

Ten books

Chosen by Peter Tyrer

I have always been a quick reader, and this is both a blessing and a handicap. It means that my job as an editor is made somewhat easier as I can read, some might say scan, papers in a few minutes and at least pretend I have absorbed the essentials. I am far from sure that this is the case and with good literature I often fail to pick up lyrical prose, felicitous dialogue and much of the amazing poetry of language. I also may be reflecting the natural insularity of the British but feel remarkably privileged to have been born in a country which has generated the English language, a remarkable polyglot of expressive flexibility that is constantly being reformed to meet new demands. I have only read one book, *Le Grand Meaulnes* by Alain-Fournier¹ (I have struggled with it for years in the original French), which makes me regret that because I am not really fluent in other languages I am missing something very important in translation.

George Orwell

Good English uses simple words, and here George Orwell is supreme. He also once wrote that all his good writing was, in his reckoning, political. I think he meant that the expression of good prose or poetry without an underlying message was in some way self-indulgent; it had to convey something more. In his autobiographical account *Homage to Catalonia*² he shows this most clearly, and anyone who is uncertain about what his later novels *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are telling us should read this account of his experiences in the Spanish civil war, when he fought on the side of the main anarchist party (POUM) against the twin enemies of Franco and the PSUC (Catalan Communist Party), the latter an organisation following the philosophy and methods of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It was the covert and cynical actions of the PSUC, which concerned Orwell much more than the open warfare with Franco's falangists, and his horror at their distortion of language, so upsetting to an honest writer, that is so brilliantly described in the activities of the Ministries of Truth, Peace and Love in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger

Despite being constantly aware of Oscar Wilde's epigram that America and Britain are two countries separated by a common language (a very frequent reminder with papers I receive from across the Atlantic), some of our very best literature in English comes from North America. Orwell's honesty is repeated in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.³ The account of the passage of Salinger's anti-hero, Holden Caulfield, as a mixed-up adolescent who regards almost everyone he meets as a 'goddam phony' is raw observational insight at its best and I am convinced it is one of those books that will never really date. When I read the book I identified with Holden all the way through – I think I still do – and detested equally the people he despised, such as his handsome room-mate Ward Stradlater, who always looked neat and tidy but was a 'secret slob' because – why did this give me such a frisson of excitement? – in achieving his clean-cut glamour he never cleaned out the gunge from his razor. Some have criticised Salinger for not developing Holden better – the message he conveys is hardly the stuff of the American dream – but this, folks, is how it is and you cannot get away from it. I often see Holden looking at me when I am at my most portentous trying to convince a patient to do what is demanded by the system

I serve, a look which is a mixture of both pity and loathing, the latter for the degree of control I have at my elbow and the former for being part of an agency that has to exercise the trappings of this nonsense which no person in his right mind could possibly believe in.

Barack Obama's dreams

Orwell was a political writer but it is rare to find a good writing politician; Disraeli, Churchill, and possibly Roy Jenkins, were our last representatives in the UK. But Barack Obama is one too, and I am convinced this will be appreciated long after the honeymoon period of his presidency has passed. I read his autobiographical *Dreams from My Father*⁴ some time before he was chosen as the Democratic candidate for the White House and was subsequently amazed at his remarkable ability to keep race out of the campaign despite it clearly being an intrinsic backcloth to everything he said and did. It also helped me to understand the lottery of the place of one's birth. Barack Obama senior was a man with most of the same qualities as his son, but as he was born into a country (Kenya) where political affiliations were tribal, his more mature reflections on the way the country should move forward after independence were lost in the farrago of in-fighting that followed the departure of the English, and he died almost forgotten and in penury. But Obama in his book also explains why in an overpopulated country with poor resources it is often necessary to be tribal and for these loyalties to trump all others. As his aunt Zeituni told him – 'Don't judge your father too harshly. And you must learn from his life. If you have something everyone will want a piece of it. So you have to draw the line somewhere. If everyone is family, no one is family' (p. 337).⁴ To someone such as me, who rarely gives much thought to my own inheritance, a combination of traditional dogged Lancashire and more colourful Irish stock, and who rather arrogantly believes the whole world should learn to appreciate honesty, altruistic commitment and fair play, Obama explains gently why we should always be aware of the myriad ways others live their lives and the logic of their reasoning.

