THE PLEASURES OF READING

ABSTRACT

This text is a version of Robert Adams' keynote speech delivered on November 6, 2003, in Ottawa, at the Association for Canadian Studies' conference, titled "Reading Canada."

I am going to discuss what books meant to me but I could as easily have used the expression "the written world" instead of "books." There is nothing sacred about cloth, card board, paper, glue or thread. It is the written word, whether on clay tablets, papyrus, paper or disk, that is holy.

When I was young, living in the Bible Belt of South Wales in Great Britain, I memorized the first verse of the Gospel according to St. John: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." I know that Christian theologians now put a different spin on that passage but I have always taken it literally. The word, especially the written word, represents for me all things good and librarians, the keepers of the word, are the 'priests of the world I live in.'

Books have been so very precious to so many people. When Sir John Franklin died of starvation with all 129 of his men in the Canadian Arctic, he had long abandoned all of his guns, but he died still clutching to him his copy of *The Vicar of Wakefield.* During the Blitz on London during the Second World War, that dreadful man Evelyn Waugh who wrote *Brideshead Revisited* evacuated all of his beloved books out of London to the safety of the countryside. But he left his son Auberon behind. As a boy, Salman Rushdie kissed any book he dropped by way of apology for the act of clumsy disrespect.

I have the same feeling about books.

Books and libraries have always been my salvation. At the moment I make my living by reading and by speaking about what I read on stage, on radio and on TV. It is, I find, a very satisfying way to live, especially as my wife Pearl, my editor and manager, prevents me for most of the time from saying anything *too* foolish or outrageous in public. But my salvation, my rescue by the written word, began much earlier, more than six decades ago.

I was born in a small town, a big village really, in South Wales. My mother and father had little formal education, but they were both widely read and had a great love of the written word. My mother taught me to read when I was four. By the time I was six, my two much older brothers had left to fight in the Second World War. And so I became, in effect, an only child. I had friends in my little town and I played with them after school every day, but after I came home the rest of the evening was always the same. My parents and I each had our own comfortable chair by the fire, and we sat and read after dinner until it was time for me to go to bed.

I don't know how much of that routine was for my benefit. I suspect that at least some of it was a deliberate sacrifice by my parents of other possible leisure activities. It was part of their lifelong effort to teach by example.

It was certainly effective. Reading has always been associated in my mind with love, security, and warmth. I was about fifteen before I discovered that not everyone read for two or three hours every day. When I went into the homes of friends and saw no books, I always assumed that they were in another room and that the family would take up their reading at some time after I left.

I was a teacher for thirty-six years, at every level from Grade Seven to third-year university, and like every other teacher I was often asked by parents how best they might encourage their children to read. My answer was, and is, always the same. If you want to buy books for your child, buy books. If you want to read to your child, read. It is a good start. But if you are serious about helping your child, *let the child see you read.* Children listen to a distressingly small portion of what we say, but they pay great attention to what we do…

Children who see their parents read every day will come to believe that reading is a normal part of human activity and the habit of reading is the greatest legacy a child can receive. I am deeply grateful to my parents.

ROBERT ADAMS

Robert Adams came to Canada in 1964, where he taught History and English for 36 years. Since 1997, he has been giving an annual series of book reviews on stage to sold-out audiences. He has often been a panelist on CBC Radio's "Talking Books," and is a sought-after guest-speaker at literary functions. His talks are regularly telecasted on TV Ontario's "Big Ideas." His second book, A Love of Reading, was a national best-seller in 2001.

I would not have you believe, though, that my parents were perfect. There was always plenty of food on our table but little of it was edible. My mother could not cook. It wasn't until I left home at 17 to go to London that I realized that anyone ate for pleasure. I thought, as a child, that you ate so that you wouldn't die. Even now, I do not frequent restaurants that claim to make food "like mother used to make."

One of the consequences of my mother's inability to cook was that, when I was 12 years old, I was exceptionally thin. The problem was that I was also six feet tall. The truth is that I looked very odd and I suffered because of it. Children are cruel.

