

Savouring the Taste of Text

by Kate Marie Ryan SAVOURING THE TASTE A Reading Autobiography by Kate Ryan I love quotes. One of my favourite books of all times is a book published in 1926 entitled *Many Thoughts from Many Minds*. Salvaged from the dump by my father in his university days, it has now been handed down to me. Its red leather bound cover and gold etched pages reek of many previous owners. I can pick a subject, any subject and discover opinions of great minds expressed in words from centuries passed. Their ideas vary from the beautiful to the banal. It is a book that I have found extremely useful for all occasions as it covers almost anything; births, friendships, loves, weddings or funerals. It is a book that prompts me to reflect. It is also a book that I look forward to passing on through the generations. In this book, Burke quotes that "To read without reflecting is like eating without digesting". I find his analogy of reading and eating an interesting one and kept it in mind as I attempted to explore my own experiences as a reader. Modern life is a busy one that competes against the 24 hour clock and lists of 'things to do'. Compared to my childhood, I find that I now read with a matter of urgency rather than as a matter of complete absorption. I 'speed read' rather than savour those words as one would savour a melting chocolate in the mouth. This will often leave me with a sense of indigestion from having read a book too fast. I miss certain points that perhaps would have made the story more 'tasty'. It is no wonder then that I remember vividly the books from my childhood more than those from my adolescence or 'rushed' adulthood. As a child it was difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. I would see the characters in books as characters in my own world. My mother said she would often find me up in the middle of the night, balancing a book upside down, and reading gibberish to our pets. Noddy, our cat used to get an earful of *My Cat Likes to Hide in Boxes*; Ebony, our very own Newfoundland 'nanny' used to be read *Peter Pan*; meanwhile Squeak, our cocker spaniel used to be treated to *Lady and the Tramp*. Growing up on a Nelson kiwifruit farm we had many opportunities to entertain ourselves. My brother was big on the sandpit and diggers whereas I was big on talking to the animals or finding secret places to daydream. I used to climb onto the hayshed roof with a duvet in tow and lie back making animals out of the clouds. Normally what followed would be Enid Blyton or books on Greek mythology. I would then fall asleep in the baking sun and imagine that same warmth melting the wax off Icarus' feathers before he fell from the sky. Puberty had a significant affect on me. I matured earlier than most of my peers and was one of the first to get a bra and the first to get my period. Word spread fast and boys found out quickly. I soon discovered words can be quite cruel. If it hadn't been for books such as Judy Blume's *Are You There God It's Me Margaret*, Jules Older's *Hank Prank* and *Hot Henrietta* or William Taylor's *Possum Perkins* I probably would have remained a self conscious teenager, not realising that we all go through this phase. Around this time I had decided I was going to be a photographer for National Geographic so I had made a bird hideout in a neighbouring reserve in order to take photos of the birds. This was also where I spent much of my reading time in secret. I began reading young adult fiction series such as L M Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, Jean M Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. At school Fridays were designated silent reading days and needless to say, they were my favourite days! Most of our literature-based reading was done in English class, and in other content areas, the majority of the reading was in textbooks. We then moved from Australia and back to Auckland where I began my first year at high school. Although I enjoyed novel studies at school I have a vague memory of what I actually read. The books I have or have not read become increasingly murky around school certificate time and throughout the years that followed. Prescribed texts I can vaguely remember include Maurice Gee's *Under the Mountain* and John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. In contrast, books that I had chosen myself and read in the holidays seem easier to remember. During these first few years of secondary school, friends of mine introduced me to horror fiction and I became an avid Stephen King and Dean R Koontz reader. I have a vivid memory of reading *The Bachman Books* under torchlight during a fourteenth birthday sleepover. We decided to read out loud some short stories from *The Bachman Books*; *Rage*, *The Long Walk*, *Roadwork* and *The Running Man*. We all had a go at reading the stories and by two in the morning we had worked ourselves into a bunch of fearful insomniacs. Also around this time I was introduced to Emily Bronte, Virginia Woolf and Jane Austin, although it is hazy as to whether this was through my best friend at the time, Sara Findlay or through school. Inspired by the relationships in *Wuthering Heights* we thought we could write our own similar story. We began our own secret written language which was a mixture of Japanese and Egyptian-like symbols which only we had a code for. For months we would take the story home on alternative nights and write chapters each. We became so engrossed in the story that we would write it during class and infuriate our teachers as they wouldn't be able to understand a word of it. My friend was what I would call an avid reader and an absolute introvert. Her silent eccentric ways influenced my reading habits significantly in a way that made me drop everything and delve deep into books like I did when I was younger. After fourth form my parents separated and we moved to my Grandma's place. I was also into a very steady relationship which continued past my secondary schooling and into university. Sex was then always at the front of the mind and so it seemed inevitable that when I stumbled across copious amounts of old *Mills and Boons* in the garage, I was tempted to read them. I found them extremely predictable and most times quite boring, yet still I read almost every single one of them. I also stumbled across my mum's book on *The Joy of Sex*, which was highly educational for my own understanding of sexuality. During my senior years, I found that I had little time to sleep, let alone read what I wanted to outside of class! As in third and fourth form, literature-based reading took place in English class. We read books such as Bryce Courtenay's *Power of One* (who is now one of my favourite writers) and works by Shakespeare. We were given Ian Pollock's illustrated version of *King Lear* and in hindsight I am glad we studied it in this comic format. I feel that to read Shakespeare is to miss both the aural experience and the visual. We were able to enjoy both with this particular text. These years also saw me reading a great deal more short stories, poetry and plays. Through Drama and English I was introduced to texts such as George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, Hone Tuwhare's *No Ordinary Sun* and Roger Hall's script work such as *Middle Age Spread* (self selected for a monologue piece). New Zealand and Pacific Island writers such as Maurice Shadbolt, Sam Hunt, Witi Ihāemaera, Albert Wendt, Janet Frame and Keri Hulme were all introduced. I continued to enjoy reading adult fiction in my own time by authors, usually ones that were lying around the house such as Wilbour Smith, Bryce Courtenay and John Grisham, although my social life seemed to take

