

Jane Sullivan is a regular contributor to The Age. This is the text of an opening address given to public librarians and managers at Reader Development Day at the State Library of Victoria on Thursday 22 February 2007. It was published in an edited form in The Age on Saturday 24 February 2007.

The British novelist Zadie Smith recently wrote a piece for *The Guardian* about her thoughts on writing. She says that writing is very difficult and demanding, which you might expect her to say. But more surprisingly, she also says that *reading* is, or should be, very difficult and demanding.

Here are a few quotes:

“Reading, done properly, is every bit as tough as writing...
Reading is a skill and an art and readers should take pride in their abilities and have no shame in cultivating them...
To respond to the ideal writer takes an ideal reader...
A reader must have talent. Quite a lot of talent...
The skills that it takes to write it are required to read it...
Readers fail writers just as often as writers fail readers...
To become better readers and writers we have to ask of each other a little bit more.”

It sounds tough, doesn't it. Zadie Smith is being a reader's coach. Get your nose into that book, get down to it, work up some intellectual sweat, dig deep, you can do it, you're a reader with talent, keep up the hard work every day, don't shirk, don't slip, don't you dare get lazy on me, and one day you'll show them all, you'll be an Ideal Reader.

I'm exhausted even thinking about it.

And yet when I read Zadie Smith's fiction, I don't feel I'm working at all. When I read her novel *On Beauty*, I didn't feel I was cultivating my skills and my art, and I certainly never felt that I was in danger of failing, that I had to keep asking a little bit more of myself.

I was feeling nothing but pleasure: the pull of an absorbing story, the discovery of complex characters, the rising tension of conflict, the savouring of black and satirical humour, the recognition of ridiculous aspects of our world, the hints of doom – and certainly in the background, the pressure of more abstract ideas about art and beauty and what matters to each of us. It was all there in my head and heart, even though I didn't actually think about it consciously as I read, and it

all added to the richness of an experience I can only describe as reading pleasure.

Was I missing something? Was I failing Zadie Smith as a reader? I don't think so. It's just that for all the very understandable passion she expresses about the art of reading, we don't read like that. When we read, we don't read for duty. We read for pleasure.

The emotions come first, and at their highest point they enter thrill territory. To discover a book you love is not that different from discovering a person you love, and you can experience every emotion reading it, including what Les Murray calls the gift of weeping. Everything else – the intellectual analysis, the conscious aesthetic appreciation – comes second.

Of course I'm talking here about recreational reading. All of us have had the often tedious experience of reading stuff we have to read: at school, at college, in our jobs. In my role as a journalist who specialises in writing about books, I'm in an odd position: I have to read things that other people read because they want to. I read books by authors I'm going to interview, or books that I think might provide me with ideas for columns, or just to keep up with what's new, and I must admit I sometimes skim books, or just read the blurbs and reviews, because there are only so many reading hours in the day and I'm human.

But I absolutely could not do my job if I did not enjoy what I was reading, on one level or another, which means I have - or have had to cultivate, I'm not sure which – very broad tastes. Whether it's Proust, Marcel, or Potter, Harry, it had better be fun.

All too often, however, reading isn't much fun. So little fun, in fact, that it puts some of us off altogether. Tess Gerritsen, an American author who writes bestselling medical thrillers, once gave a talk at a library and afterwards a woman came up to her and confessed "I don't read books any more".

Gerritsen was quite taken aback and asked the woman when was the last time she had really enjoyed a book. She thought it over and said: "When I was a child. When I could read what I wanted to."

Both women knew exactly what that meant, and I'm sure you do too. It's the old reading under the bedclothes with a torch thing. But when you become an adult, you put away your torch. As Gerritsen says, you get a compulsion to read books you don't really want to read, books designed to challenge your mind and leave you feeling all the more accomplished for having read them. Books that are "worthy" of your precious time.