However, as you can see, later I filled out beautifully.

The books in my parents' home were generally classics. My father, with his limited means, bought collections cheaply at estate sales. The result was that, by the time I was about 14, I had read all of Dickens, much of the Brontes, and most of Alexandre Dumas. Before my teens, however, my reading needs had been met by the school library or by the little town library to which our teachers marched us through the streets every Monday and Friday afternoon. I read all the usual suspects, A.A. Milne, Kenneth Graham, Richmal Crompton, Conan Doyle, etc.

Why did I read so voraciously? The short answer is, of course, my parents did and I saw them doing it. But the answer is more complicated than that. Why does anyone read? Charles Lamb said that he loved to lose himself in other men's minds. Harold Bloom says that he reads in search of a mind more original than his own. Macaulay said that his reading enabled him to live more deeply and in greater fellowship with all those who live or who have lived.

Reading means that we are not obliged to reinvent the wheel. There are lessons to be learned from books, from the past. In *King Lear,* for example, I believe that Shakespeare said everything that there is to say about inter-generational conflict. It ought to be required reading for every parent.

We all see articles every day on why we should read. Reading alleviates loneliness, warms our souls, lets our imaginations soar, and stimulates our intellect. After all, it is only the written word that can convey complicated truths. But when I think back to my early years, reading means than all those things. Bear in mind that I was a very tall, very ungainly, very awkward boy, living with good but elderly parents in a stultifyingly small community.

My books gave me the entry into a parallel and more satisfying universe. My books showed me that life could be otherwise and that for me was a life-saving discovery. I say "my books" because I did not have to own a book for it to belong to me. Through libraries, I had access to every book in the world. They were all mine. I had access to knowledge and wisdom that Aristotle and John Milton could never have dreamed of. I could read and re-read and make fantastic friends, intimate friends. I could build a community of friends like Sydney Carton, D'Artagnan, Sherlock Holmes and so many others within my own mind and all I had to do to visit them was to open a book or just go into my own memory.

Reading about the loneliness of Edmond Dantes in the Chateau D'If or the fear of Tom Brown as he was terrorized during his school days legitimized my own emotions, my own fears. I was a frightened, bullied child at school and, until I read, I thought that I was the only human being in the universe with those problems.

Books and libraries really were my salvation when I was a child. I could pretend, in my interior world, that I was brave, that I was Sydney Carton mounting the steps of the guillotine to save the husband of the woman I love or that I was Abel Magwitch, risking death to visit the little boy who had once given him food.

Books and libraries really were my salvation when I was a child. I could pretend, in my interior world, that I was brave, that I was Sydney Carton mounting the steps of the guillotine to save the husband of the woman I love or that I was Abel Magwitch, risking death to visit the little boy who had once given him food.

I memorized the passages, acting them out in the privacy of my bedroom – and I could always bring tears to my own eyes, tears of joy at the beauty of the language and at my own courage. But, more important, that "pretend bravery" kept me going until, in real life, I began to develop a little real courage of my own.

So far I have spoken only about reading and what it meant to me. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized that reading is only the final contribution to a process that begins with writing. Writing and reading are inseparable. Of one thing we can be sure, writers write to be read. I don't care what Kafka said to Max Brod. If Kafka had really wanted his work destroyed, he would have destroyed it himself. It seems clear to me that an anticipated reader is a part of the writing process. But why must writers write? Haruki Murakami in Tokyo and Rohinton Mistry in Toronto both gave me the same answer, that, if they did not write, they felt incomplete.

But that doesn't really answer the question especially since, for most people, writing is such agony. I have a favourite joke about writers that makes that very point:

> A writer had died and was awaiting reassignment to some future existence. But before the reassignment he was permitted a tour of heaven and hell. First he went to hell, and hell was full of writers, tearing their hair out in frustration, crippled with writer's block, unable to get a word onto the page. And then he went to heaven, and heaven was full of writers, racked with frustration, tearing their hair out, unable to get a word onto the page.

