

# Chasing the Rainbow of a Thousand Books

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At a young age, I realized two key facts about myself: I like books, and I have a lousy memory. So I decided at the start of my senior year of high school to keep a list of all the books I read. In a small red notebook given to me by a boyfriend, I wrote down No. 1: "Mr. Bridge," by Evan S. Connell.

Nine hundred ninety-nine books, 14 years and an embarrassing number of boyfriends later, about all I remember of "Mr. Bridge" is that Kyra Sedgwick takes her top off in the movie.

The red notebook is long gone; the list now has its own fancy, overpriced journal (two, actually: one spanning 11 years, and the other three years and counting). On average, I read 71 books per year, 1.4 books per week. Everything with an ISBN makes the list, from big books ("Anna Karenina," "Ulysses," "Moby-Dick") to little books ("The Tempest," "Through the Looking-Glass," "Animal Rights: A Very Short Introduction").

In the beginning, I read with great abandon, with no concern for titles, authors or prestige. One year, I chose what to read in large part based on whether I liked the book jacket peeking out at me in the Knoxville Public Library. This process of selection yielded such now-forgotten finds as "Let the Dog Drive," "Dad Says He Saw You at the Mall" and "The Samurai's Garden."

For a long time I read only fiction, out of some perverse belief that nonfiction was too hard. Smarter now, I'm an equal-opportunity reader. My list has hovered around 23 percent nonfiction for most of the 21st century. Lucky for me my thinking changed, or else I might have missed "On Photography," "Consider the Lobster," "Kitchen Confidential" and "The Year of Magical Thinking."

Early on I discovered that I could up the total rapidly by reading poetry; one wintry Saturday in 2000, I added four books to the list: "Diving Into the Wreck," "The Simple Truth," "Lunch Poems" and "The Wild Iris." I read the fewest books during my first year of college, and my second-fewest during my first year of graduate school (41 and 43, ouch). My greatest annual total, 100, came right after I fell in love with a PhD student in -- could it have been otherwise? -- English.

Once a year, I tally the list. As I counted "My Name Is Red," "King Solomon's Mines," "The United States of Wal-Mart" and others, I noticed that I was approaching my 1,000th book.

My 500th book was "Best American Short Stories 1999." Interesting, sure, but not exactly a showstopper. No. 1,000 had to be great. It had to be awesome. It had to be the culmination of a list so catholic it includes "Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones" and "Sex and the City" alongside "American Pastoral" and "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." Since starting the list, my eyesight has gone from 20-20 to 20-100; if nothing else, the 1,000th book had to be worthy of my glasses.

Shakespeare is the author I've read the most -- 15 times in all. Virginia Woolf clocks in at 13, Kurt Vonnegut and Gabriel García Márquez at 11, Margaret Atwood at 10. My obsession with John Updike fueled my early adolescence but cooled off by the time I started the list at age 16.

Sometimes I reread books for the sheer pleasure of simultaneously reveling in the words and remembering the deliciousness of the first reading. I will never get enough of the romance of "Love in the Time of Cholera," for example, or the horror of "Wuthering Heights." And some books echo in my mind, so much a part of me that I barely distinguish between their words and my own: "The Waste Land," "The Sound and the Fury." More often than I care to admit, I'll read a book with a funny sense of familiarity, and it's not until I open the list to write in the latest that I discover I had read the book before. Just a few months ago, I eagerly cracked open "The Things They Carried" only to have my significant other, brandishing the list, point out that I had read it last year. Oops.

Books I've read twice count twice; books I've read three times (including "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," improbably enough) count three times. Each time we read a book, whether for the second time or the seventh, we read it anew, with eyes made deeper or darker or richer from experience. The first time I read "Madame Bovary," I realized only that she was sad. Twelve years later, I read it again and realized why.

Some books tell stories separate from those recounted within their pages. Once I tried to persuade my mother to read "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" by claiming that it had all the elements -- sex, thwarted love, villains, passion -- of the romance novels she favored. I read "American Psycho" in one sitting, clutching my cat the whole time, and I grew up near the crazy house portrayed in "Running With Scissors." For weeks after I quit smoking, a voice fought to drown out "The Razor's Edge," "In Cold Blood," "The White Hotel," "Bel Canto" and "Disgrace" with a relentless mocking: "You know what would make this book better? A Winston."

After college (all books read for educational purposes are marked with an asterisk on my list) I began searching for a career that would let me continue to add books. I waited tables, but there wasn't much opportunity to get reading done between reciting specials and fetching sangria. I worked as a temp, too, and impressed my bosses by lugging Michael Schmidt's "Lives of the Poets" from job to job.

I got my first job in publishing by describing how much I love the look, smell and feel of books. Since then, I've been able to add such titles as the Encyclopedia of Weather and Climate, "10 Practice Tests for the New SAT" and "Career Opportunities in the Publishing Industry." Worthy tomes, all, and being paid to read is one of my life's great joys.

Perhaps I moved to New York in part because it's the most literary of American cities. I lived a year in the neighborhood described in "Motherless Brooklyn," and I've walked the streets of "Washington Square," "The House of Mirth," "The Chosen" and "The Colossus of New York."

Unknowingly, I started "The Good Soldier" near the Flatiron Building, steps away from where the book itself begins. I stumbled upon Jonathan Franzen bird-watching in Central Park right around the time I finished "How to Be Alone." He knew I recognized him after I stopped, turned and stared.

Several months ago, I hit 990, and the dilemma began. Should the final 10 be old favorites? New classics? Aside from the brief fixation on covers, I'd never had a method for choosing books. One followed another -- for school, based on recommendations from friends, or according to the magical process by which books find you at the exact moment in which you need them. I read "Journal of a Solitude" during a period of sharp loneliness, and "Darkness Visible" during my own dark period.

As I neared the big one, though, I became hyper-conscious of what to read. In the end, of course, I simply read. One page after another. "The Afterlife," "The Intuitionist," "Twilight of the Superheroes," "The Great Railway Bazaar."

And then I realized what my 1,000th had to be. The novel that had been staring me down from the shelf for years, the most improbable of bestsellers, intimidating in every way, a book even academics fake having read. I fantasized about beginning the novel in a comfy chair with a glass of wine by my side. In reality, I opened the first page of the 1,000th book in neither comfort nor mild inebriation. Truth be told, I was stuck in traffic on the Fung Wah bus en route to Boston. Less than ideal circumstances, but that opening line is a killer. As with so many books so many times before, I read the first few words and I vanished.

"A screaming comes across the sky."

It'll be a while before I begin No. 1,001.

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