

Confessions of a Literary Snob

By Mary Sauve

They say print is dead. I disagree. Look at all the books being published today. Literally everyone has a story, and everyone seems to be telling it. Literally. But just because in both reading and writing there may be something for everyone, that doesn't mean your own reading realm need be a democracy.

Mine developed into a strict dictatorship sometime into my 40s. I'm not saying it isn't important to read widely, especially when you're young. This is the key to developing a repertoire and your own taste. After all, as your mother probably said, if you've never tried broccoli, how do you know you don't like it? Same for tiramisu – you may love it, but until you've tried it. So yes. Read. Read a lot. Read variety. Read quantity. Give authors a chance to seduce you into their world-making. But after a while the pick up lines get stale, and if the first few pages don't grab you, let go of the obligation to finish the book. Yes, this goes against the old adage of finishing everything you start. But I'd like to amend that rule by simply stating that "ain't nobody got time for that". Life is too short to spend it reading books that do not inspire, provoke, or awe. It just is.

How to choose. Simple. I started by reviewing all my favourite books of all time, making a list of those authors, and then reading another and another by those same authors. Seems limiting to you? Maybe. But I knew my time would be well spent. And, if I didn't like that book? I tried another. It's true you may not love all the books of a favourite author, but at least you're starting from a qualitative guarantee of your own history. After that I went with people's whose taste I trust implicitly. This is from years of book talks and sharing, and people who love the same style of writing that I do. Conversations about real things. Tangible things. Books. That lead to conversations about intangible things. Life. Happiness. Loss. Compassion. Humanity. If you're really stuck. Start with the list of Nobel prize winners for Literature. This prize recognizes a body of work. A career writer. A pattern of talent that is internationally recognized. If you're my brother go for the winners of the Man Booker prize. The Pulitzer is not reliable enough for me. Read back to the top. I am a snob.

But my point is: we all should be literary snobs, eventually. We should care what we spend our time on and who with (both physically and imaginatively). Whether the futile romantic desperation of Gatsby, the independence, intellect, and woe of Isabelle Archer, the deep and lonely grief that made the mother in *The Lovely Bones* leave her family, the meditation on history, both global and personal, in Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*. These are stories worth spending time with to me. And we all have our own list of formative and shaping texts. Heck, Oprah even asks celebrities to list the books that made a difference to them. Why?

Because this is how we think about the time we spend reading and what it says about us. Who we've become because of those shared stories. There's nothing more personal than identity, and its making. This is why I say dictatorship. You decide what goes in and why. You decide how it shapes you. You decide to quit or keep going. Even though democracy may be about choice, I still have the right make mine. So, call me a snob if you like. I do. Reading may for everyone, but everyone's taste in books is not for me. And it shouldn't be for you either.