Tess Gerritsen did that. She picked out an Oprah Book Club selection that came with glowing reviews and looked forward to reading it. That book, and the

dreadful woes of its heroine, became her nightly torture session. She endured it all the way to the end because she knew it would feed her soul. All it did was leave her paralysed with depression.

Now Gerritsen believes we should all read what we want, and to hell with it. “This weird craze for ‘responsible reading’ has driven old-fashioned reading for sheer enjoyment into the closet,” she says. “It makes women hide their romance novels. It’s turned Stephen King and Mary Higgins Clark into guilty pleasures.” It’s killing the soul of the reader, she adds, and then here comes the most damning indictment of all: it’s promoting the literary equivalent of Brussels sprouts.

Where does this leave those of us who passionately want to share our love of reading? Do we become a Zadie Smith-style reading coach, always seeking to raise the bar, tirelessly urging readers on to higher and more demanding things? Or do we relax like Tess Gerritsen, tell them to chuck out the Brussels sprouts and dig into the ice cream?

I believe in getting readers to relax and to read what they want to read, and never to apologise for it, but I also believe in encouraging them down a few paths they might not otherwise take. There’s a lot of comfort in reading, and that’s fine, but sometimes you need to move out of your comfort zone.

Let’s go back to Zadie Smith, and that discomfiting thought that a reader can fail. Here’s why, she says: “Readers fail when they allow themselves to believe the old mantra that fiction is the thing you relate to and writers the amenable people you seek out when you want to have your own version of the world confirmed and reinforced...”

In other words, the trappings of reading may be cosy – all curled up in your favourite armchair by a fire, perhaps with a cat in your lap, or sitting by the pool in the sun – but the experience itself shouldn’t be too cosy.

There’s also a hidden question here. Read only what you want to read, says Tess Gerritsen. Fine. But how do you know what you want to read until you start reading? You might love ice cream and hate Brussels sprouts, but does that mean you should never try any other kind of food? That’s when you can benefit from someone else’s help – a friend, a teacher, a reviewer, a bookseller, a librarian – who respects your choices, doesn’t talk down to you and can guide you towards a book you might never otherwise have considered. And maybe, just maybe, you will love that book.

There are some wonderful books around on the joys and horrors of reading: Alberto Manguel, Francis Spufford and Nick Hornby have done some very perceptive work in this area, and Hornby is particularly good because he’s so down to earth, irreverent and funny.

In his book *The Complete Polysyllabic Spree*, he talks about two friends who were both reading a very long political biography that had appeared on most Books of the Year lists. They were parents with demanding jobs, and each night before they went to sleep they ploughed through a few paragraphs. One of them got very excited when he found the bookmark was much further into the book than he remembered, but then he found the kids had been mucking around with it and had put it back in the wrong place. He was crushed.

At this rate, Hornby notes, it might take his friends decades to finish the book. In fact, they will probably never finish it. But in the process, they will reinforce a learned association of books with struggle. And struggle is absolutely not what reading should be about, Hornby says. You can get very little from a book that is making you weep with the effort of reading it. Please, please put it down.

Actually my most recent inspirations on this subject didn't come to me from a book. They came to me on an exercise bike at my local gym, reading a woman's magazine. In among the celebrity gossip and beauty ads was an edition of *Oprah* magazine dedicated to the pleasures of books and reading, and it was such a treasure trove I borrowed the magazine, took it home and copied out large chunks of quotes.

One revelation was a section called *How To Read A Hard Book*. The contributors are American academics, experts on the classics. They are writing not for students, but for ordinary pleasure-seeking readers, and you might be surprised at some of their advice.

Here's Geoffrey Sanborn, an associate professor at Bard College, on *Moby Dick*: "Get an unannotated edition with no introduction and no essays at the back. Clear your mind of expectations and open it to Chapter One. Listen with nothing more than ordinary human curiosity to the voice that begins speaking to you."

This isn't easy to do, he says, because people are trained to revere the classics and think the right way to read such books is to seek out their cleverly hidden meanings. "But the secret to *Moby Dick* is that there is no secret. Everything that matters is right on the surface.