Ulysses by James Joyce

In my work with people with serious mental illness I often find that their apparent misuse and deconstruction of words may be linked to illness but sometimes contains valuable insights, and it is sad that so little of this is developed further in the chaos of psychosis. In *Ulysses*⁵ James Joyce celebrates the diversity and inventiveness of language better than anyone else I know and the way he manages to create a flow of words that gets to the heart of consciousness is onomatopoeia at its most supreme. *Ulysses*, a title that expresses Joyce's ingenuity and wit perfectly, comprises over 250 000 words and yet covers just an ordinary day, 16 June 1904. Jane Austen was celebrated for making the comings and goings of ordinary life such fascinating reading, but even she could not manage to make any of her novels cover the mere span of 24 hours. I also love Joyce for jesting with both his readers and critics. Even today, no one is quite sure about all the messages that Joyce was conveying in this work and even the notion that it is equivalent to the story of Homer's *Odyssey* may be a complete smokescreen or just a send-up of Homer, who I am sure would have taken the joke very well.

The poetry of reaching out

Joyce's prose is really the poetry of thought and feeling, as poetry has the ability of extending understanding to places where words in ordinary context may lose their capacity to express. This

particularly applies to the expression of gut emotions, especially those that are often hidden, painful or extraordinarily powerful. In this context I hope readers agree that the recent inclusion of poetry in the *Journal* is a valuable addition to our understanding (as distinct from the doggerel that is occasionally published and which masquerades in poetic form). Auden once described a poet as someone who likes ‘hanging around with words’ and it is the ability to stretch words to envelop emotion and its underlying structure that is the stuff of good poetry. Wisława Szymborska goes one step further in doing this; she connects with the reader by making her words so intimate they reach across and grasp your hand. In ‘Conversation with a Stone’ from the volume *View with a Grain of Sand*⁶ she describes the reaction I feel when faced with a patient who is so walled off from real contact that every approach is rejected:

You may get to know me, but you'll never know me through
My whole surface is turned toward you, all my insides turned away.

Alienation in Kafka and Golding

Franz Kafka was a man who would probably have been a regular attendee at a psychiatric clinic if he was alive today – although I suspect he would have reflected so much on this he would have been a frequent DNA – but even if he had attended, we would probably have been deprived of the best of his writings. No one describes alienation better, and in *Metamorphosis*⁷ this is expressed in its most coruscating form. The reactions of a travelling salesman who realises he has changed into an insect but desperately tries to keep this from his family and employers are somewhere near to – but of course I can never be certain – the feelings of many of our patients who, equally desperately, try to preserve the appearance of normality when strange torment fills their minds.

The external torments that afflict children and vulnerable adults such as those with intellectual difficulty are more obvious to others but equally insoluble to the sufferer. The best illustration that these are hidden just beneath the veneer of conventional existence but take very little to have them exposed comes from William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*.⁸ His story of the developing savagery of children when left to their own devices unfettered by adult supervision foreshadowed the Stanford Prison Experiment 17 years later together with all its ramifications.⁹ We all seem to have the ability to be sadistic bullies, and I have always felt that to be the recipient of this behaviour is one of the most offensive assaults on the psyche. Often when growing up I was grateful to be a monozygotic twin as twins at least can be protected from the awful isolation that so many others must suffer at these times.

The Rotters' Club by Jonathan Coe

Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club*¹⁰ brings this message even closer to home, as this account of life of a brother and sister growing up in Birmingham in the 1970s recapitulates my own experiences 20 years earlier. The school he describes was my own and its hierarchical system of headmaster, senior staff and prefects represented a lesser form of institutional bullying that was both threatening and controlling, and which I have done my best to counter whenever I have seen systems in the mental health services acting in the same high-handed manner. But Coe also describes the funny side of life in the curious microcosm of school existence. His exquisite account of his hero's feelings when he forgets his swimming trunks and fears consequent public humiliation in the pool at the hands of the physical education teacher recapitulates my own absent-mindedness and the curious ways in which I managed to keep my head up just above the swirling waters of official censure.

Big-Endians and Small-Endians

It is allowed on all hands, that the primitive way of breaking eggs before we eat them, was upon the larger end: but his present Majesty's grandfather, while he was a boy, going to eat an egg, and breaking it according to the ancient practice, happened to cut one of his fingers. Whereupon the Emperor his father published an edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs (p. 38).¹¹

Whenever I read directives from people who are not permitted the luxury of thought but regurgitate communications on risk management, health and safety, gender equality, data protection, zero tolerance, and all the other petty orthodoxies of this age of regulation, as though I was completely unaware of their underlying principles, I think of the Big-Endians and Small-Endians of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*¹¹ during the short time these missives pass through my hands to the waste-paper basket. I then stand back in amazement when I reflect that despite all the advances in our thinking in the past three centuries, the message of Swift's satire is still as alive and as vibrant as it was when published in 1726.

