

This timeless classic." "Universal appeal." "Countless readers have embraced its message." For generations, the concept was upheld that works of literature guarded an essential meaning; that such a meaning could only be revealed by certain persons entrusted with its safe disclosure; and that, once released, it would affect readers in exactly the same way, regardless of their character, background or accidental place in history and the world. Hence the phrases above, which often still have their way with book jackets and related point-of-sale material. With one exception, the four titles here challenge that notion. They share, instead, a focus on famous titles that is unashamedly personal.

Will Schwalbe's *Books for Living* upholds the universalist view of fiction, and, at first glance, looks as though it belongs to the ever-expanding category of reading-on-the-run. Schwalbe offers a range of titles, from Lin Yutang's *The Importance of Living*, through *David Copperfield* and "Bartleby the Scrivener" to Xavier de Maistre's *A Journey Round My Room*. Each chapter is subtitled with an action, such as "Slowing Down", "Quitting", or "Betraying". The book's aim is therefore consistent: if you wish to choose kindness, or have trouble with the business of hugging, or feel sensitive or are fearful of betrayal, you will find guidance on such topics (or consolation if, try as you might, you cannot see yourself "Embracing Mediocrity") by reading the appropriate work. This is where Schwalbe's book in fact challenges the notion of reading-on-the-run. It does not offer bullet-pointed highlights so that you can dip in, find the solution and emerge thinking "There, I've done *Copperfield*". Schwalbe expects the readers to read.

His own observations are certainly not the fruits of skim-reading. Of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* ("Disconnecting"), he notes that we would be mortified if the most intimate parts of our lives were laid bare through Orwellian surveillance; yet we sign up for precisely that exposure through our use of smartphones and social media. In the chapter on *Rebecca* ("Betraying"), Schwalbe draws attention to the way in which jealousy and intense loneliness interweave, offering a parallel between the novel and the rumbustious life and drink-hastened death of a friend of his. Here, one of the key elements of *Books for Living* becomes clear: how the boundary between our reading and our lives is often so porous.

Each volume in the recently established Bookmarked series, says the blurb, "is a no-holds barred personal narrative detailing how a particular work of literature influenced an author on their journey to becoming a writer, as well as the myriad directions in which that journey has taken them". As with the Schwalbe, such an intent might raise certain suspicions: that this is going to be like a class report on "my favourite book", perhaps. In different ways, however, the titles here largely evade or disarm such scepticism.



Kurt Vonnegut, 1969

## How to read

### Some personal relationships with books

MICHAEL W. THOMAS

Will Schwalbe

BOOKS FOR LIVING  
269pp. Two Roads. £16.99.  
978 1 4447 9077 1

Curtis Smith

KURT VONNEGUT'S  
'SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE'  
184pp. IG Publishing. £10.99 (US \$14.95).  
978 1 63246 011 0

Kirby Gann

JOHN KNOWLES'S 'A SEPARATE  
PEACE'  
144pp. IG Publishing. £10.99 (US \$14.95).  
978 1 63246 010 3

Aaron Burch

STEPHEN KING'S 'THE BODY'  
130pp. IG Publishing £10.99 (US \$14.95).  
978 1 63246 030 1

Curtis Smith makes his journey in the company of "a guide as charming as he is sly", the narrator of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. As with the other titles in the Bookmarked series, Smith's evaluation proceeds somewhat in the manner of Billy Pilgrim's, between present, past and a third space which contains the writer's musings on the advent, impact and resilient after-life of his chosen title. "We go to the beach", Smith says, "in the summers we don't have a

major expense – a new car, a dead furnace".

There, the approach and retreat of the waves mimic Kurt Vonnegut's cute curtiness: "Hello. Farewell. Hello. Farewell". "Billy Pilgrim", adds Smith, "echoes this Tralfamadorian saying before he's struck by an assassin's bullet". Elsewhere, Smith's meditations take in the fate of Lot's wife and the third Punic War, and show this to be no loose-limbed book report but a serious attempt to place Vonnegut's novel at the heart of his personal history, his daily work as a teacher and his fear that the world is seeking its own assassin's bullet. The most substantial of the three Bookmarked titles, Smith's book nonetheless switches about with a cheery disregard for linearity that would invoke Tralfamadorian approval.

All three Bookmarked authors take pains to fix on a crucial starting point: the time of life and circumstances in which they read their chosen book. At fourteen, Kirby Gann, also the series editor, will do most things other than read (already an accomplished swimmer, he is "Boy Wonder" to his family). Confined to his room (this is 1982, when such a measure was still punishment), he is forced into school-work and begins to read *A Separate Peace*, John Knowles's understated novel of Gene and Phineas, two boarders at a New England prep school during the Second World War. Almost immediately he starts to construct a shadow-novel: the diffident Gene and supremely confident Phineas morph respectively into his friend Gary Thompson and himself. Gann "has never been to New England... The Devon school is private, a prep school (the meaning of

which he has to look up)". That last phrase will resonate with many readers, articulating as it does the power of revelation. The book itself is everything yet, in another way, not enough: the reader must find out its context, fill in any strange gaps, the better to savour its magic. As his personal and writing lives proceed, Gann becomes more knowing. The relationship between Gene and Phineas, he discovers, belongs in a tradition of such pairings: a force of nature and a self-conscious chronicler. Perhaps inevitably, he mentions Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway.

Aaron Burch's approach to Stephen King's novella *The Body* differs from that of Smith and Gann. The first he knew of it, he admits, was through Rob Reiner's film *Stand By Me* and much of his early discussion focuses on how he accommodated the novella in an imaginary world already constructed by the film. Burch's frankness in this regard is refreshing – he does not put the film away as a childish thing but allows it to inform his responses to the novella. A parallel with Gann's discussion emerges. *The Body* and *A Separate Peace* are coming-of-age tales, although King's is bleaker: "I was twelve going on thirteen", says the narrator, Gordon Lachance, "when I first saw a dead human being. It happened in 1960, a long time ago". More than this, both Gann and Burch find connections between the settings of their titles and their own worlds. Gann muses on the "separate peace" of Knowles's title, the unsettling contrast between Gene and Phineas's summer idyll and the war far away, comparing it with the "peace" he knew as a child, circumscribed by the Cold War. Burch contrasts first times: Gordy, Chris, Teddy and Vern's discovery of the body and the ways in which beginnings have affected his writing and teaching: "First date. First kiss. First job, first pay-check... Firsts signify specific moments of before and after, while also demarcating an irreversible change in who we are". You cannot go back, as numerous books and songs have insisted before and since King's novella – and as Thomas Wolfe's George Webber discovers, although Wolfe substitutes the more poignant "home". What you can go forward to, as Burch celebrates, is deepening and abiding friendship. If beginnings are a powerful theme for Burch, so too is that vital development: "unlike Gordy Lachance, I did have friends later on like the ones I had when I was twelve. But the age of the question isn't the important part of the sentiment".

Here, as in these other readers' confessions, is an awareness that, literally and figuratively, the reader is an unfixed being. The book that delighted the teenager might baffle or appal the mid-lifer confronting Curtis Smith's "deterioration of cartilage and bone". Amid such uncertainty, however, a handful of books will always faithfully echo Knowledge's words to Everyman: "I will go with thee and be thy guide". They just might not be the universal classics you expect.