

Readers Archive is an ongoing series that asks writers, artists and musicians to allow access to their processes of reading and research. Each month an invited contributor writes a text which discusses their own routes of investigation. Further insights into these followed avenues are given through a list of text, lyrics or otherwise, that the selector considers to have been key on that journey. By uncovering the links made by others, be they linear or tangential, Readers Archive offers up a list of possible turning points for further reading and departure.

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Philip Hoare

4 June – 5 July, 2009

Selected Readings

Wuthering Heights, Emily Bronte
(Penguin paperback, 1970s)

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald
(Penguin, film tie-in paperback, 1974)

Decline and Fall, Evelyn Waugh
(Penguin paperback with 'Art Deco' cover, 1970s)

Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll
(Any edition with John Tenniel Illustrations)

Diamond Dogs, David Bowie
(LP album cover, gatefold edition, 1974)

Roxy Music, Roxy Music
(LP album cover, 1972)

A Voice Through A Cloud, Denton Welch
(Reader's Union hardback, 1951)

The Rings of Saturn, W.G. Sebald
(Harvill softback edition, 1998)

The Sense of an Ending, Frank Kermode

Moby-Dick, Herman Melville
(Rockwell Kent illustrated edition, 1930)

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A project by Ilsa Colsell, Conor
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with the support of
The Elephant Trust



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AN ANTI-READING LIST

'Dress in white' one said, with quotations,
From someone's wife, a famous writer
In the nineteen-twenties
Being Boring, *Pet Shop Boys*

Books are relived emotions, atlases to our interior lives. For me, as a teenager, they were an act of nostalgia for a time I never lived.

To be nostalgic before you'd even come of age was a particular malaise of the period in which I grew up, in suburban Southampton in the 1970s: a grey, bland place from which to rebel, yet also a place of its own escape. When I walked to school, I felt the history beneath my feet, as if the pavements might crack open and the past appear through the tarmac. Books, like music, were the narrative of that subversion, alter-native texts to the regimes under which I laboured. They were like the little door in *Alice*, or the piece of mushroom offered by the hookah-smoking caterpillar. They were my hallucinogens.

Rather than from the monks who attempted to teach me Maths and French, I got my education from David Bowie and Roxy Music, and later on, from the *NME* and *Sniffin' Glue*. Without them I wouldn't have known of Man Ray, Jean Genet or Albert Camus. Words were indivisible from the pictures I saw; the other universes I attempted to recreate in my own journals, with their acutely felt poems to people or things I loved, accompanied by images scissored from the *Sunday Times Magazine*. Everything was cut-up, collaged; a sampled existence, like the pictures on my wall—that pin-up of Bowie in a powder-blue suit and eye-make-up to match—or the gatefold sleeve of the first Roxy album with its opiated, science-fiction, café-society sleeve

notes. Words were a means of coming to terms with a doomed world: the rotting corpses of *Diamond Dogs* prepared me for the eschatological fictions of Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*.

You can tell off your life in book covers. For me, the film tie-in Penguin edition of *The Great Gatsby*, with Robert Redford and Mia Farrow in soft-focus creamy-white was part of the same narrative as a fashion spread in *Honey*, depicting a man in an impossibly pale suit. They both made my heart yearn for something I never had, and would never experience—just as Scott Fitzgerald's text was a nostalgic paean for a time he was living through yet had already lost. For a lower-middle-class English boy who never went to 'proper' university, Waugh's *Decline and Fall* (segued with *Brideshead Revisited* via the TV)—accomplished the same act of caste projection. These books were responsible for my own attempts to recapture something elusive—the essence of glamour—by osmotic contact with the dying vestiges of a lost world. The day I met Stephen Tennant, now living in reclusion in his dilapidated Wiltshire manor—with its classical statues painted pink, the bath tub filled with seashells, and the aesthete's long thinning hair henna'd as he extended a thin hand weighed down by a scarab ring—it was like meeting my other self, the person I could have been.

The irony is that I am writing this at dawn in the same room once decorated by those posters from *Jackie*, and where I first heard the plucked opening notes of 'Drive-In Saturday' (itself an exercise in nostalgia for an age yet to come). A room of one's own is the arena for such self-abusive dreams—from that suburban bedroom where I smoked illicit cigarettes out of the fan light window, to the halls of residence where I recreated Thomas Jerome Newton's capsule by bltacking upturned plastic cups to the wall, while outside my monastic cell, the lino corridor lead into Horace Walpole's fantastical Strawberry Hill, a time machine I entered every time I went out to pee.

Stirring the sediment is dangerous; you don't know what's down there. I do it every day, defying the past to come back and bite me. The books we choose are reassurances, refuges, self-dramatisations; they only tell us about ourselves, confirm our prejudices, just as Des Esseintes' interior voyages proved that travel narrows the mind. We self-select as we read, for all that other texts are pressed upon us. All those books I was forced to read? I only ever read the words I wanted to understand.

Maybe I can't read any more. Maybe analysis spoiled it all long ago, sitting on orange-upholstered chairs in college seminars on hot summer afternoons, slowly pulling apart the works of art which had taken me into other worlds. But some books are beyond explanation. I didn't succeed in reading *Moby-Dick* until the third or fourth attempt, and even then it took me months to finish it. Now it has become a loop, a kind of holy text to be re-read, verse by verse, as the abbot reads aloud during the daily meals of the monastery. Like Ishmael, I feel forever haunted by the grand hooded phantom of the whale.

Sometimes books find you, rather than the reverse. I discovered *A Voice Through a Cloud* one morning in a jumble sale and that afternoon locked myself into its account of an art student's innocent cycle ride that ended in semi-paralysis and a weird, part-rural, part-suburban existence in the Home Counties of the 1940s; a gothic invalidity spent dressed in a cassock, worshipping shirtless farm workers glimpsed toiling in the fields. (Only later would I discover that Welch was championed by William Burroughs and John Waters). Welch's restricted, neo-romantic wanderings somehow segued into those of W.G. Sebald, whose voice it was impossible to ignore after he wrote me a fan letter on the publication of *Spike Island*. It was like receiving a postcard from E.M. Forster.

The great optimism of literature is that there are still books out there, in some charity shop, waiting to be discovered—books you might pick up for the first time, only to realise they

tell a story you already know. Perhaps this should be an anti-reading list, in the spirit of the Anti-University of Shoreditch, circa 1969, where the syllabus included Francis Huxley on dragons, R.D. Laing on anti-psychiatry, and Yoko Ono on 'The Connexion'. Or maybe I should list the ten books I ought to read. That would be an entirely more healthy exercise. But then, I never agreed with the idea of healthy exercises; unhealthy ones are always more enjoyable.

Philip Hoare lives and works in Southampton.

He is the author of *Serious Pleasures: The Life of Stephen Tennant* (1990), *Noel Coward: A Biography* (1995), *Wilde's Last Stand* (1997), *Spike Island* (2000), *England's Lost Eden* (2005) and *Leviathan or, The Whale* (2008).

He also wrote and presented *Arena: The Hunt for Moby-Dick* (BBC 2, 2008), and wrote and directed *Philip Hoare's Guide to Whales* (BBC 4, 2008)