"Go with it. If you find yourself enjoying some passage without knowing why, if you find yourself stimulated into more intense thoughts and feelings, if you find yourself sinking beneath the overused upper layers of your personality, then you've 'gotten' the book."

This is where I should make a confession. I have never "gotten" *Moby Dick*. I have tried to read it, and I got totally perplexed and bogged down in the first chapter. Why, I wondered, should anyone want to tell me so much about whales? So I closed the book and gave up. I don't consider myself a lesser person for it,

and I don't consider Herman Melville a lesser writer for it. It's just that we didn't match up. Maybe in the future we will.

Many writers I now love – Nabokov, Dostoevsky, Doris Lessing – I began by disliking. Perhaps I came to them too early, or tried too hard. I was a good little literature student looking for those cleverly hidden meanings, and I should just have been using my ordinary human curiosity. We think of reading as an intellectual activity, but actually it's hugely intuitive.

One of the things I love about reading is the pictures that come unbidden into my head. It's like my own private cinema, and I'm Cecil B. De Mille – or Quentin Tarantino, if you prefer – completely in control of every shot. Frodo Baggins, for example, looks just like a rather plump tomboy I used to know at primary school, and not even Elijah Wood has quite erased that picture.

That pictorial aspect of reading is not much talked about, but it's very important to me. It's how I remember books, and I never quite get a fix on a character until I can see him or her. The illusion is that the pictures are all mine, and so they are very dear to me; but of course they have been created in my mind by the art of the writer.

Back to Oprah and *How To Read A Hard Book*. Here's Burton Pike, a teacher and translator, on Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*: "...You need to stop thinking and let yourself feel, get the pleasure of the striking images and language, recognise the emotions they arouse in you without trying to explain them to yourself...You the reader are his target: he wants to subtly change your life."

And here's Marcelle Clements, a novelist who teaches at New York University, on the Behemoth of literature, Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*: "Read fast. Read for plot – though you won't understand what the plot is until the end."

You may be tempted to pause and admire the metaphors, the music of the language. "No!" cries Marcelle. "Don't stop reading! Don't lie down in the snow! ...Don't forget: you can always return. If you do as I suggest, before too long the narrator's recollections are so intimately connected with yours that you can't always distinguish between them. Then you're truly on your way."

These academics, I think, get to the essential pleasure of reading. You must allow it to sweep you up and carry you away, right out of your comfort zone, to God knows where. Time enough to come back later and look at where you have been: to check, as Zadie Smith would have us do, whether you have read properly.

Toni Morrison talks about this returning to the work in *Oprah* magazine. She discovered the pleasures of reading, she says, through listening: to the radio, or to stories told by her grandparents. It was a passive activity, but she brought her own lively child's mind to bear on it. "That Alice in Wonderland combination of willing acceptance coupled with intense inquiry is still the way I read literature," she says. "Slowly, digging for the hidden, questioning or relishing the choices the author made, eager to envision what is there, noticing what is not."

I don't think Morrison's approach is quite the same kind of reading as the academics are recommending, but that's okay too. She is talking about what for many of us is often the second stage of reading: after the first dizzy rush, to go back and savour the work in a more leisurely way, to see the things we missed the first time. The pleasure of rereading is something we take to naturally in childhood, when we're read to – think how often parents are driven mad, night after night, with the clamour for the same old picture book - and rereading is not something we should put away as adults.

This is what I would say to any reader: If you give a book a good go and it doesn't sweep you up, don't worry, don't feel guilty. Put it down and try another one. You might come back to that first book, perhaps years later, and find some magic that eluded you the first time. And if it does sweep you up, however surprising and disturbing that might be, don't worry about whether the world considers it treasure or trash: go for the ride.

As Nick Hornby says: Read anything, as long as you can't wait to pick it up again.

- Jane Sullivan

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Further reading:

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