

The Joy of Books

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Confronted by an essay on the importance of books in my life, I tried to do the obvious research.

"How old was I when I learned to read, Mummy?" I asked my mother. "About four, I should think," my mother replied.

If that answer seems a little vague, it is right to point out that I am one of ten children. A new child was learning to read each year; why should my own effort stand out?

I tried another question. "What was my first book?" My mother could not remember. "I think Bettine read to you," she offered.

My earliest years were spent at our ancestral home in England. We had a nanny—my mother's old nanny. And then we had a governess, Bettine. The awful truth is I have no memory of anything I read or had read to me by my mother or Nanny or Bettine before I was six.

Then we took a ship to Africa and went to live on a farm called M'Bebi in Southern Rhodesia (today's Zimbabwe). There I distinctly remember reading a book called *Our Island Story*. The fact that "Our Island" was Great Britain thousands of miles away was irrelevant. We lived in a colonial warp at M'Bebi.

That year was 1948, and I can recall sitting on the grass outside the house with my brothers and sisters while our mother read us *The Story of France*, another book about the continent we had just left.

Time stood still on our African farm. The description of M'Bebi by the great novelist Evelyn Waugh — a friend of my parents who stayed with us in 1958—serves perfectly for any

time between 1948 and 1960. He wrote to Ian Fleming's widow, Ann:

"Children were everywhere, no semblance of a nursery or a nanny, the spectacle at meals gruesome, a party-line telephone ringing all day, dreadful food, an ever present tremendously boring ex-naval chaplain, broken aluminium cutlery, plastic crockery, ants in the beds In fact everything that normally makes Hell but Daphne's [my mother's] serene sanctity radiating supernatural peace. She is the most remarkable woman I know."

All more or less true, except I would dispute the plastic crockery. And why didn't Evelyn Waugh mention our books? I took him to our schoolroom myself and showed him the books there. He kept laughing, because he was amused by the way classics and books he dismissed as rubbish stood side-by-side.

I think that is how my reading tended to be. I would happily read cowboy books by Zane Grey or Clarence E. Mulford, and then switch to *The Glory That Was Greece* or *The Grandeur That Was Rome*. I was equally thrilled by the detective stories of Agatha Christie and by Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.

We had no television, no video cassette recorder, no compact disk, and so we read and read. I suppose we were children of the Empire. Rudyard Kipling and Rider Haggard were great favorites. I don't know if Edgar Rice Burroughs counts as an imperial author, but I read every single Tarzan book.

At my boarding school—a Jesuit school in Salisbury (today's Harare)—we had an excellent library. Other boys would tell me about adventure novelists like Hammond Innes or Neville Shute. I would try one of their books and, if I liked it, I would read every book the author wrote. Discovering a new author is undoubtedly one of the happiest of human experiences.

I hated school, and so I lost myself in books. I would wake early in the morning and lie under my mosquito net and read. When supposedly doing homework, I would cradle my head in my arms and read a library book hidden from the invigilating priest. At night I would race through my shower so as to lie in bed and read until the lights were turned off. Then in the dark I dreamed of the characters in my book.

As I got older I did read a few political books. Disraeli's *Sybil* and Trevor Huddleston's *Naught For Thy Comfort* taught me

something of poverty in nineteenth century England and suffering under contemporary apartheid. I learned of that strange far-away continent — America — from O'Henry's short stories and books like *Cheaper By the Dozen*.

In my teens I tried to read Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* but failed miserably, as I have done ever since. The books of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh were far more to my taste. I think I was over-influenced by *Brideshead Revisited* and blame it, at least in part, for my later years of idleness at Oxford.

P.G. Wodehouse was a source of constant amusement. I have profited from the advice of Jeeves and joined Bertie Wooster at the Drones Club. I have stayed at Blandings Castle and accompanied Lord Emsworth to see his prize pig. Unhappy are they who have missed the joys of Wodehouse.

Joy is a good word to apply to books. In *Surprised By Joy*, C.S. Lewis defined what he meant by "Joy" — "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction." Reading Norse mythology was a source of great Joy to Lewis in childhood.

In my own youth I experienced what Lewis described. As an eighteen year old, I lay on the supremely comfortable red sofa in the drawing room at M'Bebi reading *I, Anastasia*. The book was written by the woman who claimed to be the daughter of the last Tsar of Russia. Something about her tantalizing story gave me an exquisite feeling I now recognize as C.S. Lewis's "Joy."

I don't know if in the long run that book changed my life. Perhaps every book you read changes you slightly, adds to your experience and knowledge. But one particular book did change my life in a huge and dramatic way.

In 1960, I left M'Bebi for England to attend Oxford University. For some months before starting at University, I stayed with my Aunt Mia Woodruff in London. She told me a story which had my tongue hanging out with longing for the book concerned.

My aunt had a friend who had been brought up in Oregon under the name of Opal Whiteley. The child had loved nature

and animals and had kept a diary about life in the lumber camps where she grew up. She wrote on butcher's bags, scraps of paper, anything. The diary had been torn into thousands of pieces, which Opal as a young woman pieced together again.

