perhaps he meant reading opened his mind to a world he thought he would never see again. A few years earlier he had toured England, France and Germany as a Captain in the Field Artillery, visiting the beaches of Normandy, the Ardennes Forest courtesy of the Battle of the Bulge, and other exotic venues. While he later again traveled to Europe, at that early stage he could not have known he would escape the narrow life circumstances and his choices had given him.

Going deeper, perhaps he had in mind an inner vision, reading so as to look into his own soul and the souls of others. I will never know. So, other than sparking my interest in the endeavor itself, Dad gave his young son only the most general impetus for reading. At first I read chiefly to get approval and good grades. I saw it as a travelogue. I knew nothing of the inner workings of life and saw it through reading only in primary colors. Only later did I gradually, slowly learn to go beneath the surface into the broader, fuller, more complex world into which reading can take us. I reluctantly confess that even as a freshman in college, when I finished reading Dante’s Divine Comedy, I had no idea what this great work was about.

Our subject tonight is vast. I can only scratch the surface. I have already confused you with my title, but I'll get back to elucidating that in a while. In the limited time and space available, I'll try to share a few of the directions reading has taken me and things I enjoy about it. I will mention some memorable images and situations; also a few little known works I have enjoyed that you might want to read; some series of related books that have continuing interest, as well as a curiosity or two – generally lengthy tomes that do not follow the normal rules but have an oblique, distinctive point of view or manner of presentation, that yet holds one's attention.

In these varied groupings, a guiding principle seems always present. For me, reading is a voyage of discovery. I have always instinctively considered reading a metaphorical “journey.” Many of you are familiar with and some have participated in my discussion groups at the Mercantile Library – “Literary Journeys,” they are titled, where the subject matter has two axes, interesting places and rewarding perceptions that emerge from the trek we make through the subject matter of the pages.

To begin, short episodes in a couple of works that I have enjoyed illustrate a very simple primary principle in reading that fascinates me: how vivid depictions of place and action can preserve and bring to life exciting events and locales I could never see, summoning visions out of nothing. Here are two very different examples.

Some years ago, in a paper for this Club, I wrote about Xenophon and the 10,000 Greeks of the Anabasis and their heroic escape from the hostile Persian Empire. When the 10,000 finally reach the Black Sea, out of nowhere appears a flotilla of Greek ships, upon which the weary Greeks embark and sail back home. As I read this passage in my mind's eye I see the ships emerging from the void, the shrouded mists of pre-history and, the Greeks aboard, sail back into the ahistorical fog. As I read Xenophon, I pump life back into this image of the Greek ships, sailors and soldiers

I never knew, who existed for a time and now only on the pages of The Anabasis or in my mind's eye. When you or I read it they spring (hopefully) vividly back to life.

Similarly, some 40 years ago, I read a much different book, Edgar Snow's Red Star over China, a sympathetic treatment of the early days of Mao's reign, long before Richard Nixon opened that country to the West. At one point Snow was travelling in Mongolia. Out on the steppes he glimpsed a pack of Mongolian horsemen. They came charging up to greet him and his traveling companions. In my mind's eye, again, I see a vital image in motion so unlike what I thought Red China must be, the lively horses and horsemen coming into being and just as quickly returning into the void, existent only in memory. The horses and horsemen are dead, so is Snow, so is Mao Zedong. But they live in my mind as I read about them and ruminate on their reality.

Leaving this perhaps simplistic perception of building blocks of books, I will now share another aspect of what I get out of reading through discussion of a few books that have touched and enlightened me over the years, books you may not have read but which will show you more general aspects of geography and psychology that may interest you as well. My reading of them is built on the same two axes – places and situations that interest me and ideas that I find rewarding. As we go outward through space and time, so we go into illuminating the inner life as well.

This is a disparate group of works – lost works, books depicting difficult journeys, taking us places we have never been, describing things we have never done, but perhaps putting us in touch with feelings and thoughts we did not know we had.

