

The (often broken) promises of reading

The truth is, I take little pleasure in book pages. They remind me of the many volumes that sit reproachfully on shelves at home, unread, partly read, read but in need of rereading. Editors read all day, yes, but what they do is not reading. It is filtering, weighing, analyzing — it is a dozen mental activities, but it is not reading with the stops out, reading at Harry Potter pace.

Goodness knows what rubbish I read as a child; I think most of it had to do with girl sleuths and gymkhanas. My consumption of library novels was so great that my mother would drive me to the local branch every Tuesday after school to exchange one week's allotment for another. I read at the breakfast table, in bed, in the bathtub, while watching TV, while knitting, and sometimes while knitting *and* watching TV. I read until the last possible second before making a dash for the bus to school. I tried to read at the dinner table, but my father wouldn't allow it (not because of the antisocial nature of this behaviour so much as the risk posed by beef gravy to library books). My great limitation, then as now, was an inability to read in a moving vehicle.

We invited recent Left Atrium contributors to confide certain facts about their habits as readers. We asked for the titles of books they:

1. are planning to read next
2. have had for ages but now despair of ever reading
3. bought because everyone else did
4. display prominently for effect
5. thought might be useful but now find a mystifying purchase
6. could never part with
7. have read more than twice
8. have kept since childhood.

We also requested suggestions for books to convalesce by, and for a confession of favourite places to read.

The series of abridged responses that follows leads to one overwhelming conclusion: the age of Gutenberg has not yet ended. — *Anne Marie Todkill, CMAJ*

Brian Deady, Emergency medicine, New Westminster, BC

1. *Paris to the Moon*, Alan Gopnik. I'm holding out for a few books for Christmas, including Oliver Sacks' memoir, *Uncle Tungsten: Memories of a Chemical Boyhood*.
2. *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo. I bought this years ago after seeing the musical. It sits on my shelf, looking very intelligent but gathering dust just the same.
3. It pains me to admit this: *Iron John: A Book About Men*, Robert Bly. I never read it, I swear.

4. *Citizen: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, Simon Schama. Of course, I haven't read it. It sure looks nice next to *Les Miz*, though.
5. We've got a load of books on our shelf with titles like *Creative Parenting* and *Kids are Worth It!* There's a trick, though: you actually have to read them.
6. *The Story of English*, McCrum, Cran and MacNeil. A history of the evolution of the English language. This answer surprises me.
7. I've never actually read a book more than twice. I do have the distinction of having picked up Boris Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago* for the third time this summer. I got to page 168, five pages further than last time. I hear there's a new translation out; maybe I should try it.
8. *Who Has Seen the Wind*, W.O. Mitchell. A great read for a prairie kid; all the swearing delighted me. ❄️

D. John Doyle, Anesthesiology, Toronto, Ont.

The book that I've had for ages but despair of ever reading is *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*, Douglas R. Hofstadter. This book is "a metaphorical fugue on minds and machines in the spirit of Lewis Carroll," but even with an honours degree in physics and mathematics and a (lapsed) membership in Mensa, I can understand only limited portions of this important book. (It won a Pulitzer.)

I have rescheduled it for my retirement. This book might also qualify for category 4, but I prefer to recommend Plato's *Republic*, which I have carefully and thoroughly read in Coles Notes. My favourite places to read are airport lounges and beach resorts. ❄️



Fred Sebastian

De l'oreille gauche

Shannon Dutchyn, Emergency medicine, Vancouver

I'm in a morbid mood these days. One of the last books I read was Charles Panati's *Extraordinary Endings of Practically Everything and Everybody*, a salacious look at extinctions ancient and modern, last stands, capital endings, decimating diseases, cemeteries, bygone sex practices and the last words of famous people. Currently, I'm reading *History of Punishment & Torture* by Karen Farrington.

My favourite place to read is in bed, with a chocolate treat nearby. Although I haven't kept any books since childhood, I do remember enjoying Carolyn Keene's Nancy Drew mysteries.

I fancy myself a student of the English language and I enjoy books about grammar. My favorites are Richard Lederer's *Anguished English* and *Crazy English*, as well as William Safire's many creations — mostly very light reading — such as *Fumblerules*. It was from these erudite professors that I learned such trivia as the longest word in the English language: pneumonultra-microscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis

While I've never read a book more than twice (life is too short), there are

many that I wish I had time to read over. For example, Steven Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, of which I can recall only 4. I suppose that makes me “moderately effective.”