In 1920, Opal's diary was published in America and was a literary sensation. The diary also was published in England, where Opal was received in British high society and spent the last sixty years of her life. Opal was convinced that she was not Opal Whiteley at all, but was Françoise de Bourbon Orléans, daughter of Prince Henri d'Orléans and a descendant of Louis Philippe, the last King of France.

My aunt had known "Françoise," as she called her, for many years. The strain of trying to prove her true origins had ended with "Françoise" being put in an institution. But my aunt—who is a no-nonsense woman—remained convinced that her story was true. That evening in London, Aunt Mia handed me a book, *Opal Whiteley: The Unsolved Mystery*, by E.S. Bradburne, which I fell on eagerly.

In trying to solve the riddle of Opal's origin, E.S. Bradburne pointed to extraordinary features of the diary, which was littered with French words and historical allusions. Opal referred to herself as "Petite Françoise" and recited remarkable anagrams that she had learned from her "Angel Father," her true father, whom she came to believe was the explorer, Prince Henri d'Orléans.

"When we were come to the bridge, we made a stop and I did sing to the rivi re a song. I sang it Le chant de Seine, de Havre, et Essonne et Nonette et Roullon et Iton et Darnetal et Ourcq et Rille et Loing et Eure et Audelle et Nonette et Sarc. I sang it as Angel Father did teach me to"

The first letters of these apparently random words spell "Henri d'Orléans."

Why should a child of an Oregon lumber family include many such rhymes in her diary? On publication, scoffers said the diary must be a forgery. E.S. Bradburne in her book makes a powerful case that Opal couldn't have forged the diary. Amongst the evidence for its authenticity, the letters in childish script on the original pieces of paper were too close together for any insertion.

With this Anastasia-type story coursing through my veins, I read Opal's diary reprinted in Bradburne's book. It was written in a most peculiar, child's language—my Aunt Mia believed the little girl was translating the French syntax into English. For example, Opal wrote of potatoes:

"And I did have meditations about what things the eyes of potatoes do see there in the ground. I have thinks they do have seeing of black velvet moles and large earthworms that do get short in a quick way. And potato flowers above the ground do see the doings of the field—and maybe they do look away and see the willows that grow by the singing creek. . . . Being a potato must be interest—specially the having so many eyes."

I quickly read the whole diary and was much moved. For ages I thought no more about it.

Twenty-seven years later, in 1987, I shared a house with my Aunt Mia near Oxford. One morning she announced that some Americans were coming to see her. Robert Nassif was a composer of music who had fallen in love with Opal's diary and, like Aunt Mia, firmly believed it authentic. He had written a musical version of the diary and wanted to learn more about Opal from my aunt. He was bringing his mother and sister with him. Aunt Mia asked me to let them in, and did *not* want me smoking my disgusting cigars in the drawing room.

Towards lunch time the bell rang, and I went to the door. A small, dark young American woman stood there. She was Robert Nassif's sister, Patricia, a clinical law professor at the University of Iowa. Seven months later we were married in her hometown of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I have spent much of my time in Iowa ever since.

Opal's diary had brought me a wife and a new life. But the literary story of Opal in our lives was not done. Patricia had told me that Opal as a teenager had written a nature book called *The Fairyland Around Us*. Opal had difficulty in publishing it, and in the end about a hundred copies had been privately printed, which the author herself had illustrated. She had sent the book to some eminent statesmen and scientists in Europe, hoping to arouse interest.

Patricia explained that her brother Robert would give anything for a copy of *The Fairyland Around Us*. For years he had

been searching for it. He had employed second-hand book specialists, who had scoured America for the book—but without success.

Shortly after our marriage, I decided to read the original American edition of Opal's diary. The preface written by Ellery Sedgwick, editor of "The Atlantic Monthly," referred to Opal's correspondence from the distinguished men to whom she had sent *The Fairyland Around Us*: "Many of these letters . . . are messages of thanks for copies of that first book of Opal's . . . bearing signatures to delight the eyes of collectors of autographs: M. Clemenceau, M. Poincaré, Lord Rayleigh . . ."

I nearly leapt out of my chair. The Lord Rayleigh mentioned was my mother's grandfather, the winner of a Nobel Prize for physics. He had lived at Terling Place, the Rayleigh family seat in the English county of Essex, where my mother had been brought up. I told my wife that *The Fairyland Around Us* must still be at Terling Place. My wife looked doubtful.

A few months later, when we were in England, we stayed at Terling Place with my cousin John, the present Lord Rayleigh. I told him of Robert's great desire for the book. He was generosity itself: if I could find the book in the huge library, of course Robert must have it.

Next morning I rose early. For hours I searched in the library without success. Almost in despair, I picked up a large, green, suede-covered book that had no title on the spine. It was *The Fairyland Around Us*, and a letter written by Opal to my great-grandfather in 1918 fell from its pages.

I felt a stab inside me. I know what C.S. Lewis would have called that feeling. He would have called it Joy.