
DAISY BUCHANAN

Burn Before Reading

the
pound
project.

the pound project.

small change, one story at a time.

The Pound Project is an independent publisher based in the UK. Established in Birmingham by writer JP Watson, the company campaigns to put the value of writing first. This is the 16th title in the movement. More information about the company's ethos, products and services can be found at www.poundproject.co.uk.

Daisy Buchanan is a writer, and a reader. She hosts the You're Booked podcast and lives by the seaside with her husband, the author Dale Shaw.

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Foreword by Isy Suttie

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Daisy Buchanan: "Huge thanks to my friend Emma Gannon, whose work I admire so much, and who set this book in motion. Thank you to Isy Suttie, for your wonderful introduction and for all of your wonderful work. Special thanks to Guy Herbert at Marjacq for your technical advice. Thanks to my husband 'Producer' Dale for *everything* – not least for lending me that biography of Tallulah Bankhead. Most of all, thank you JP – for all of the other brilliant, beautiful Pound Project books and for bringing your passion, talent and enthusiasm to this one. I think we have made something very special, and I'm very proud of us."

For readers

FOREWORD

I can't remember a time when I didn't know Daisy. Much like ice cream, and blankets, it just feels like she's always been a necessary, joyful part of my life. But I think we first met when she asked me, over Twitter, to appear on her brilliant podcast, *You're Booked*, in which she explores the reading habits of her guest authors. There never was more of a podcast which spills over with joy and curiosity for its subject matter. (Which also, incidentally, is one of the best titles ever. 'To book' should be an active verb to do with reading – when you're so immersed in a book that you feel as though you're living the story, you are 'booked'.)

Daisy's writing is explosively funny, excitingly relatable, and so generous – the first words are an invitation, and you have no option but to say yes. In *Insatiable*, she brings humour and vulnerability to sexual situations most of us, I daresay, have never

encountered, drawing us in by making it all so relatable, by creating a heroine we fall in love with from the off due to her vulnerability. In *Careering*, which touches on some of the themes explored in this essay, it's her characters' vulnerability again which grabs our emotions and holds them in the balance.

In person, Daisy is one of the warmest humans. We meet for long, boozy lunches in restaurants that tend to contain lots of dark wood and velvet, which helps us to lose track of time as we waltz from subject to subject. She truly listens, and she tells, too. She's the kind of person you could go for a walk along a freezing beach with and not notice the cold.

Daisy brims with passion for books in a wonderful, childlike way. She's helped me to reignite a love of reading in myself, a true love of reading, the love which she writes about in her essay. Not reading to achieve, reading for the love of it. Easier said than done – it's harder to be still and open than to push forwards. She talks about parents and caregivers wanting to throw this book at her head when she

mentions her habit of reading for half an hour in bed before she starts the day. But I, as a mother of a toddler and a seven-year old (who walked to school with her head in a Jacqueline Wilson book today whilst I stopped her from banging into lampposts), don't begrudge Daisy this half hour. I have my own version of it – I say I'm going to put clothes away, scoot upstairs, dive under the bedcovers and open my book. Sometimes it's only for three or four minutes before I am discovered, but it's like I've snorkelled, seen the coral, and come back up.

Many years ago, I was travelling on a train from Hertfordshire to London reading one of the Fifty Shades books. I was, I'm sorry to say, embarrassed about the fact I was reading it, and had considered decorating the cover with wrapping paper, or even better, slotting it into a copy of War and Peace. I'd had to sneak to the supermarket at lunchtime to buy the next instalment, even though I had it at home, as I couldn't wait to find out what had happened. A woman in her 50s came and sat opposite me

in the carriage, and I noticed she was reading the same Fifty Shades book. We had an animated conversation the whole way back, gabbling about the characters and what we thought would happen and how we just had to know. At the end, she said, 'It's the first book I've read since school.'

Daisy embraces books, *all* books, because they take us out of our lives into another's, even through a small connection we make with the characters. I detest snobbery around books and so does Daisy. As she explains so beautifully in her essay, the characters may be nothing like us, but will ignite our empathy, and make us grow as humans. Reading, or rather, *book-ing*, saved Daisy from burnout. This essay may well bring back childhood memories of when books were your salvation, your best friend in your pocket, and it will gently allow you to let that happen once again, no matter your age. Sinking into a book, rather than plunging in, is a superpower.

Isy Suttie

October, 2022

BURN BEFORE READING

A story of burnout – and the books that saved my life

INTRODUCTION

Almost everything will work again if you unplug it for a few minutes, including you.

- Anne Lamott

I'm not sure that I know anyone who is any good at relaxing.

This is not an original observation; we have all become increasingly dependent on screens, tech and time saving devices that do not save us any time.

Anecdotally, everyone I know is always exhausted. Everyone I know checks their emails on holiday. And everyone I know believes two conflicting things: that this is a problem, and *more* is the solution. More exercise. More work. More money. To do, and do, and do until we have done. Oh, to have done! 'Life? Completed it, mate.' One of my favourite comedians, James Acaster, makes a joke about life being an endless, relentless series of jobs. It's only when we're so tired that we're in bed, about to sleep, that

we can confidently call out ‘NO MORE JOBS’. And the ultimate state of ‘no more jobs’ is death.

Who are we when we are not doing? Who might we become if we stop grafting, gaining, gathering, pushing and proving ourselves? What if we die?

Before 2020, I relied on a limited repertoire of relaxation tools. Back then, burnout was a soft, numbing mist, rapidly descending. It was on the very brink of turning into a thick fog. Relaxing sincerely and entirely required effort I wasn’t prepared to spend – that energy was reserved for progress, and the pursuit of success. I gravitated towards the more ‘efficient’ methods, the ones that brought instant oblivion.

