

Christmas reading

The impetus to read grows stronger during the short days and long nights of the holiday season. Even if a leisurely stretch of time in your comfortable reading chair never materializes, it feels like it might. If not this evening, certainly an hour after breakfast tomorrow morning In my own case, middle age brings with it a renewed desire to read, to read widely, but also selectively, since time is not unlimited. My new “progressive” eyeglasses may have something to do with this fifth-decade enthusiasm for the printed page. The dislocations of the holiday season also help to interrupt the regularity of my café/newspaper habit. Too much time poring over repetitive stories about George W. and Osama, softwood lumber and air travel security straitjackets the mind. No matter how good the coffee.

The year 2001 was fruitful in terms of books read and partly read. It's not al-

ways necessary or possible to read the whole book. Certain books may be sampled repeatedly, and selected passages enjoyed over short or longer periods of time. I recently returned to Doris Lessing's 1987 account of the war in Afghanistan, *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*. During her visit to western Pakistan in the autumn of 1986 she met with mujahedeen commanders, spoke with Afghani women, and visited refugee camps. Fifteen years before “September 11,” she transcribes the words of a mujahedeen military leader describing the war against the Russian invaders:

Nothing is easy in this struggle and this question of ideology is perhaps the most difficult. The people you in the West call Fundamentalists are the most ideological but they are also the best of the fighters, they began fighting before any other group did. They have allies and followers all over the Moslem world and, long-term, this may create difficulties for us all.



“Charlie [Ballantyne] in chair,”
Ottawa, 1896

De l'oreille gauche

A few days before reading that I was looking for something to read in the Chicago airport. I picked up the November issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* to see what P.J. O'Rourke had to say about daily life in conflict-ridden Israel. He presents the view that ordinary life triumphs over terrorism. Along the way he takes that familiar observation by Santayana and irreverently flips it on its head:



Why can't everybody just get along? No reasonably detached person goes to Israel without being reduced in philosophical discourse to the level of Rodney King — or, for that matter, to the level of George Santayana. "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," Santayana said, in one of those moments of fatuousness that comes to even the most detached of philosophers. It goes double for those who can't remember anything else.

I'll no longer be able to listen to the oft-quoted words of Santayana with quite the same deference.

Picking my way through a text is satisfying in the same way as savouring different items at a smorgasbord provides gastronomic pleasures that are different from the orderly unfolding of a five-course meal. Here a delicious turn of phrase, there a beautifully constructed argument, or a few compelling lines of dialogue. Recently, I reluctantly finished *Puligny-Montrachet*, the absorbing account of village life in Burgundy by Simon Loftus. I nibbled at that book intermittently for two years, just the length of time for Domaine Leflaive, one of the region's accomplished wine makers, to produce a couple of good vintages.

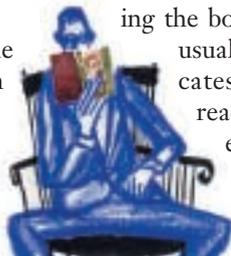
During the holiday season, in the company of young visitors, I also rediscover the fun of reading children's books aloud. This is something I do less of now as our teenaged sons, Sebastian and Matthew, grow out of their need for a good bedtime story. Over the past year I've renewed acquaintances with my friends Frog and Toad (Arnold Lobel), Richard Scarey's Gold Bug, Bill Stoker from the fairy tales of Terry

Jones, and spent time identifying the animals on Noah's ark, thanks to Peter Spier. The printed and illustrated page continues to be part of the fabric of our extended family life.

Christmas is also a time of books as gifts — eureka discoveries for the person who has almost everything, and sometimes surprising gifts for me.

For Sebastian this year, I found a remaindered copy of John P.L. Roberts' *The Art of Glenn Gould*. Seb was born the day Glenn died.

For Matt, an enthusiastic cyclist, I picked up a copy of Lance Armstrong's *It's Not About the Bike*. It's an inspirational, if not especially well written, story. The copy I purchased also has a few production problems — some pages out of order and a repeating sequence of pages describing the Tour de France — unintentionally building the suspense. I look forward to the books I'll find in my Christmas stocking. Accompanying the books, considerate givers



usually include gift certificates of free time, so the reader may scramble unencumbered over a thousand new pages.

The anticipation of a new year compels some of us into a brief period of stocktaking. A friend once suggested substitution as an alternative to the unchecked acquisition of books. Put a limit on the total number of books in your life. Do I really need all nine of those books by Thomas Merton, sitting on the shelf immediately by my left elbow? Perhaps its time to find a new home for some or all of them. How about my collection of reference books, among them *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, *The Dream Encyclopedia*, *The Junior Encyclopedia* (only Volume 1, A-C), and *The Complete Illustrated Guide to Everything Sold in Garden Centers*. Should some of my daily reading time be used to select and dispose of all the nonessential books in my life? What would I take with me if I had to leave this house and was able to carry with me only one not-too-heavy bag of books?

Hard to say. I do know one paperback book that will be in the bag — a favourite discovery of recent years — *Selected Non-Fictions* by Jorge Luis Borges, edited by Eliot Weinberger. *Selected Non-Fictions* is 500 pages of essays, film reviews and criticism, book reviews and notes, capsule biographies, reflections on history, politics, and culture, and prologues and lectures by one of the 20th century's great writers. The scope of this collection reflects a curious and wide-ranging intellect. Included in the collection is the finely crafted lecture "Blindness." Borges delivered it extemporaneously in 1977 — that is, he had no written text. In 1955 Borges was appointed the director of the National Library in Buenos Aires. It was also at that time, when he was middle aged, Borges recounts, that

the pathetic moment came when I knew I had lost my sight, my reader's and my writer's sight ... Little by little I came to realize the strange irony of events. I had always imagined Paradise as a kind of library. Others think of a garden or of a palace. There I was, the center, in a way, of nine hundred thousand books in various languages, but I found I could barely make out the title pages and the spines. I wrote the "Poem of the Gifts," which begins:

No one should read self-pity or reproach into this statement of the majesty of God; who with such splendid irony granted me books and blindness at one touch.

Those two gifts contradicted each other: the countless books and the night, the inability to read them.

Selected Non-Fictions is a collection that would make a fine addition to a compact bookshelf on your favourite desert island. With the best books in our lives, though, it's probably best not to wait until we've booked time on the island. When I've finished with my copy, I hope to exchange it for its companion, *Selected Fiction of Borges*. Happy reading in 2002.

Vince Hanlon
Emergency physician
Lethbridge, Alta.