

“Read a bit, It will be good for you”.

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GRAMMATICAL NOTE

“Read a bit, It will be good for you”. This sentence breaks two rules of English grammar. The first is that the capitalised “It” should properly follow a full stop, not a comma. The second is that the full stop should sit inside the speech marks, not outside them. Sorry to be a grammar Nazi but I did go to a bloody grammar school.

Read a bit, it will be good for you. I'm looking at my office right now. There is a stack of books as tall as a large dog about Vladimir Putin, because I'm doing something about the little bouncer you should always be afraid of in a Moscow nightclub.

There's another stack of books, the size of a poodle, which I've written. My first book is on top of the stack. It's called “*The Life and Evil Times of Nicolae Ceausescu*”, and it's about how I ended up reporting on the Romanian revolution in 1989 by accident.

The title is a bit naff. On reflection, I should have called it “*Christmas with the Ceausescus*”. They were shot. There's four reference books, a book of quotations, a Roget's Thesaurus, my ancient copy of Pears' Encyclopaedia from way back when, another book of quotations, then my first novel, *Elephant Moon*, about the war in Burma, and below that, *Cold*, my thriller about Putin's Russia, and beneath that my best-selling non-fiction book, *Church of Fear* about Scientology, the church that likes to wear dark glasses and beneath that “*Wayne Rooney: Boots of Gold*”, then *Church of Fear*, translated into Japanese. Pretentious, moi? Jamais.

And also there's a dog versus looking at me and saying, “What the hell are you doing?” There's books, books, books everywhere. I live in a house with three stories. On the first and second stories behind the staircase, one whole wall is covered in books. So I have probably got 2,500 books here. I've got more in my garage, and I've got more somewhere else.

Cliches may not be original, but they always have some truth to them. Books are the best wallpaper, though to be honest I actually don't like wallpaper. I'm forever fucking mystified by everything that goes wrong in the world, and I don't understand

it. But the more books you read, the better chance you've got. The world is less fucking bewildering. And I mean that with a passion.

My favourite books to read are novels. And within novels my favourites are thrillers, because there's something wonderfully exciting about not knowing where the story is going but having to turn the page. When you write a thriller, the same thing happens. My all-time favourite book is *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler. I read it when I'm scared or worried. I like to reread it because it reminds me of human courage and human dignity in the face of evil and power and money. The writing is superb, taut, precise, like the inside of beautifully crafted watch. It's been made into a movie with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. There are some great lines in it: "You know how to whistle don't you? Just put your lips together and blow." It's perhaps the best novel about blackmail ever written, set in LA where gambling and gangsters and murder and sex kompromat blackmail ride along with great wealth and moral depravity.

My top five favourite books? So, *The Big Sleep*, then *Darkness at Noon* by Arthur Koestler, which is a fantastic story about a world gone mad, about devotion to a mass murdering psychotic called Joseph Stalin. And obviously, at the same time another part of the world, Germany, had gone mad and produced Hitler. My favourite book about Nazi Germany is *All alone in Berlin* by Hans Faluda, which is a great novel. Then I love *1984* and *Animal Farm*. But I think my favourite piece of writing by George Orwell is his essay *On Shooting An Elephant*. My novel *Elephant Moon* is set in Burma and I love that short story. Fourth favourite novel would probably be *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and fifth, because I read it to my kids, would be *Going Solo* by Roald Dahl. It's the story of Dahl learning to become a pilot, and then flying hurricanes against the Luftwaffe, him crashing and being picked up. He writes so beautifully, so funny. But he had a dark streak. He was horribly anti-semitic. His family recently apologised for Dahl's anti-semitism and good on them.

Nonfiction is often a bit boring. One of the great joys of going to university was the realisation that an awful lot of academic life is boring and pretentious and dull. But every now and then you came across people who really thought in an interesting way and I can remember their minds rang like a bell. So, yes, I went to university and

yes, I picked up a degree in drinking. And I can remember doing a bit of philosophy in my first term. My lovely philosophy professor was a guy called Wolfgang von Leyden. Back in 1938 he was a German Jew teaching at the University of Vienna and he was kicked out and by the Nazis. He came back in 45 and said, "As I was saying, before, I was suddenly interrupted." I loved the cast of his mind.

I hoard books in a way that I don't really hoard much else. I'm not that interested in possessions. But I want to get a bigger house or another house because I've got too many books. I really don't want to throw them away. But the thing about books is that they are beautiful. And they're like people, but you can't keep people locked up in your home, but you can keep a book. For me, a really good book is a lovely character. I've got two Kindles, but I never charge them, and I don't really use them. And there's a reason for that, in that a good book has its own smell. I love reading in the bath. And that joy you get from doing that, from the crumpled pages if you get the book a bit wet, that, for me, is like laughter lines in the face of a much-loved friend.

I love from the smell and flavour of a book. It's beautiful, beautiful. And there's another thing too. Armed with books, you can take on the world. With this great wall of books that I've got, I am defended, not just me but my family and my friends. And pretty much everything I believe in is defended by books. I'm thinking about the defence of liberty, of our democracy, of our way of life, of free speech. And for me, I think my favourite book on that is *On Liberty* by John Stuart Mill. The thing is the elegance of the sentences are not accidental. He put an incredible amount of thought into thinking cleanly, clearly. And you can't do that if you think in a fuzzy or foolish way, your mind doesn't ring like a bell. Your book doesn't shine.

I'm not a fan of Chomsky because I find him pretty fucking unreadable. It's too dense. It's too confusing. But people who write well, they put time and effort into it. George Orwell is a great case. So to develop the thought, books help you deal with and defend yourself against the ferocity of stupidity, which is, and has always been with us, but is with us now, exacerbated and accelerated like petrol on the flames by social media. So what's incredible and beautiful about books is that they are a defensive wall, around what I like to think of as civilization.

You may say that's a pretty, pretty wild claim. But nevertheless, I've got some books on philosophy, I've kind of knocked around with some of the early Stoics and Cynics. Diogenes the Cynic lived in a barrel. And when Alexander the Great, the ruler of the known world, came to see him, Diogenes looked up and he said, "Get out of my light." I love that story. And I love Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*.

Books stand on the shoulders of other books that have gone before. I'm looking at my own book about Scientology, *The Church of Fear*. That rests on a great book by Professor Robert Lifton, an American military psychiatrist who wrote a book "*Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of 'Brainwashing' in China*." The thriller writer Richard Condon read that and wrote "*The Manchurian Candidate*" about a returning American soldier from the Korean war who had been brainwashed who has a good chance of becoming President of the United States. That was made into a film twice and then an Israeli TV series, with the Chinese Commies being replaced by Hizbollah, and then that was reversioned into the US TV series *Homeland* which just goes to show there are only so many plots going around in Hollywood.

By the way, you don't have to agree with me that books are the only possessions worth having. But if you disagree with me, watch out. The people who thought burning books was a good idea ended up surrounded by rubble in 1945.

Ends

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