I used alcohol, especially white wine. (Liking wine, I told myself, counts as a hobby *and* a social life.) I used food, because I was allowed to relax while doing something that was essential for my physical survival. Although I’m not sure anyone has set off for a long journey into the wilderness with a hamper filled with Domino’s stuffed crust pizza

and giant white chocolate chip cookies. I used clothes shopping – something that was easy to justify because clothes are also essential! Clothes keep us warm and they protect us from the elements. And if you're addicted to buying discounted sequined occasion-wear, as I was, they're just the thing if you decide to start a new life as an entertainer on a cruise ship. I was also locked in the usual cycle of clicking and scrolling and checking, which was an addiction, albeit not a relaxing one. Email-Twitter-Email-Instagram-Twitter-Email, went the unbreakable loop. (I'd stopped looking at Facebook though, which I used as proof that I was just *fine*.)

These methods were my Power Down button. When I felt so drained, overwhelmed and defeated that I couldn't cope, these things let me switch off, instantly and totally. Like my poor, overheated laptop, I knew I wasn't ever shutting down *properly*. I wasn't ever completely rested, charged and running efficiently. 'But this is temporary,' I'd say to my friends, over white wine, as we waited for the

pizza to arrive. 'We just need to get to the end of the month. We just need to get to the end of the project.' What if the project was life itself?

In 2019, for the first time, burnout was recognised by the World Health Organisation as an 'occupational phenomenon'.

Burnout is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion. It can occur when you experience long-term stress in your job, or when you have worked in a physically or emotionally draining role for a long time.

Common signs of burnout:

Feeling tired or drained most of the time.

Feeling helpless, trapped and/or defeated

Feeling detached/alone in the world

Feeling overwhelmed

- [mentalhealth-uk.org](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org)

The mist was thickening. The fog was rolling in. Something was wrong, but I couldn't call it burnout.

I wasn't busy enough, and I wasn't successful enough. I was beginning to break the wine/pizza/clothes cycle, and struggling to find stillness, desperate to find a replacement addiction. The top contender was more work.

At the beginning of 2020, I resolved that I was going to have my greatest year yet. I was going to do the most, and be the best, and try my hardest. Nothing was going to hold me back.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA.

In the Spring of 2020, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the world went into lockdown. Our futures became uncertain. Some of us felt lonely. Some of us felt our closest relationships becoming strained. We were told to work from home. We felt like we were living at work.

Burnout was universal. I didn't know anyone who didn't meet the official definition – everyone was tired, drained, helpless, trapped and overwhelmed. And we had nothing to distract ourselves from our feelings. In the context of lockdown, my Power Down

buttons could not be justified or explained. They were exposed for what they were. In moderation, drinking wine, eating pizza, scrolling through Twitter and buying party dresses were all fine. But I was abusing them. The quantity in which I craved them stripped them of any relaxing quality. In order to survive, and protect my mental health, I urgently needed an alternative.

And so, in lockdown, I learned to read.

Reading became my cure, my salvation, my route to 'wellness'. Admittedly, I'd always hoped it would be something sexier, more glamorous – green juice, pilates, ayahuasca. But I had always been a reader.

When I was a very young child, I was violently bullied and abused at school, to the point when I had moments when I wasn't sure I could bear to be alive any more. Stories gave me something to hope for. They were a rich source of comfort and joy. No matter how bad things got, I could always find something to read. Another world to take refuge in, when mine no longer felt safe. I trusted books.

As an adult, I knew stories were going to be part of my dream job. I started working for Bliss magazine and launched their books page. I became an author, writing memoirs and eventually novels. In 2018 I created a podcast, *You're Booked*, where I interviewed legendary authors about the books on their shelves, and the stories that shaped them and their work.

It was thrilling, and surreal, to chat to Tracy Chevalier while peering at her office pinboard, packed with postcard images of a variety of Vermeers. To stand in David Nicholls' kitchen, comparing the different versions of F Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* felt like a dream come true, albeit a rather strange dream with more pots and pans than are typically featured in a fantasy landscape.

However, I had a problem.

I felt guilty about this, but the more I read for work, the harder I found it to read for fun. The more I read, the taller my pile grew. I read to get to the finish line. I read to get to the next book. I read as

though I was afraid of getting fired from reading. I had become estranged from the point of the podcast, and the point of books themselves; pleasure, joy, relaxation, and growth. *Learning. Being challenged.* I had stopped getting lost in stories; instead, I'd grip the book in my hands and count down the moments until I could get my phone out again and send an email about the work I was doing as a result of the book I was reading.

And then, during a dark and difficult hour, I felt the faintest flicker of magic.

As I said, I'd reached a point where I was buried by the books, and any reading recommendation felt like an admonishment, proof of the fact I hadn't read everything yet, and I was falling far behind. So when people told me I'd love Elizabeth Jane Howard's saga, *The Cazalet Chronicles*, I'd smile tightly, and sometimes even pretend to have read them already. I would not say, 'No way! I have a giant pile of proofs I have been sent. I need to read every single book that's coming out next year, I shall not trouble myself

with a book that came out 30 years ago. What's the point? Who will that impress?'

Eventually, I caved.

I don't know what impulse led me to order the complete set of Cazalet novels, but I spent the spring of 2020 reading all five, back-to-back, addicted. I hadn't read like that since I was a child.

