



Your reading mind: borderless vs self-determined
Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/UCLA/MPS/DLR/IDA

Confessions of a Literary Snob

How I learned to rule my reading universe

By Mary Sauvé

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 when I grew disenchanted with the book club selections of other members in our group. I just didn't like the books. Over time, I stopped reading them, and quit the club. Most people argue that a book club is a great way to be exposed to texts you might not normally pick for yourself. To a certain extent this is true. Maybe more in the beginning, as you get to know people and their tastes. But after a while it wears thin, and resentment starts to build.

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 not until you've tried it. So yes. Read. Read a lot. Read variety. Read quantity. Dip into uncharted territory. Give authors a chance to seduce you into a world of their making.

But after a while when the pick-up lines get stale, and the first few pages don't grab you, feel free to 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". I mean India seems like a great place to go, but I can't stand the heat. So, it's not on my bucket list. Life is too short to spend it reading books that do not inspire, provoke, or awe. It just is. Eventually it's time to define the boundaries of your own literary landscape. And the terrain can be as vast, hilly, varied, or stable as you choose.

How to start? Simple. I began 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. For me I'm talking Ian McEwan, Italo Calvino, Jane Austen. Seem 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, or even all the cities in a favourite country, but at least you're starting from a qualitative guarantee of your own history.

After that I went with people 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. This is especially true of my little brother who alternates between fiction and non, and always has something to say about what he's reading, the state of the world, and our place in it. Even if I don't end up reading the same books, I come away inspired to read.

If you're really stuck, start with the list of Nobel prize winners for Literature. For me it's Jose Saramago, Nadine Gordimer, Alice Munro, Kazuo Ishiguro. This prize recognizes a body of work. A career writer. An expansive topography of text. A pattern of talent that is internationally recognized. If you're my brother go for the winners of the Man Booker prize. That's how he turned me onto Scottish author James Kelman. The Pulitzer is not reliable enough for me. Read back to the top. I am a snob.

And this is the point. We should each care what we spend our time on and with whom (both physically and imaginatively). 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, how those travelled trails have left landmarks on our minds.

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. Notice I didn't say stop reading. You must read. It's fuel for the soul, gas for our humanity. But, just because democracy may be about choice, I still have the right to make my own. So, call me a snob if you like. I do.

Reading may be for everyone, but everyone's taste in books is not for me. And it shouldn't be for you either. So, what do you have to lose? Besides the shackles of poor prose and the chains of time misspent. Nothing. Start re-mapping the borders of your kingdom today and reign like a boss (or a snob) over your reading life.

Your Reading Life: O Magazine asked teachers nationwide to reflect on this topic and to respond, and in this special feature, here is one reply. Mary Sauvé is a Language Arts teacher in Quebec, Canada with over 20 years teaching experience, and an avid reader.