

Zadie Smith: By the Book NOV. 17, 2016

The author, most recently, of [“Swing Time”](#) says the best gift book she ever received was from her dying father, who “gave me his copy of ‘Ulysses,’ along with the confession he had never read it.”

What books are on your night stand now?

I’m on a reading jag after a long period of only writing, so there’s a towering “to read” pile: “Sudden Death,” by Álvaro Enrigue; “Using Life,” a novel by the imprisoned Egyptian Ahmed Naje; “Homegoing,” by Yaa Gyasi; “Heroes of the Frontier,” by Dave Eggers; “The Underground Railroad,” by Colson Whitehead; “Diary of the Fall,” by Michel Laub; “The Good Immigrant,” edited by Nikesh Shukla; “Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty,” by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson; “Birth of a Bridge,” by Maylis de Kerangal; “Known and Strange Things,” by Teju Cole; “The Little Communist Who Never Smiled,” by Lola Lafon; “The Fire This Time,” edited by Jesmyn Ward; “At the Existentialist Café,” by Sarah Bakewell; “Time Reborn,” by Lee Smolin; “Moonglow,” by Michael Chabon; and let’s say the last four or five novels by Mariás, several by Krasznahorkai, and — as always — unfinished Proust. I much prefer reading to writing: I can’t wait.

What’s the last great book you read?

I’ve been unusually lucky recently; I’ve read quite a few. Obviously the final volume of Ferrante, then Ottessa Moshfegh’s razor-sharp short stories “Homesick for Another World,” and Alexandra Kleeman’s stunning “You Too Can Have a Body Like Mine.” I tore through two volumes of “The Arab of the Future,” by Riad Sattouf — it’s the most enjoyable graphic novel I’ve read in a while. I was moved, agitated and inspired by Kathleen Collins’s rediscovered “Whatever Happened to Interracial Love”; Hisham Matar’s “The Return”; an early manuscript of Hari Kunzru’s “White Tears”; and Jonathan Safran Foer’s “Here I Am.” I’ve been meaning to read Dana Spiotta for years, and I’m so glad I finally did: “Innocents and Others” is terrific. John Berger’s “Portraits” is among the greatest books on art I’ve ever read. I had a sort of spiritual experience with it. No, let’s not be coy — I did! It was totally spiritual! But if I have to choose only one, then it’s “Lincoln in the Bardo,” by George Saunders. A masterpiece.

Tell us about your favorite overlooked or underheralded writer.

A Jamaican writer called Andrew Salkey, who wrote a Y.A. novel called “Hurricane” before Y.A. was a term. I remember it as the book that made me want to write. He was the most wonderful writer for children. I just found what looks to be a sequel, “Earthquake,” on an old-books stall on West Third, and I intend to read it to my kids. He died in 1995.

What do you read when you’re working on a book?

I read a lot of essays and articles from journals. It stops me from feeling stupid. Writing novels can make you very stupid — just writing about something that doesn’t exist for three or four years.

What moves you most in a literary work?

Ingenuity, honesty, perversity, bravery and — I must admit — natural talent. I feel the same wonder at a brilliant debut as I do watching Simone Biles doing her back flips.

What’s the last book that made you laugh?

I think it may have been Ayelet Waldman's "A Really Good Day" in manuscript. It's a nonfiction book about combating depression by way of a daily micro-dose of LSD, and it's Ayelet, so you can imagine.

The last book that made you cry?

"Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," by Harriet Jacobs.

The last book that made you furious?

"Private Island: Why Britain Now Belongs to Someone Else," by James Meek.

What books do you most like to assign to your writing students? And what was your favorite assigned book as a student?

I like the existential conversation that happens around Kafka, and I used to enjoy assigning Dennis Cooper's "My Loose Thread" because it provoked such strong feelings, of love, of revulsion. I enjoy teaching early Baldwin: I think students appreciate meeting a master at a moment when his style is still something of a hot mess. Also, Baldwin was so brave so young — it's inspiring, to me as much as to my students. But if I want a purely pleasurable morning where I don't need to do too much, then it'll be "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie," by Muriel Spark, or "An Experiment in Love," by Hilary Mantel. Not a lot of teaching happens on those occasions. It's just me sighing with happiness.

When I was a student I was assigned "Mythologies" and "A Lover's Discourse," by Roland Barthes, and felt at once that something momentous had happened to me, that I had met a writer who had changed my course in life somehow; and looking back now, I think he did.

How do you like to read? Paper or electronic? One book at a time or simultaneously? Morning or night?

Any medium and in any order. But morning reading — like morning newspapers, morning sex, morning lie-ins and morning running — is the luxury of childless people.

How do you organize your books?

First I push aside the many pairs of kids' sunglasses, random plastic crap, half-drunk cups of tea, several sets of keys belonging to previous residences, large tins of foreign coins — before carefully wedging whatever book has just arrived into the pile of books that arrived at some point previously.

What book might people be surprised to find on your shelves?

I don't think I am a very surprising person. Perhaps the fashion books? Though I don't think it's much of a secret that I like a nice dress.

What's the best book you've ever received as a gift?

As he was dying, my father gave me his copy of "Ulysses," along with the confession he had never read it, despite the date of purchase, Jan. 7, 1953, which I found written in the inner leaf alongside his name. Maybe I will pass on "The Man Without Qualities" or "Moby-Dick" to my children in the same confessional spirit.

Who is your favorite fictional hero or heroine? Your favorite antihero or villain?

All from childhood, if I'm honest. I don't read fiction in that way now. So probably Jane Eyre and Ebenezer Scrooge.

What kind of reader were you as a child? Which childhood books and authors stick with you most?

I think I was a kind of addict. I can remember reading a book called "Dibs in Search of Self," a scholarly book about autism, when I was about 9, just because my mother owned it and it was there. If it was words on paper and it was in the apartment, then I read it. But the writers that meant most to me: Alice Walker, Roald Dahl, Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Noel Streatfeild, Andrew Salkey, L. Maud Montgomery, Louisa May Alcott. Toni Morrison because of "The Black Book," which she edited — and I read, at a very delicate age, 9 or 10. But C. S. Lewis above all.

If you could require the president to read one book, what would it be?

He's probably already read it, but "Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City," by Matthew Desmond.

You're organizing a literary dinner party. Which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite?

You can never be sure of the long dead, or how they might feel about black lady writers, so I think I'll just go for living friends: Nikita Lalwani, Tessa Hadley, Darryl Pinckney. In my view that is nowhere near enough people for a literary dinner party, but on the other hand it's a very solid beginning.

If you could befriend any author, dead or alive, who would it be?

Zora Neale Hurston. Our thing would be striding into literary parties looking severe while wearing very fine hats, followed by getting drunk, followed by getting food in Chinatown at 2 in the morning.

Disappointing, overrated, just not good: What book did you feel you were supposed to like, and didn't? Do you remember the last book you put down without finishing?

During a period of sadness I read "Darkness Visible," by William Styron, and I have to say it didn't help in the slightest. I think I prefer Ayelet's suggestion. I also can't get along with Turgenev, though I love Russians, or Doris Lessing, though I am a feminist. And I hate every single last one of those Beats, both in poetry and prose.

Whom would you want to write your life story?

Dead: Lytton Strachey. Living: Larissa MacFarquhar.

What do you want to read next?

Some poetry. I've badly neglected poetry these past few years. My husband, Nick Laird, and the Scottish poet Don Paterson have been working on a giant anthology, "The Zoo of the New," and for a couple of years now I've been listening to the two of them debating over Skype about what's going in it and what's not. I'm very curious to see what made the final cut.

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