We start on the island of Guernsey. One of the Channel islands, Guernsey sits just off the French coast in the English Channel. In World War II, it was rapidly overrun by the Nazi occupiers of France, and there in time and place GB Edwards set his only novel, The Book of Ebenezer Le Page. Susan and I discovered this beautiful book many years ago and have never tired of

recommending it to friends. The story is simple. Ebenezer Le Page spends his life at a distance even there on the island from the woman of his dreams. No spoiler here, but the book tells the reader a lot about the island, its people, and how they lived through a time of brutal privation and captivity. Ebenezer Le Page is set in war time, but it is not an adventure story or a mystery. Its subject is ultimately the human heart, how it refuses to find and yet ultimately finds love in surrounding, yet very difficult circumstances. It is a lovely and rewarding book.

Many of us read mysteries to escape from such trying circumstances as we see in Ebenezer Le Page. However occasionally we come upon a mystery, spy thriller or adventure story that takes us out of ourselves and drops us right back into the soup of deeper thoughts and feelings. Such is the fine World War II spy novel of Simon Mawer, Trapeze, recommended to me by our brother Igor Dumbadze. Mawer's best book, Trapeze depicts the adventures of Marian Sutro, a daring 19-year-old Francophone English woman recruited by Special Ops and trained to parachute into occupied France, help extricate downed RAF pilots and assist the French resistance.

There is lots of adventure in Trapeze, but one episode sticks with me more than the rest. Late in the book Marian finds herself in Paris with the Gestapo closing in on her. There she has to escape from an ambush set in the wonderful Père Lachaise Cemetery. (By the way, you must go there the next time you are in Paris. This final resting place of Heloise, Abelard, La Fontaine, Molière, Modigliani, Simone Signoret, Yves Montand, Jim Morrison and many, many others is worth an extended visit.) What Mawer does with this marvelous cemetery and the prosaic streets around it is hard to forget. In the middle of a street, in broad daylight, Marian pulls out a gun and executes two Gestapo men who think they have her cornered. Equally memorable, the rest of this tale shows us this resourceful, fearless young woman up against long odds illustrating what one can do up against formidable opposing forces.

Somehow without thinking about it, most of the works I have chosen to share in this section are set in the Second World War. At least Walter Kempowski's fine, underappreciated novel All for Nothing is set not in France but in East Prussia in the waning days of the war. There a noble family sits helplessly on their estate watching the melancholy, ever increasing parade of broken humanity on the abutting road limping westward, hoping to escape the approaching Red Army and take what shelter they can in the crumbling Third Reich. They avoid the fire by crawling back into the frying pan. As the ghastly tale unfolds, the family unravels. The bank on which they sit above the river of humanity gradually is eaten away by the flow, and drops into the stream. Some of the family survive, some do not. The work demands that we think about the questions of who and why, what turns fortune's wheel amid adversity.

But that is enough gloom and doom, adventure and derring do. Now I'll turn to a work I'm pretty confident you won't read – it's over 1,100 pages long – John Cowper Powys' A Glastonbury Romance. This odd book in an extended tour de force drawing on the Arthurian legends, Oriental philosophy, the social and political currents of the mid-1930s, and the local life that marked the Somerset County, England town of Glastonbury. All of this is redolent of the counterculture exemplified even today in the annual Glastonbury Festival of music and its countercultural festival of arts, a gathering not unlike the Woodstock extravaganza of the youth of at least some of us. The year of 2020 was to have been the 50th rendition of the Glastonbury Festival, and the Saturday night headliner was fittingly scheduled to be Sir Paul McCartney. If you go online, you may yet find Sir Paul, guitar at the ready, attired in a sky blue and white cloud figured shirt, prepared to take you back to Glastonbury, Woodstock, and the befogged days of your youth. Some years ago we travelled through Glastonbury and I got a kick out of communing with King Arthur and his knights, the Buddha, Powys' odd assortment of 1930s Britishers, and my own

misspent youth. Alas, the later adventure with Sir Paul was not to be. Another lengthy tome you might enjoy is Alfred Doblin's Berlin Alexanderplatz, a chronicle of down and out Berliners in the years of the doomed Weimar Republic.