I guess the reason I'm a physician is because I read Elizabeth Morgan's autobiography about medical school and residency. I was convinced I wanted to be a plastic surgeon after poring through her truly inspirational book. ✱

Michael Gordon, Geriatric medicine, Toronto

1. *Blind Assassin*, Margaret Atwood; *Wonder Boys*, Michael Chabon; *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington
6. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce; *Look Homeward Angel*, Thomas Wolfe
7. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
8. *Look Homeward Angel*.

Recommended: *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom and *Home from the Vinyl Cafe* by Stuart McLean.

Favourite place: my exercise bike. No one interrupts me, and I hate exercising — so this is the incentive.

William G. Green, Obstetrics and gynecology (retired), Townsend, Ont.

My interest in the September 11 tragedy led me to wonder about it being but an extension of a much earlier conflict, i.e., Muslim-Christian hostility going back even before the Crusades. I appealed to my friend John Moir, an emeritus professor of religious history at the University of Toronto. He lent me a book by Henri Pirenne, called *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, which is so abstruse that I understand precious little of it. Still, I am persevering. Why? Not to impress my friends (well, maybe John a bit). I guess I still want to understand.

I've often thought, when immersed in the first reading of a really good book, what a shame it is that I shall never be able to read it for the first time again. Age has shown me that, for a few books, that joy can almost be recreated. Every five or ten years I plow through Churchill's history of World War II (a.k.a. *How I Won the War*) and wonder anew at the man.

You mention reading as therapy. My wife can tell that the world is pressing too much on me when she finds me rereading my favourite antidepressant, Nevil Shute. ✱

Sean Gupton, Emergency medicine, Minneapolis, Minn.

1. *Apricots from Chernobyl: Narratives*, Joseph Novakovich
2. *Foundation's Edge*, Isaac Asimov
3. *Timeline*, Michael Crichton
4. *My Brother*, Jamaica Kincaid
5. *Night Cars*, Teddy Jam, illustrated by Eric Beddows
6. *The Stand*, Stephen King
7. *The Stand*, Stephen King
8. *The Red Dragon*, Thomas Harris.

This book was handed to me one childhood summer by my mother in an attempt to buy herself a few moments of peace. I can't say it influenced my decision to enter medicine, but when I did my Grade 5 book report on the novel I did learn never to choose for a book report a novel that:



“Nellie Beales reading in a hammock,” place unknown, circa 1910

- a. describes cannibalism and fine wine
- b. you are not old enough to check out of the public library
- c. prompts you to write, "My favourite part was when the Red Dragon bit the guy's lips off."

Recommended: any Harry Potter book.

Favourite place: in bed. *

Vincent Hanlon, Emergency medicine, Lethbridge, Alta.

- 1. *The Sea, the Sea*, Iris Murdoch.
- 2. *Betrayal of Trust: The Collapse of Global Public Health*, Laurie Garrett; *Words and Rules: The Ingredients of Language*, Steven Pinker
- 3. A 1912 reprint of the Temple Shakespeare edition of *As You Like It* (found in an antiquarian book shop in London 20 years ago. We considered calling our first born Rosalind until he turned out to be a Sebastian).
- 7. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Shunryu Suzuki; *Peace is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh.

I have a revolving paperback bookstand that we reclaimed from the garbage outside the public library near the family home in Calgary a long time ago. It is full of dusty copies of paperback poetry, Shakespeare and contemporary fiction from those years. I could ship it in its entirety to you by FedEx.

Recommended: *Roads to Santiago*, Cees Nooteboom.

Favourite place: enroute or on arrival in a different place. I like to read with or against the grain: e.g., John McPhee's *Coming into the Country* (about Alaska) while sitting in a cafe in Barrow, Alaska or Witold Rybczynski's *City Life* while on retreat in the woods outside of Calgary. *

Kerri Lambert, Psychiatry (residency), Winnipeg

I'm currently reading *Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien (must read it before the movie). I usually alternate between clas-

sics and contemporary books. On my bookshelf is *We Were the Mulvaney's* by Joyce Carol Oates. I also have Timothy Findley's *Pilgrim* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. For some reason, I despair of reading *The English Patient*. I bought *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield because everyone else was buying it. I proudly display Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (and I did read it) and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

I am a book hoarder; I do not part with books easily. In fact, I'm not a very good book lender because I'm very particular about how other people handle my books (no dog ears, please!)

To recommend: *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, Rebecca Wells. I laughed out loud in several spots. And, of course, there's any Calvin and Hobbes treasury.