The Vanishing Face of Gaia by James Lovelock

Finally, on a more sombre note, James Lovelock's *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*¹² is a reminder that global warming is with us and will stay with us for a very long time. It will devastate many parts of the world but here in our favoured ‘septred isle’, and in New Zealand and many parts of Canada, we will do very well, as I am recognising already in the productivity of my allotment. What Lovelock gets over excellently is the notion of Gaia, of the Earth as a living planet that can regulate itself if it is allowed to without interference from others. The preoccupation with green solutions such as wind farms, reduced air travel and other attempts to reduce our carbon footprints – do birds have aerial ones? – is tiny compared with the existence of man. As Lovelock points out, ‘merely by existing, people and their dependent animals are responsible for more than ten times the greenhouse gas emissions of all the airline travel in the world’ (p. 4).¹² We in psychiatry do not need to be reminded that social deprivation, over-population and poverty are the stuff of serious psychiatric disorder and have been given notice that the world population will have to reduce dramatically if increased mental suffering is to be prevented. Suffering will occur anyway, as a by-product of famine and disease, if we choose to do nothing now.

What I do not read

In looking at the books recommended by previous authors of ‘Ten books’, I am aware that none of my recommendations have been shared by others. One might expect this but I also notice that many of our authors do recommend the same books so my isolation somewhat disturbs me. None of my books are psychiatric ones in the classificatory sense, but I have to be honest and say that I do not often use these except as reference texts. It may be that I have spent too long in community psychiatric teams and have been deskilled, but most classic psychiatric texts have little meaning for me now except for brief reference. Does this mean I need to be woken up to the reality of proper psychiatric practice¹³ or am I just past my sell-by date? I am not sure. Perhaps I should take some reassurance from Simon Wessely when he says ‘Let's be frank. Doctors and scientists don't need to read books. Our colleagues in the humanities use books to communicate – we use papers.’¹⁴ But I do get sustenance from the books I have listed and I think it helps my clinical judgements. I accept that the great works of psychiatric theory and practice are necessary for the training of psychiatrists but they have little relevance for me now, when in my present preoccupation with collaborative

environmental change¹⁵ I am trying to get inside the heads of people whose psychopathology represents only a tiny part of my understanding of their problems.

One book on the list of no fewer than five of our previous contributors is Karl Jaspers' *General Psychopathology*,¹⁶ which is still in print. Now whenever I tried to read this book when it was recommended during my training at the Maudsley Hospital I fell asleep. I know I fall asleep quite easily but not usually with such alacrity as through Jasperian exposure. Later I thought I understood the problem when I overheard Aubrey Lewis, the foundation pillar of the Institute of Psychiatry, responding to a question from one of my colleagues that he did not quite understand part of Jaspers' explanation of some aspect of phenomenology. 'Ah', Sir Aubrey replied, somewhat triumphantly I thought, 'but of course you would be able to understand it if you read Jaspers in the original German'. The Lancashire side of my personality said to me 'Now that is the mark of the true scholar', the Irish one sided with Holden Caulfield and said, 'Another goddam phony'.

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- 3 Salinger JD. *Catcher in the Rye*. Little Brown & Company, 1951.

- 4 Obama B. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. Canongate Books, 2007.
- 5 Joyce J. *Ulysses*. Sylvia Beach, 1922.
- 6 Szyborska W. *View with a Grain of Sand* (trans S Barańczak, C Cavanagh). Harcourt, 1995.
- 7 Kafka F. *Die Verwandlung*. Kurt Wolff, 1915.
- 8 Golding W. *Lord of the Flies*. Faber & Faber, 1954.
- 9 Zimbardo PG. On the ethics of intervention in human psychological research: with special reference to the Stanford Prison Experiment. *Cognition* 1973; **2**: 243–56.
- 10 Coe J. *The Rotters' Club*. Penguin, 2001.
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- 12 Lovelock J. *The Vanishing Face of Gaia*. Allen Lane, 2009.
- 13 Craddock N, Antebi D, Attenburrow MJ, Bailey A, Carson A, Cowen P, et al. Wake-up call for British psychiatry. *Br J Psychiatry* 2008; **193**: 6–9.
- 14 Wessely S. Ten books. *Br J Psychiatry* 2002; **181**: 81–4.
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- 16 Jaspers K. *Allgemeine Psychopathologie: Ein Leitfaden für Studierende, Ärzte und Psychologen*. Springer, 1913.

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