But it didn't make me numb. I wasn't seeking a hit. When I was reading, I was simply existing, with myself, but not thinking of myself. Paying attention. This was how I needed to read. To feel good. The muscles were all there. It was simply a matter of practise. I had to stop reading as though it was my job and read as though my 'one wild and precious life' depended on it, *because it did*.

Burn Before Reading isn't a set of instructions. It isn't a reading list filled with set texts – although it will feature many of the books I love the most, and the stories that have brought me healing and joy. It isn't a series of essays about being 'literary' and I will not be trying to impress you with my

intellectual prowess. (I don't have enough intellectual prowess to impress anyone.)

This is an invitation. I am going to ask you to consider how you read before you worry about what you read. I would like you to ask yourself, honestly and gently, how you're feeling, and how a book might help. Climb on your own lap and consider the story you would most like to tell yourself. Do you need to feel held? Do you need to laugh?

Perhaps you have been to a party where someone with a very loud voice has held forth on a recent literary prize shortlist. Maybe you find yourself reading book reviews, not books, and your head is filled with someone else's words, describing someone else's words, and making you feel estranged from all the words in the world. Possibly you have come to grief in a bookshop, circling the shelves and tables, your wallet staying in your pocket as you worry about what you choose and whether it will be clever enough, or cool enough.

As an author, an occasional broadsheet critic and

the BBC News guest presenter of the 2019 Booker Prize, I say: Fuck. That. Noise.

My hope is that after reading this, you will read for yourself. You will start to read in a way that fills your heart and blows your mind. You will reach for books instinctively, and they will help you to navigate joy and pain, to love more deeply and to laugh harder, for longer. You will become ‘a confident reader’ – and by that, I mean a person who is able to go to a dinner party and tell the other guests, without embarrassment, that you are having a wonderful time reading *Sweet Valley High* or *The Da Vinci Code* or *Spot the Dog*.

Burnout isolates us. It makes us feel as though we’re unable to cope. It renders us unable to ask for help. Burnout drove me further into my addictions – habits and strategies that made me so numb that I could not feel the ways in which they were hurting me. In his TED talk, Johann Hari posits that the opposite of addiction is connection. Reading cured me of burnout because it’s the activity that makes

me feel connected. I want that feeling of connection for us all.

Books to stoke the fire

The Kindness Method - Shahroo Izadi

If burnout feels barren and dry, this is the fall of rain that will help us bloom again.

The Unexpected Joy Of Being Sober - Catherine Grey

This hope filled memoir is a call to kindness.

Love, Nina - Nina Stibbe

A joyous celebration of the domestic, the literary and the absurd.

Where Hope Comes From - Nikita Gill

A balm for all kinds of loneliness.

Careering - Daisy Buchanan

My own comic novel about why work will never love you back.

CHILDHOOD, STORY TELLING AND SEEKING

The part of the school day I loved the most was reading period...if I could be a librarian, I decided, it would be like reading period lasting forever.

- Curtis Sittenfeld, American Wife

I wish I could tell you that my independent reading journey started with Dickens. Or that, the first time I was let loose in a library, I homed in on Jane Austen and the Brontës. Even a children's classic, Charlotte's Web, or Little Women, would sound slightly more sophisticated and impressive than the truth.

My book addiction began with me on my hands and knees, getting mild carpet burn from Aylesbury Library's scratchy, municipal flooring, as I systematically scrabbled through a seemingly endless selection of Baby-Sitters' Club books.

As a reader, I'd been born with lashings of privilege and luck. (For starters, 'lashings' is a word I only know because my parents liked to read me

Enid Blyton books at bedtime – it's the quantity in which every member of the Famous Five drinks their ginger beer.) Being a reader is my inheritance, and my legacy. I grew up surrounded by books, and by readers. My sisters and I got books for our birthdays, books for Christmas, sometimes books at Easter. One of my very favourite books, Judith Kerr's autobiographical novel, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, is still slightly sticky with Cadbury's Creme Egg fingerprints.

My parents didn't just read to us – they read whenever they had a moment to themselves. Every shelf, every surface, every spare space was occupied by a small pile of books. There was no filing system, or hierarchy. I suspect Dostoyevsky would have been surprised to discover that he was the filling in an Agatha Christie sandwich.

However, I was on the brink of becoming a book brat. I was spoiled. At nine, I didn't want to read what I was 'supposed' to read. The books I was given suddenly seemed dull, and childish. I decided I was

far too old for talking cats, magic trees, or major voyages. I didn't want to read 'improving' books in which earnest children overcame adversity. I wanted glamour. Now, at the age of 37, I believe I will never be too old for talking cats or magic trees. But then, I was ready for Kristy, Mary-Anne, Claudia, Stacey and Dawn.

The Baby-Sitters' Club series was set in an affluent Connecticut suburb in the late 80s. Every book was written in the first person, with a different character at the helm. The characters were, initially, 12 going on 13, and mature and responsible enough to be trusted with providing childcare to various local families. They would sometimes pool their babysitting money and order pizza – and meetings were held in Claudia's room *because she had her own private phone line*. These were books about girls whose lives were nothing like mine, and yet, when I read them, I felt a thrilling, direct connection with every single character. I felt as though I belonged. Every story was a direct invitation to join the club.

At that time, nearly all the fiction I had read was written before the 1950s, and it was full of heroines selling their hair for money or managing on a single egg a month. These books made me very grateful for 20th century heating and plumbing. However, I was ready to spend all my spare time in Connecticut, where it never seemed cold or grey.