Another aspect of the world of reading that fascinates me is the tendency of some writers to create their own milieus, authoring books in series that deal with an imaginary site, peopled with recurring and interrelated characters. Among my favorites are the Barsetshire Chronicles of Anthony Trollope, his somewhat similar Palliser series, and the Gothic Yoknapatawpha County of William Faulkner. The imagination required to populate a whole work with characters cut from distinctive but individualized cloth fascinates me and gives me whole new worlds to visit, without ever having to cash in SkyMiles or renew a passport.

By the way, here is where my enigmatic title comes in. Nothing smart alecky about it and wholly fitting for this august body. I am always tickled by the fact that Reading, Pennsylvania masquerading as "Brewer," the "fifth largest city in Pennsylvania" houses the four volumes of John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom tetralogy, including two that have won the Pulitzer Prize – Rabbit is Rich and Rabbit at Rest - as well as other early Updike works. In addition to being entertaining, the four volume Rabbit series gives us a good look at the America of the latter half of the 20th century. While Updike is chided by some as a prolix writer infatuated with his own voice, writing only and always about sex, religion and Pennsylvania, this reader disagrees. I think he is one of the most insightful chroniclers of his era. His "Pennsylvania" covers much of the life of his and our times. It is much broader than the mere geographic entity, the Quaker State.

These disparate groups of books and series illustrate at least one more reason why I read: to travel mentally and visit not only distant vistas but also experience the precious moments these special places summon into our minds and hearts. Reading can entertain, beguile, distract, educate

about the world and perhaps most importantly about ourselves. In one telling scene remaining I hesitantly let you into one of the secret places of my own psyche. You may have such a place (of a different character, I hope) illumined by your own reading.

The best of Joyce Carol Oates' far too many novels is her early work them, set firmly in Detroit, Michigan, depicting generations of the working class Wendall family. The central male figure is Jules Wendall, a participant in the 1968 riots that marked Detroit for many years thereafter. Not in the riots, but during his youth, Jules had an intermittent relationship with a neurotic rich young woman named Nadine Greene, who inexplicably abandons a very ill Jules during their teenage years in a tawdry motel in Texas.

Years later, after both Nadine and Jules have grown up, they find each other again, back in Detroit. The fact that Nadine is married makes no difference. She tells Jules she still loves him. They establish a love nest in an apartment complex somewhere in residential Detroit.

One afternoon they meet at their apartment and things don't go well. There is sex. It is unsatisfying. They leave the apartment. We see Jules walking Nadine down the sidewalk to her car. The sidewalk and the lovers are dappled with sunlight amid the shadowing leaves of the overarching trees. As they walk, to his horror Jules sees Nadine take a gun from her purse. She shoots him in the chest, then shoots herself. Jules, we learn, nearly dies, but does not, although he disappears from the novel for a time and is emotionally eviscerated. Without going deep into analysis of my own twisted psyche, these images of sun and shadow, attempted love and violence, male and female intimacy, and horror, mortal fear arising out of commonplace sex have always stayed with me. I can't shake them. I've taken this further in other venues for myself but will go no deeper here tonight. You may have noticed I got a kick out of Marian Sutro shooting down two guys in the streets of Paris. Hmmm. Do we have a problem here? Make of it what you will.

To try to sum up this brief foray into a vast topic I'll finish by saying where I assert reading can take us. Through it we can journey not just to exotic, or well loved, or fondly remembered, pleasing places. It can carry us to our deepest feelings, our most intimate perceptions, the heart of it all. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, another writer I admire has called it A Coney Island of the Mind. If not as psychedelic for most of us who are no longer or never were stoners, we could borrow from Updike and call these places our own Reading, Pennsylvanias of the soul.

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