over the time I would otherwise spend reading. A significant book I read around this time would have been April Fool's Day, which coincided with the time my boyfriend's uncle was dying of AIDS. Halfway through my bursary year I won fully sponsored exchange to live in Italy for a year. Surprisingly it was within this single year that I was exposed to the entire history of the English language. We were given a prescribed text called Mirror of the Times which took us on a very in-depth journey from Anglo Saxon literature such as Beowulf right through to the Twentieth Century writings of Tom Stoppard. We studied the lives, the history and the works of writers from every century; John Donne, Ben Jonson, John Milton, John Gay, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Gray, William Blake, Mary Shelley, Wordsworth, Byron, Keats, Oscar Wilde, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf, William Golding, Wilfred Owen, T S Elliot, Philip Larkin, Samuel Becket and many many more. For the equivalent of seventh form English in a foreign country there was an immense amount of work involved! I still have the text book and it is a great source of reference for me even now. We also did a close study of Robert Louis Stevenson's The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde which included seeing a particularly gruesome staged production of the play. As I was had very little access to English books I found solace in reading the Italian magazines or watched loads of television. My host sister insisted I learn to read and understand her favourite books in Italian. Consequently two books I did read in Italian which made a significant impact on my personal life was Antoine de Saint Exupéry's The Little Prince and Paulo Coelho The Alchemist. From Italy I went onto do a university degree. My time tended to be devoted to textbook reading. I read about New Zealand sociology, politics, mass media and society. Unfortunately reading began to become a chore, my eyesight started to weaken and I really lost the sense of 'me' time and forgot about the joys of having a book tucked away in the handbag to read for later. However around that time I met someone who made a significant change in my life and helped rekindle my passion for books. We were together for about 4 years and he was an absolute bookworm. I relished reading his 'handed down' books, which we would then have lengthy discussions about late at night or at our local bar. One book that really moved me and transported me to another era was Betty Jean Lifton's biography of Janusz Korczak's plight to save the Jewish children during the holocaust, entitled The King of the Children. When he left to go back to England he left me in the same way I met him, on a tall ship, only this time I was left with the words of with Kahil Gibran's The Prophet echoing in my ear; "So saying he made a signal to the seamen, and straightaway they weighed anchor and cast the ship loose from it's moorings, and they moved eastward". Of all the books, this has been one of my most favourite pieces of literature. It is one I will read and re-read and find something new in it each time from which I can relate to in life. After university I found time for personal reading increased. I spent much more time meandering through bookshops and pulling random titles off the shelf to read in bed or at the beach in the weekend. In 1999 I got a job on the star of the Onedin Line, Soren Larsen, which sent me across the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans with little else to do but work, write and read. I managed to read many of the books that had been left onboard from previous passengers. I consequently went through scores of Patrick O'Brien, Iain Banks, Sebastian Faulks, Ben Elton, Margaret Atwood, Nick Hornby, Douglas Adams and various others. My favourite place to read was curled up in the netting on the bowsprit, with the occasional spray splashing your face or if we had particularly annoying voyage crew one could always scramble up aloft and hide in the crow's nest. Reading up high with the birds was an exhilarating feeling. I remember one time we were in a rough storm just off Sable Islands in the Atlantic. Coincidentally I was halfway reading through Sebastian Junger's book based on a true story called The Perfect Storm. Tucked up in my bunk, listening to the waves slam against the hull and the boards creak like they were about to buckle made this true story all the more chilling and most definitely relevant. (I was most disappointed to find out that they later made it into a shocker of a film which no way reflects the intelligence of this book). After we reached London I jumped ship and reunited with my bookworm comrade who had mountains of books to share. The impersonal nature of this big city really encouraged book reading. I had never seen so many people with their heads buried in newspapers and books before. Absolute silence prevailed on the tube or the bus, as each individual was absorbed in their pages. London became a great place to read. My favourite place to read would be to go to Hyde Park in the summer or tuck myself up in bed in the winter. Notably my favourites during this time were Jean Giorno's The Man Who Planted Trees, Arthur Golden Memoirs of a Geisha, Patrick Suskind's Perfume, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's work, Robert M Pursig's Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Louis de Berniere's Captain Corelli's Mandolin and Milan

About the Author

Kate Marie Ryan is a Secondary School Teacher of English and Drama. Born in New Zealand, she has lived in Australia, America, Italy and the United Kingdom. She holds a degree in Communication Studies and after working several years in the UK within Theatre, Journalism and Public Relations industries, she returned to New Zealand to complete a Graduate Diploma in Teaching (Secondary). She currently teaches and resides in Sydney, Australia.

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