The Baby-Sitters' Club books were the first ones I got to judge by their cover. No well-meaning parent, aunt or teacher handed them to me. No one asked which chapter I was up to, or how I was 'getting on'. When I read these books, I was free from everyone else's expectations, and it was liberating.

Those novels may not be recognised as heavyweight literary greats, but they are the stories that defined my relationship with reading. They brought me sheer pleasure, and pure joy, during a dark and difficult time.

At school, I was bullied, and I didn't really have any close friends. Even within my family, I sometimes felt lost. I have five younger sisters, and although

my parents never stopped telling us and showing us that we were all very loved, they were always fully focused on my youngest siblings. I knew how the world saw me – plump, a bit posh, a bit weird, good at lessons, abysmal at PE – but I didn't feel *understood*. There was something bottled up inside me, a longing I couldn't fully explain to anyone. These books released it. The heroines became my friends when I needed friends badly. Their relationships and connections were created in a way that it made it easy for me to imagine myself as part of the gang.

As a lonely, isolated child, I discovered that reading could be the lifeline that made me feel connected to the rest of the world. Ultimately, that's why we read. It's the single most important job that books do. If your relationship with reading begins in that place – if you let books heal the pain that nothing else can reach – you're in for a love affair with words.

After I immersed myself in the Baby-Sitters' Club world, part of my imagination became more plastic and pliable. The simple stories had soothed

my empathy muscle and stretched it. They left me hungry for more characters, and more friends. Every book is a magic mirror, reflecting some of the infinite different ways to be human. A character doesn't need to look like you or talk like you, to convince you of their depth, strength and vulnerability, and their capacity for change.

Through books, I started to see that I was not alone in my loneliness. Everyone else sometimes felt confused and unhappy, even if they tried to keep it a secret. Long before Instagram existed, I was starting to learn not to compare my insides with everyone else's outsides. The act of reading is kinetic; it powers us with empathetic energy.

As children, we're willing to suspend our disbelief. The membrane that separates fantasy and reality is translucent and wholly permeable. We throw ourselves into stories in the way we throw ourselves into ball pits and down slides. It doesn't matter whether we're reading, watching, or listening. We live for stories. We're all Fox Mulder; we want to believe.

Then we grow, change, and stop making time for stories. If we study literature at school, we may come to resent the stories we're made to read. We get older. We read *about* books, all the time. Christmas comes around, and we might receive a hefty celebrity biography or the latest Booker Prize winner. We huff about not having time. We wake up, we see the book on the bedside table and we feel as though it's Sunday night and we haven't done our homework.

That's why it's vital for us to go back as far as we need to and revisit the moment when we first picked up a book and felt something significant sparking up inside ourselves. Because I believe so many of us don't read regularly and think we *should* be reading more. We'll start with a book like *Girl, Woman, Other* – a famous book, a prizewinning book – and if we don't connect with it immediately, we'll blame ourselves and resent the book.

Perhaps it's a little bit like exercise. As adults, we know we'll feel better after we go to the gym, and yet, we put it off. We think of it as a health

requirement. We don't think we're going to enjoy the act of working our muscles and moving our bodies. But when we were children, we would move, purely for the fun of moving. We'd roll down hills or hurl our bodies to the floor during party games of musical bumps, never thinking 'this counts as cardio'. To get the maximum amount of joy from reading, we have to remember the way it felt to read, and imagine, as children. We'll get to the big books eventually – first, we start with the stories that feel as much fun to read as musical bumps.

I believe that nearly all of us have read at least one book that electrified us. A story we discovered when we were young, that seems to have been written expressly for us. A novel that was so funny and engaging from the very first sentence that we couldn't believe it counted as a book. It seemed incredible that it sat on the same shelf as those sturdy, stuffy stories people kept forcing upon us.

Little Women seemed deeply unappealing to me when described as a story about four girls struggling

with privation and economic depression during the American civil war. But as soon as I read the first line, Jo's "Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," I thought 'I couldn't agree more' and I was hooked. I felt the same electricity when I was a teenage reader and encountered Sophie Kinsella's Shopaholic series and met Becky Bloomwood telling herself not to panic as she went through her credit card statement. I felt it when I read Marian Keyes' Rachel's Holiday and the eponymous heroine told me that she couldn't possibly be a drug addict because "drug addicts are thin".

Some of those novels are for adult readers, but the experience of reading them makes me feel like a child – lit up, connected, immersed and willing to believe everything. They revitalise and nourish an existing passion.

However, you might have been on a different reading journey. You might be carrying old shame and pain from a time when you weren't encouraged on your reading journey. I know many people who

turned away from books after being forced to read out loud.

If that's you, I'm so very sorry that happened. It should not have happened. But I hope you give reading another chance. Because we do not need to read for our parents, our teachers, critics, bitchy book club hosts or influencers on BookTok. But I genuinely believe we need to read for ourselves, simply to stay in touch with the magic our imaginations are capable of conjuring. After all, most of us are reading constantly – if we use email and social media, we're getting through thousands of words every single day. We don't need to be 'better' at reading. We're great at reading for information and productivity. Now it's time to read childishly – for pleasure and fun.

Read childishly

Bookworm: A Memoir Of Childhood Reading - Lucy Mangan

A celebration of forgotten favourites.

Carbonel, The King Of The Cats - Barbara Sleigh Charming and restorative.

Ballet Shoes - Noel Streatfeild

The book that's always on my bedside table.

Noughts & Crosses - Malorie Blackman Still fresh, still urgent.

Forever - Judy Blume

The most mentioned book on the You're Booked podcast. One word: Ralph.

READING FOR EMPATHY

Why, we are just the same – I am only a little girl like you. It's just an accident that I am not you, and you are not me.