Favourite place: on my rocking chair with my wool blanket, a bowl of popcorn and a cup of tea or warm milk. If I had a fireplace, I'd be next to it. During the holiday season, I love to read next to the glow of the Christmas lights. *

Ruth Elwood Martin, Family medicine, Vancouver

- 1. Waiting-to-be-read books and current reading stack up on my bedside table. I measured 2 stacks each 15 inches high; they included several unread *CMAJ*s.
- 2. I've had Rudy Wiebe's *Stolen Life* on my bedside table since it was first published. I don't think I'll finish it ... the story is too close to the tragic stories I hear in my prison work.
- 3. Sometimes, those books I buy because everyone else is buying them are disappointing for me. These include: *Alias Grace*, Margaret Atwood; *No Great Mischief*, Alistair MacLeod.



William Howell Arthur Thomas collection / National Archives of Canada / PA-200512

"Linton Showler, reading First Aid book," Camp Borden, 1916

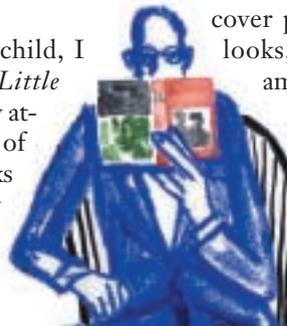
- 4. I don't think I do this. However, I might hide something that I don't want others to know I'm reading!
- 5. Not sure about this one.
- 6. That's our problem. We never part with books. Soon, we'll run out of wall space for bookcases, and we'll have to follow the example of a professor at Edinburgh University who filled up his house with so many books that he had to buy the house next door.
- 7. I often reread old favourites, especially when I'm exhausted and discouraged. Books by Jane Austen (*Pride and Prejudice*), George Eliot (*Silas Marner*) and Nevil Shute (*Pied Piper* and *Trustee from the Toolroom*) describe ordinary folks doing what they feel they should do, thereby making a difference.

8. Not many. Because I was the oldest of five, and the first to leave home, the childhood books went to my younger siblings.

Recommended: recent reads that gripped me and that I lent to convalescing friends and family include *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, Louis de Bernières; *Snow Falling on Cedars*, David Guterson; *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, Rachel

Naomi Remen. It's not as easy to recommend books to patients. We're taught not impose our personal belief systems on our patients. Does this include our taste in reading?

Favourite place: As a child, I emulated Jo March, of *Little Women*, by retreating to my attic bedroom with a stash of apples and a stack of books and refusing to hear my mother's summons to help with chores. *



4. *There's a Trick with a Knife I'm Learning to Do: Selected Poems 1963-78*, Michael Ondaatje. This book's catchy title and provocative cover photo get plenty of second looks, but the poems inside are among my favourites.

5. *Modern Chinese: A Basic Course*, Peking University Faculty Staff

6. *Island: The Collected Stories of Alistair MacLeod*. I think this choice reflects my Nova Scotia roots.

7. *The English Patient*, Michael Ondaatje: a sure sign of a hopeless romantic

8. I've reread *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë, repeatedly since high school. Does that count?

Recommended: this is a tough one; each situation is so variable. Books that I have recently recommended include: *Love of a Good Woman*, Alice Munro; *Geisha: Memoirs of a Geisha*, Arthur Golden; *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ursula Le Guin.

Favourite place: on a comfy lawn chair overlooking the Mediterranean, preferably at a private beach in Southern Turkey. When that's not immediately available, in my bedroom, behind closed doors. *

Ron Ruskin, Psychiatry, Toronto

1. Harry Potter. I am curious to see what is so compelling about J.K. Rowling's writing.
2. *War and Peace*. I have made it through other Tolstoy works, but never this one. Perhaps I need more peace.
3. I had wanted to read through the Koran. After September 11, I decided to read my old copy but found that it had mysteriously vanished, as some of my old books do. Why do old books wander off? I bought another copy, but the Koran is not arranged in a clear chronologic order and I think one needs a teacher to study it. Do we need teachers more than books?

Sorting books

Books,
books,
books

stacked
everywhere, overwhelming
hardwood floors, defying
categories on newly white
bookshelves barely vertical
stilt-walkers reaching for the
ceiling.

Voices,
voices,
voices
echo

all around — my
father's and his
father's and my
husband's father's —
inviting us to walk the
pages of their passions:
steam railway engines and
medicine's early discoveries
(do cigarettes kill?) and
theological discourses and
Irish tales read with a lilt and
The Ancient Mariner destined for
tears mingled with our own
pages and our children's
pages (Redwall and Harry,
Aslan and Psammead) and
outgrown favourites saved,
interweaving with grand-
children unborn and
those beyond.