> The dead writer turned to St. Peter and said, "I'm puzzled. Heaven and hell seem identical." And St. Peter replied, "No, no, no; the agony is the same, but in heaven they get published."

What is this innate need to write and to be read? Because it is common to every age and culture. More than 2000 years ago, in Rome, the greatest of all orators, Cicero, complained: "Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents – and – everyone is writing a book."

Why do they do it? There are so many theories. Francois Mauriac thought that all writing is in some way a re-examination of the writer's childhood, a voyage of self-discovery. Jungians argue that there are only so many stories to tell, the myths that inform our Western civilization. We tell and re-tell these stories as acts of comfort, of reassurance that we are not alone, that we are participants in a great collective ongoing past. Perhaps.

The theory that I find most persuasive is that argued by Northrop Frye in his great *Anatomy of Criticism.* Frye suggests first that every narrative contains within itself the author's vision of the individual and his of her relationship to the universe. Second, Frye suggests that the writer has an innate need, not always consciously felt, to communicate that vision to the world outside.

In recent years, I have been reviewing novels alone on a theatre stage, For an hour-and-a half, five times a season, the audience listens as I examine the tension between the author's vision of life and my own vision. It is in that juxtaposition of what the author believes and what I believe that I think we can identify the real excitement, the real joy of reading.

As we match our own vision of life to that of the author, we may sometimes find the author's vision persuasive. Thus the readers, as they read, are using the author's vision of life to produce anew and refined vision of their own.

After I finish speaking, the audience and I enter into a dialogue and there is real excitement as the three visions of existence clash – the writer's vision, my vision, and the vision of each member of the audience.

It doesn't matter that each member of the audience and I may have reacted differently to the novel. What matters is our engagement with it. As Kafka said, "A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us… if the book we are reading doesn't shake us awake like a blow on the skull, why bother reading it in the first place?"

I think that there is also another process at work as we read. As we match our own vision of life to that of the author, we may sometimes find the author's vision persuasive. Thus the readers, as they read, are using the author's vision of life to produce anew and refined vision of their own.

I know that my theory that reading is a clash of visions between the reader and the writer is no more than my own theory to explain the excitement I feel when I read, so let me finish by referring to one of the early joys I found in reading, the pleasure of pretending to be one of the characters.

When I was young and afraid, less cautious. I always pretended to be the hero. Now, I am less cautious.

When I speak on stage, I sometimes dramatize a passage from the novel I am reviewing, even if the character is less than sympathetic. I am going to end with a brief sermon from Brien Moore's wonderful novel, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne.* A bad and bullying priest, Father Quigley, is haranguing his congregation. I suppose I like thundering out the sermon because there were Welsh revivalist preachers among my forebears and, although I now hold a different faith, I still have a taste for what we used to call "hot gospel."

Permit me to indulge myself – from p. 66 of my paperback edition of Judith Hearne:

> "Plenty of money! Plenty of money! Plenty of time! Plenty of time! Yes. The people of this parish have both of those things. Time and money. But they don't have it for their church! They don't even have an hour of a Sunday to get down on their bended knees before Our Blessed Lord and ask for forgiveness for the rotten things they did during the week. They've got time for sin, time for naked dancing girls in the cinema, time to get drunk, … time to spend in beauty parlours… time to dance the tango and the fox-trot and the jitterbugging, time to read trashy books and indecent magazines, time to do any blessed thing you could care to mention. Except one."
>
> "They – don't – have – time – for – God."
>
> "Well,"… "I just want to tell those people one thing. One thing. If you don't have time for God, God will have no time for you."
>
> "And speaking of time, your time will come before the judgment seat of Heaven. Don't worry about that… what will God say to them on that terrible day? What will He say? Will it be, 'Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you?' Will it be that now? Do you think it's likely? Or will it be, 'Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels?'"