Frances Hodgson Burnett, A Little Princess

I have a tendency to be very self-centred.

Obviously, I'm not proud of this. I know it's connected with my anxiety, and I understand that others who struggle with their mental health sometimes feel the same way.

Our self-centredness does not manifest in the way that society expects. We do not roam around, shouting, 'Look at me! Behold my brilliance! Aren't I wonderful?!' *If only*. Instead, during difficult times, our inner voices run this unhelpful audio advert 10 times an hour: 'I'm the worst one. Everyone is looking at me, and everyone hates me. Everyone else must be constantly thinking about how bad I am, how inadequate. No one, in the whole history of time

has ever had problems as bad as mine. There is no hope for me, at all.'

I recently came across the concept of 'terminal uniqueness'. This is typically used in recovery communities, I think often by people trying to overcome addiction while believing that, unlike everyone around them, they are beyond help. That their problems are so awful there isn't a person or piece of advice in the world that can reach them.

When I was feeling burned out, this is how I felt. In my emotional, irrational lizard brain, a poisonous seed was starting to grow shoots. I felt so numb, and so hollow, that I could not grasp the idea that others may be feeling just as numb and hollow. I said, often, 'I'm so lucky! It could be worse!' but I didn't believe it. Secretly I felt that 'everyone else' – a cheerful, amorphous mass – had far better practical and emotional resources than I did.

Luckily, a different voice quietly started nudging me towards a solution. It whispered, 'Are you on an obsessive, hubristic and financially ruinous quest to

kill a whale? No. Are you trying to kill your entire family to avenge your father's ghost? No. Are you and your sisters economically dependent on finding husbands and trying to maintain your good spirits after being negged at a ball and subsequently pursued by an insufferably smug clergyman? No. Well, then! Think on!'

Empathy is a complicated, controversial word. Affective empathy is associated with the feelings we get when we respond to other people's feelings and emotions by acknowledging our personal experience of them. There is a mirroring – to recognise the sadness of another person, we revisit our own. This is generously meant and instinctively offered, but it hardly helps.

Cognitive empathy is when we come a little closer to being in another person's shoes and experiencing their feelings from their perspective. Another important thing to consider is the way in which our understanding of empathy is limited by our social expectations. People who are neurodivergent may

express their empathetic responses differently. (Various studies have suggested that some people with autism experience affective empathy to an overwhelming degree.)

I like Brené Brown's observation that empathy connects, while sympathy disconnects. "Empathy is a choice, and it's a vulnerable one ... rarely can a response make anything better." To empathise is to see someone suffering, and not say, 'Oh, mate, why didn't you save your money/not crash your car/do something that involves time travel and/or being able to see the future?'. It's to think, 'Here's a human having a human problem. In these circumstances, any one of us could be chasing that whale.'

This is what reading does. Every single book I pick up makes me more aware of the many, many things I don't know. Every story tells me something new about *why* we do what we do. In books, I meet people dealing with different kinds of danger, struggling with problems, searching for solutions, and not always finding them. Is Hamlet tragic

because (sorry for the spoiler) everyone dies at the end? Or because it's about the cumulative effect of an unhappy obsession creating a swirling black hole that sucks our hero inside out?

This is how reading cures us. It robs our obsessions of their power, by forcing us to place them in the context of a bigger, more vivid space. A book may be a work of fiction, but it can force us to consider reality in its broadest sense.

On 25 May 2020, George Floyd was murdered by the police officer Derek Chauvin, and the Black Lives Matter movement (which was started in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi) spearheaded protests and demonstrations across the world. Many of us wanted to help – and it quickly and painfully came to my attention that no matter how good my intentions were, I was not being an active ally. I hadn't come close to recognising the full extent of my privilege. I still haven't.

One major issue was in my reading. I had grown up consuming words written almost exclusively by

white people. I mostly chose to read stories written by white women, featuring white women. They made me feel good. I could see myself in a comfortable way. I was lazily seeking connection. It was vital that I started to seek greater understanding, instead.

I read Kiley Reid's brilliant debut, *Such a Fun Age*, the story of Emira, a 25 year old black woman, who is accused of kidnapping the white child she's babysitting. This event is the catalyst for plenty of tone deaf, 'well-meaning' racism from wealthy white characters who try to manipulate and exploit Emira to their own ends. In a BookPage interview, Reid said the book is about "instances of racial biases that don't end in violence as a way of highlighting those moments that we don't see on the news but still exist every day".

I loved the experience of reading this book, and I found it challenging too. It stretched me. Reid's excellent prose allowed me the welcome opportunity to experience cognitive empathy – the chance to develop an understanding of the circumstances

of Emira, and women like Emira. It also came with some affective empathy – uncomfortable, unpleasant, and wholly necessary. For once, I was more like the villain than the hero. I became aware of behaviour I was unconscious of, things I said, did and thought without intention, and without any real understanding of the unearned privilege I benefit from through my whiteness. No writer has any obligation to educate their readers, but Reid does. Yet, there is nothing didactic about her prose. It's a close examination, and an invitation. She does not directly criticise us; she prompts us to consider how we must evolve.

Then, I pulled a book from my shelf that had been bothering me for some time – *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones. The novel had been in my possession for about a year. I'd bought it when it was shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction (which it won in 2019). For months, I'd been walking past my shelf, staring at the spine, and sighing. 'You've not done your homework,' said the book, every time it caught

my eye. 'You're an idiot. I'm smart and serious and I've won a prize, and you're probably not clever enough to appreciate me properly. Admit it, you're scared of me. You're frightened that I'm proof of something you don't want to admit. You're not a true reader.'