Ruth Elwood Martin
Family physician
Victoria, BC

**Fred Paola, Internal
medicine and medical
acupuncture, Oldsman, Fla.**

1. *Troia*, Gisbert Haefs
2. *The Island of the Day Before*, Umberto Eco. The man is too smart for me. What's he talking about?
5. *The Chemistry of Wine-making*, American Chemistry Society
6. Any book at all
7. *A Man*, Oriana Fallaci; *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint Exupéry.

Recommended: *A Soldier of the Great War*, Mark Helprin; *Gates of Fire*, Steven Pressfield.

Favourite place: my bedroom. *

**Kevin Pottie, Family
medicine, Ottawa**

1. *Mercy Among the Children*, David Adams Richards
2. *Functional Histology*. I'm surprised I still have this book.
3. *Passing the bat: Street performers in America*, Patricia Campbell. Obviously bought during an earlier phase in my life.

4. When I was younger I never put a book on a shelf unless I had already read it. Now I have books on shelves that I haven't read. I promise to read them, someday. But one makes promises to oneself that cannot be kept.

6. I could never part with the books that I received as a child. One book that really impressed me was *A Child's History of the World*, by V. M. Hillyer, I think. It gave me a sense of the ancients, the Greeks, the Romans, all the way up to the present. I read and re-read that book.

I love all of Chekhov's plays and am discovering his short stories, reading them again and again. I wish I could spend an evening with Chekhov. Or Hemingway. Or Woolf. Give me time! *

Jonah Samson, Dalhousie Medical School, Halifax

1. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Michael Chabon
2. *Blindness*, Jose Saramago
3. *Belle du Seigneur*, Albert Cohen (1200 pages in French ... yikes!)
4. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, Dave Eggers (I'm so glad I did)
5. *Ulysses*, James Joyce. I swear I've read every page, but don't ask me what it was about.
6. A German-French dictionary
7. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera, and Andrea Modica's book of photographs, *Treadwell*
8. *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett (I think I've read it more than a dozen times)
9. *The B Book*, Stan and Janice Berenstain ("Big brown bear, blue bull, beautiful baboon ...").

To restore the spirit: *On My Island*, Marie-Louise Gay. (Written for children aged 2-4, this book is probably what pulled me through medical school.)

Favourite place: cupped into a large armchair with my legs hanging over one of the arms. *

Ross Upshur, Community medicine, Toronto

Our house is chock full of books, despite many moratoria on book buying. My wife is a novelist and as passionate and omnivorous a reader as myself. I seem to spend less time with books these days, reading mostly free-text medical journals, manuscripts in preparation and grant applications for review.

Next to my bed is a motley collection that has been gathering dust for some time. The pile grows and tumbles and I am reminded that shelves exist. The one with the most dust is *Between Facts & Norms* by Jürgen Habermas, which has defeated me for years.

Currently I'm reading *Granta*, a British literary journal. I devour thrillers and murder mysteries, and my patients often leave battered paperbacks for me. Most of our books are on permanent display, as bookshelves are all over the place — which impresses some but amuses others. There are too many books to list that I have purchased and wonder what possessed me. I think bibliophilia may well qualify for the DSM-IV. I scratch my head at why I buy books, given a busy clinical practice, research program, teaching and a young family. Still, undeterred I fill up my account at Amazon .com and await the arrival of more boxes full of books, which I open with the kind of rapture I witness in my children on Christmas morning.

There are many books I could not part with — mostly the collection of texts from my philosophy training, which provide constant solace though I never actually read them seriously any more. Most of them have been read and reread so that the

spines are cracked and the pages frayed.

The best book for distraction and spiritual restoration is Herodotus's *The Histories*. It is engaging and entertaining in equal parts, integrating myth, history, heresy, anecdote and proto-ethnography all in one. *

Stephen Workman, Internal medicine, Halifax

1. The book by an American author about a dysfunctional family returning home for Thanksgiving. Can't remember the title, but it's getting lots of hype just now.
2. Collected works of Shakespeare. I've tried and just can't stick with it.
3. Collected stories of Ha Jin
4. None
5. *Reader's Digest Guide to Home Repair*
6. None
7. Dunno
9. Dunno.

Recommended: *Waiting*, Ha Jin. Your problems will likely look smaller afterwards.

Favourite place: in the car, alone, while parked and waiting for my wife to complete an errand. *



Gar Lunney / National Archives of Canada / PA-177696

Woman reading a magazine in a laundromat, from the National Film Board filmstrip "Women at Home," 1952