

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.

www.readersarchive.com

Will Hodgkinson
6 November – 20 December, 2009

Selected Readings

Nico: Songs They Never Play on the Radio
James Young

A Confederacy of Dunces
John Kennedy Toole

The House on the Strand
Daphne Du Maurier

Oblomov
Ivan Goncharov

The Buddha of Suburbia
Hanif Kureishi

Tulsa
Larry Clark

Folk Roots, New Routes
LP, Shirley Collins and Davy Graham

Moyshe McStiff and The Tartan Lancers of The Sacred Heart
LP, COB

The Child Ballads Vol 1
collected by Peter Kennedy

Blanche
Film, Walerian Borowczyk

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**WILL
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IGNORING YOUR INFLUENCES AND GETTING ON WITH IT

Everything that you read, watch or listen to somehow soaks in and helps you find your own voice. But it's typically on a subconscious level. When you are writing a book there are all kinds of things that you are thinking of without realising it.

Whenever I'm trying to put a piece of writing of sustained length together there are influences that I'm not aware of while they're happening, but will get a sense of years down the line.

As such, books act to an extent as diaries. Once you finish a piece of work you don't tend to look at it much again, but recently I revisited my first book, *Guitar Man* (2006), for an Italian edition. *Guitar Man* is a novel-like true story about picking up a guitar for the first time at the age of 34, doing a gig six months later, and telling the story of the guitar with the help of the various well-known guitarists I cajoled into giving me lessons. Although I didn't realise during the writing of it, the book is really about the switch from single irresponsibility to family life. Our children were very young at the time and *Guitar Man* was, subconsciously, an attempt to reconcile responsibility with the selfish quest. It's taken me a while to realise that.

Early on in a writing career you tend to emulate the writers you admire. It never works, but the process can help you develop. I wrote my first (thankfully unpublished) first novel aged 25 after reading JD Salinger's *Franny And Zooey* and being profoundly moved by this story of a young woman that has a nervous breakdown

and the brother that guides her towards peace of mind. It's impossible to copy because it comes from Salinger's experience and mindset, which nobody else shares. My attempt to do so (a novel about a teenage boy that goes mad) was awful. It illustrated that conscious attempts to write not from your own self but from somebody else's are doomed to failure. That realisation is the point at which you set off on your own.

It's more useful to take the example of books that you have enjoyed, to allow them to inspire you to take off on your own journey. The two books that inspired me to attempt to write in the first place are *The Buddha Of Suburbia* by Hanif Kureishi and *A Confederacy Of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole.

I read *The Buddha Of Suburbia* in my late teens and was inspired by its simplicity and its sense of the everyday. I could never imagine writing a masterpiece to match the spiritual depth of Dostoyevsky or the social conscience of Zola, but a story about an Anglo-Indian kid from the suburbs coming up to London to discover punk and the bohemian theatre scene did not seem so far away from a world I already knew. There is nothing overblown about Hanif Kureishi's debut novel; you never feel that he's trying to be clever or overly ambitious. It's deceptively well written; you don't notice the skill and effort that has gone into it. It's the kind of book that the average reader could imagine himself or herself writing.

I first read *A Confederacy Of Dunces* at around the same time and loved it for different reasons. Firstly, it's just so incredibly funny. Secondly, it's a brilliant example of how you can take an obscure subject—overweight slob obsessed with medieval philosophy stumbles about New Orleans causing chaos in one disastrous job situation after another—and make an accessible work of fiction from it. And thirdly, it's an example of how you must never write a book with the approval of the world in mind.

Toole went through several drafts of *A Confederacy Of Dunces* with a

New York editor at Simon & Schuster before the publishers rejected it, concluding that it "isn't really about anything". A year later, in 1969, Toole killed himself. His mother took up the cause, finally getting *A Confederacy Of Dunces* published by a small New Orleans university press in 1980. The following year it won the Pulitzer Prize. It proves that nobody has the monopoly on what is worth reading. Writing for a living means a lifetime of rejection, criticism and disappointment punctuated by occasional triumph. Toole's story taught me that you have to ignore all that and carry on regardless.

You start getting known for a certain field and you carve out your own patch. Mine appears to be writing musical travelogues with a comic bent. For *Guitar Man*, I took off through the Deep South in search of the blues and the roots of the guitar, attempting to sell my soul to the devil at a Mississippi crossroads and getting a lesson from an 84-year-old ex-con who had just caught gonorrhoea along the way. For *Song Man*, I retreated to a remote Scottish island with my best friend Doyle to get our heads together and learn the mysterious craft of songwriting. In both cases it was the journey that created the material and I wasn't consciously looking to another writer for guidance.

By the time I got to *The Ballad Of Britain*, which is a travelogue through England, Scotland and Wales about making field recordings to capture the spirit of folk music, I wanted to look beyond my own experience. The real inspiration behind everything I write has been the people I meet, and with *The Ballad Of Britain* this was candid. The book is essentially about people that have some sort of active relationship with music, professionally or not. It's always going to be observations of other people that inspire you to write in the first place—which can lead to a lot of trouble if you're writing non-fiction narrative.

Since I got into reading in my teens (I was a late developer—I couldn't tie my own shoelaces until I was 12) I can't think of a time when I haven't had a

book on the go. Sometimes I read a book so great that I want to copy it, as happened recently with Daphne Du Maurier's *The House On The Strand*, but luckily this desire generally dies off after a week or so. But it all soaks in.

You have to love books to really want to write one. Otherwise it's just too much hard work.

Will Hodgkinson is a writer, journalist and television presenter. His books chart his own journeying with-in music; learning to be a guitarist in *Guitar Man* (2006), writing and recording a pop song in *Song Man* (2007). His most recent book, *The Ballad of Britain* (2009), documents his travels around Britain making field recordings of folk music.

His journalism includes a column in *The Guardian* as well as contributions to *Vogue*, *Mojo* and the *Telegraph* among others. *Songbook*, shown on Sky Arts is a series in which Hodgkinson interviews songwriters about their inspirations and the stories behind some of their most well known songs.