'Look,' I'd say back. 'I'm sorry. I'm doing my best.'

'Whatever,' the book would say. 'I am not going anywhere. I will not get out of your eyeline. I am going to make you feel like this until you read me. See how much I am making you feel before you read! See how powerful I am!'

You do not need me to tell you that *An American Marriage* is a masterpiece. I loved it for its fathoms of emotional depth and nuance. The concepts of racism, right and wrong, are a starting point for an exploration of love, intimacy, and frustration. There are gorgeous and surprising moments of lightness within the heaviness of the subject; Jones writes in the way that Turner painted.

An American Marriage taught me that books do not need to be comfortable in order to comfort us.

I will always reach for titles from my comfort canon when life has brought me low. However, I have learned that my reading experience will not be rich, full or meaningful if I only choose the books that make me feel safe and warm. It is vital for us to spend some time with fictional characters who are powerless, or filled with pain, because those are the stories that prompt us to use any power we have in the wisest ways. I have always been drawn to books filled with characters who are 'just like me'. But the more I read, the more important it seems to pick up books with characters who don't seem anything like me, so that I can get closer to the truth of how I am just like them. How I am just like everyone. It's the best cure for self-centredness that I can come up with. Reading reminds me that my problems are never unique. Self-pity has never offered me any solutions. Those only come when I look for ways to help and be useful.

Books to keep us connected

Sunny - Sukh Ojla

A modern, moving romcom.

Corregidora - Gayl Jones

A startling, compelling exploration of enslavement and female sexuality.

Tales Of The City - Armistead Maupin

A sharp, funny page turner that celebrates love in all forms.

Detransition, Baby - Torrey Peters

An hilarious, electric story about trans and cis womanhood and motherhood

Grown Ups - Marian Keyes

An ambitious, generous novel about what happens when an addiction shatters life's safe surfaces.

READING RITUALS

Any book that helps a child to form a habit of reading, to make reading one of his deep and continuing needs, is good for him.

- Maya Angelou

Let's begin with bedtime stories.

Reading books – or having books read to us – is often the precursor to dreaming. Books are supposed to prime us for sleep. If you have children, you'll know what it feels like to read to them while they're tucked up in bed. In theory, at least, you have their undivided attention, and it feels magical. When I spend time with my nephews and niece, they have absolutely no interest in a story from auntie Daisy during the day, when there are games to be played, songs to be sung, and Lego bricks to be thrown.

But after bath time, when their pyjamas are on, it's a very different story. As in, an actual story.

When you're under the covers, tired from a

busy day, you can relax completely. Essentially, this is when you are most able to slip out of your own world for a moment and wander safely in a universe created by someone else's imagination. Reading a story, or being told a story, has a very powerful impact on our brains. In 2009, the neuroscientist David Lewis conducted a study at the University of Sussex and found that just six minutes of reading left the subjects with slower heart rates, less muscle tension and reduced stress levels. Instinctually, we reach for books as the perfect way to still a busy, excited mind.

In the summer of 2020, the website Sleep Junkie conducted a survey about bedtime reading. Bedtime readers reported a greater satisfaction of quality of life, and fewer difficulties going to sleep, especially when compared with people who use technology before bed.

My own burnout was characterised by rumination – essentially, telling myself the same, unhelpful stories again, and again, and again. I would

think obsessively about my concerns, fears and worries, without coming to any useful conclusions. I felt as though the thoughts were controlling me. Sometimes I would wake up in the early hours of the morning, my heart pounding, preparing to deal with an imaginary threat. I would tense myself against the intrusive, scary thoughts, silently saying, 'Don't do it. Don't think.' Even though I knew the truth. If you tell yourself not to think about pink elephants, the imaginary circus is already on its way to a town inside your head.

I was sleeping terribly when lockdown hit – I'd wake up every single hour and want to scream or burst into tears. According to the Sleep Foundation, 40% of people questioned reported that lockdown led to sleeping problems. In fact, the situation became so bad that a new term was invented for it – Coronasomnia. After half an hour of lying in the dark, trying to get back to sleep, while thinking obsessively about all the things that were going wrong and getting worse, I'd reach for my Kindle.

This became my lockdown ritual – my magical sleeping pill.

Through accident or design, at least half of my ebooks are ‘classics’ – or at least, classics, to me. Books I’ve loved, loaned and needed to replace in a hurry. Novels I adored as a teenager, half remembered, and downloaded in a fit of nostalgia. Books that feel so cocooning and familiar that they seem warm and sweet smelling, like favourite jumpers. Soft places to land.

When I woke up in the night with a racing heart, I didn’t want to read an unfamiliar story filled with characters I cared about, because I would worry when things inevitably went wrong for them. If I read a book I knew, I felt safe. Everyone I loved was definitely on their way towards the happy ending they deserved. It was safe to let the book fall from my hands, and for my eyelids to flutter shut when I felt that ultimately everything was going to be OK.

Even when I haven’t felt like a reader, I have been a ritual rereader. It’s a polarising topic. At least half

of the authors I interview on my podcast, You're Booked, are horrified by the idea of 'wasted' reading time. We reach for books to help us learn, grow and know – why on earth would we want to read what we know already?

But I'm a book lover *because* I'm a rereader. Because no drug, person or activity can stop me from feeling scared and send me to safe, soft sleep, as effectively as the novels of Marian Keyes, Jilly Cooper, Jill Mansell, Nancy Mitford and Elizabeth Jane Howard. Every single time I pick up a brand new book, I'm questing for a comfort read. I'm hoping to be challenged, stretched, moved and altered. But I'm also thinking, 'Would I take you to bed with me? Will you join my comfort canon?' What's more, comfort reading fuels and energises me for more challenging reading. My favourite stories make me feel lighter, and stronger – strong enough to pick up something new and heavy.

However, my reading habits evolved again when I realised there is another bedtime.

I'm not exaggerating when I say this has changed my life. And I'm frightened to keep writing, because I understand that what I'm about to describe speaks of enormous privilege. If you're a carer, or you have a young family or a demanding job, I'd understand if this makes you want to throw this book out of the window, or at my head.

Nearly every day, I try to read for at least half an hour before I get up.

As soon as I get a cup of coffee, I pick up my book. Usually fiction of my choosing, often a book written by an author I am going to interview, or a book I've been asked to blurb. And I don't always wake up and think, 'Oh, goodee, reading!' Sometimes, just before I start, I resent my rule, or I resent the book – especially before I'm 50 pages in.

However, after 10 minutes, I have usually forgotten everything but the book itself.

Reading affects me physically. I have noticed that when I read in the morning, my breath seems deeper, my heartbeat slower and steadier. My body

feels grounded. I'm proof of Lewis' study, I'm living it. Some people wake up early every morning to do yoga. In fact, I've tried this as an attempt to manage my anxiety. It made me more anxious; I kept waking up, worrying that I had slept through my alarm and missed the class. Reading is my meditative practice.

In the morning, I can approach books with a little more ambition. I'm rested enough to bring more mental energy and determination to the 'big' books. (This is how I muddled through *Anna Karenina*, and how, after years of resistance, I read, and loved *A Little Life*.)

I know what you're thinking. It's all very well for her, and her bloody Russian literature, lazing about among the pillows, while I'm up to my elbows in childcare and traffic jams and blocked dishwasher filters. A few years ago, if anyone had pitched morning reading to me, I would have wanted to punch them in the face.

Also, a few years ago, I couldn't countenance starting the day without my phone.

I would have it in my hand, scrolling and swiping, before both eyes were fully open. Because it was essential for my work. I'm not a doctor, I don't work for the emergency services, and I don't solve crimes. I am a self-employed, freelance journalist, and I believed that those four words defined me totally. Quite honestly, I was convinced that if I hadn't read the whole of the internet, and pitched my pieces to editors by 8am, I would be banned, by law, from calling myself a journalist anymore. I also had a troubling, dysfunctional relationship with money, believing that every waking hour must be spent trying to earn some, or I would starve.

This meant that I started the day reading. I was consuming words, bingeing on them, scanning and seeking. But I was doing so in a state of growing anxiety and panic. I'd search social media – which was work, obviously – and subconsciously absorb thousands of opinions that were not my own. BBC Radio Four listeners might start their morning with Thought for the Day, a gentle, spiritual reflection on

a topical issue. As a Twitter user, my day began with Screams for the Day – Angry People I Will Never Meet Arguing Violently and Propheying Doom.

My relationship with social media remains complicated. At the time, I knew I wasn't starting the day with positive feelings. I also knew the theories about the evils of screen time, the damage our phones are doing to our mental health, and the fact that experts say that it's better to keep a live wolf in your bedroom than a smartphone and charger. But my brain still craved entertainment, information and the new.

Predictably, it was a book that led me to my book-based solution. In *The Kindness Method*, behavioural change expert Shahroo Izadi explains that we can't change the habits we don't like by shaming ourselves out of them. We have to understand the short term gains we get from the old habit, and then find a new one that offers something similar. For example, instead of reading about venal, corrupt politicians on Twitter, and feeling exhausted, powerless, confused

and miserable, I could read about them in *The Line Of Beauty*, or *American Wife*, which made me feel more informed about humanity – and uplifted, entertained, compassionate and curious.

As many habit experts have observed, the magic of maintenance lies in doing new activities little, and often. For example – the more regularly I read, the more I love reading, and feel nourished and strengthened by that love. The more regularly we all read, the more joy we can get from reading. This habit has made me a much more confident reader, which means I feel completely comfortable holding any book on the beach or the bus.

If you want to start a reading habit, you don't have to begin first thing in the morning. But if you can bear to wake up 10 or 15 minutes earlier than usual, and start with a story, I genuinely believe that your day, your energy levels and your mood will all be boosted. This is yoga for your head, from your bed. If you're so absorbed by your book that you're struggling to put it down, that's wonderful.

It means you'll make time to return to it, and you have something lovely to look forward to.

Start days with a story

Everything I Know About Love - Dolly Alderton

Sharp writing that will reach for you and lift you up.

Happy All the Time - Laurie Colwin

A sweet, simple and deceptively profound novel about the triumph of hope.

Diary of a Nobody - Weedon Grossmith

This comic masterpiece is a hymn to pettiness and the giant, fragile ego.

The Girl with the Louding Voice - Abi Daré

A sustaining, enchanting and uplifting book, filled with hope and spirit.

Why Has Nobody Told Me This Before? - Dr Julie Smith

Wisdom and compassion that should be added to your morning routine.

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

It's always better to have too much to read than not enough.

- Ann Patchett

What do we do when we get to the end?

We don't.

I've read and revelled in 'happy ever after'. I like love stories where the main characters get together, novels in which villains suffer a just and bloody retribution, tales of heroes succeeding in their quests. But I don't think any book truly ends. We might close it, but we won't stop thinking about it. It might leave a profound or lasting impression, in the way that the subtle moral complexities of a Dorothy Whipple novel linger in my memory for months. Or it might sneak up on us at odd moments – like when I'm eating a sandwich and spill mayonnaise down my jumper, and I feel a kinship with Mick Herron's perpetually grubby secret agent, Jackson Lamb.

We are never finished with the books we read, and they are never finished with us. Still, I know what it is like to read the final page of a beloved story for the first time and feel bereft. It's a very specific sadness, and one we should respect. If we have been lucky, the book has changed us. We can't go back and have the pleasure of experiencing and responding to the magic words in a fresh way. I think this is what makes books living things, and what makes literature art. We gain so much, but there has to be a little loss, a tiny death.

However, the good news outweighs the bad. I promise that you could live 10 lives, and never run out of books to read. You could win the lottery, give up your job, refuse to see your family and friends and devote every waking moment available to reading and you would still never run out of books to read. You cannot complete reading.

Burnout made me feel broken because it made me feel afraid. As a burned out person, I felt as though my life path was long and narrow. I had one task – to

get towards the end as fast as I possibly could. I'd fallen, and I had failed. I could not get up. I had not moved fast enough.

This is how books restored me. They showed me that they thought it was hilarious that I believed I could get to the end. It was hysterically funny that this was something I believed to be worth attempting. Finishing first isn't noble, or impressive. It's tragic. How can there possibly be one narrow path? Books illuminate and connect infinite paths, underground warrens, spotlit superhighways. I have tunnelled under the earth with the Fantastic Mr Fox and emerged, blinking, with Eve Babitz on the corner of Hollywood and Vine. I've been invited to wrap myself in sumptuous furs and travel across Russia in a horse-drawn carriage, to walk across Yorkshire Moors in winter storms. I've been a guest in the grandest, and the shabbiest homes in Naples. I have been to hundreds of different Londons, and I hope I may visit hundreds more. I have been gloriously, gorgeously lost, and by that, I mean I don't know

exactly where I might be going next and I don't want to know.

Without stories, my life only moves in one, dull direction. With them, there are no endings, only invitations which lead to more invitations.

Some books show you very clearly where the extra treasure is buried. For example, if you read *Daisy Jones and the Six* by Taylor Jenkins Reid (one of my all time favourites) and you loved the way it made you feel, you're in luck – Jenkins Reid is a prolific novelist, and you can maintain the magical sensation by choosing a book from her backlist. Falling in love with an author's work and discovering there are more books is a real moment of joy, better than finding £20 in an old coat pocket. Sometimes the road to the next book is smooth, and the signs are big and bright. Sometimes you're off the road on a nature trail. The signs are still there, just a little weathered and moss covered.

In lockdown, Darren Coffield's *Tales from the Colony Room*, an oral history of Soho's infamous arts

and drinking club, led me to Henrietta, the memoir of life model Henrietta Moraes. This led me to the poetry of Dom Moraes, who she married, to the novels of her drinking buddy Angus Wilson, and to the work of her partner the artist Maggi Hambling. There are plenty of threads to pull in Coffield's book – the painter, Lucian Freud appears, which could lead you to the novels of his daughter, Esther Freud, who wrote the foreword to *The Summer Book*, a novel by the Moomins creator Tove Jansson. My husband looked for inspiration in the same book, and as a reward he is now being delighted by the memoir of Tallulah Bankhead.

You don't have to choose your next book within moments of reading the end of your current one. In fact, if you can bear it, please leave yourself a little room and space to understand and appreciate the world you have just been immersed in. Come back to the surface before the next dive.

But be open to magic and coincidence. Don't forge forward for the sake of momentum, look backwards,

look sideways. If you feel driven to work your way through a prize-winning selection or a bestseller list, you must do you. However, you might think laterally. For example, finding yourself in a second-hand bookshop and coming across a gently worn selection of PD James, you might remember Maud O'Hara in Jilly Cooper's *Rivals* failing to do any housework after "discovering the novels of PD James" and feel moved to do the same. Cooper's novel *Imogen* comes with a free list of suggested reading, because it's set in a library. I try to point readers towards it in my novel *Careering*. Imogen, my heroine, "Got very lucky when Mum named me after her favourite Jilly Cooper book".

When an author mentions another author's book within their own work, it's an act of generosity. They break the fourth wall, reach us through the pages and say, 'Me too. I am just like you. We are readers, together'. We are all readers, together. Books want to welcome every single one of us. They don't care what we've read, what we know, where we have been

before. They don't need us to be complete or perfect. They will come and pick us up. All they ask from us is that we sit with them.

My burnout made me feel as though I was in a state of pointless perpetual motion. Spinning and grinding relentlessly, making no progress, burning through the core of my own bones, wearing away at the mechanism that held me together. The harder I pushed, the more stuck I became. Reading required a stillness that frightened me. When I surrendered to that stillness, I was lifted out of myself and taken further than I believed to be possible, connected with other worlds, times and generations.

I will never stop reading. I will never stop being grateful for that invitation to wander, and wonder.

A travelling library

Dear Reader - Cathy Rentzenbrink

A gorgeous love letter to books – and a thank you letter too.

The Importance of Being Interested - Robin Ince

This book will whet your appetite for the infinite – the best quality to bring to your reading life.

Stet, An Editor's Life - Diana Athill

Irreverent, affectionate, and revealing. Athill's love of literature is guaranteed to rub off on you.

See What Can Be Done - Lorrie Moore

A delicious, addictive and occasionally infuriating collection of literary criticism.

These Precious Days - Ann Patchett

Essays on love, courage and family, with a common thread. She writes like a reader, and you can tell.

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