

The Secret

Personal

Author: Ioana Bâldea Contanti

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This morning I gave in to an old bad habit, which lately I had almost forgotten about. Illicit as late night ice cream, disapproved by my close ones, it was quite long ago the magic ingredient of silent mornings, which I shared with a delicious and unfortunately fleeting bookish fantasy.

Spread three or four books on a small table and in the mist of the morning coffee, choose one at chance, and open it at random. Read a few pages. If they catch your attention, kudos to them. If not, extract the next candidate, open it the same way, at random, and continue the game until you get to the few pages which will cause your coffee to go cold, put time on stand-by, and reduce the next half hour to an updated Shakespearean dilemma: to run or not to run after the subway.

I am sure I did not invent it myself, but in solitary mornings, I often lived with the feeling that surface skimming of books by several authors at the same time is some sort of literature consumption in a fast-food pace, not at all reasonable, but full of the unexpected pleasure of a sentence, an image, of an idea discovered with delight and with the inner guilt assumed, recognized and swept under the rug, that "this is not the way you read a book".

And no, you do not read it like that. Not from the middle.

A few years ago, I shared another game (I can't recall where I got this trick from) with a reader who was much more orderly than me. When I was browsing through bookshops and did not know whether to treat them as a library or a consumerist temple, I mean when the acquisition of a book was in doubt, I did the following : I would open the book and write down carefully the first letter of the first word from the first page. If it formed another



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word in combination with the last letter of the last word from the last page, I would buy it. If not, I'd decide it could wait. *Ia, sa, pa, da, ca, re* (after all, it's a musical note!), *nu, cu, ce, va* were qualified while *nt, st, pr, dv, rp, cr, gd, îr* lost the race, at least for the moment.

Arbitrary, of course. And yet, charmingly playful. Accomplice to the book itself, with its objective being, but also with its body of meaning including semantic cleverness and phonetic games created to captivate me, to pull me out of my reality for a few hours or minutes per day.

And no, this is not the way you buy books. Not if you're a serious reader.

Another bad habit comes from my childhood this time. I would get caught up in reading a text and read fervently until, suddenly, my proverbial lack of patience stepped in and there I was, skipping pages and quickly browsing the text from right to left, until the end of the story. I simply had to know how it ended. In that moment. In that instance. My mother got mad every time when she witnessed the ritual. And I remember defending myself by promising her that by the time I got to the end *de facto* I would "forget" the one which I stole prematurely. Obviously, that never happened.

I know, this should not be done either.

And yet here I am, sitting in the full intimacy of my decaf scented living room on a foggy and grim morning while I should, perhaps, hurry up to become a social and responsible "me". In Pascal Quignard's book, *Marin Marais*, the appointed musician at the king's court gets married and becomes father of nineteen children, all in one simple pictorial phrase contaminated as if by the purity of a *viola verb*. The XIXth chapter has only two pages, which can be cut out from the whole as a narrative snapshot of Chaucer. The coffee is still hot, the only eyes in the room are my own, ready to meet those who pervade furtively, confident, serene, open, half-closed, locked, haunting, tearful or smiling *All the world's mornings*.

That is definitely not how you should read. But time itself is lazy, pleasant and quiet, childish and fresh. It's mine and it's only between me and the book. When I get back home today, I'm going to read it from the beginning without indolence or coffee. Now though, I will zap through Llosa's pages and through a tropical forest album. Just until I finish my coffee. After all, I'm home alone. And I won't tell anyone.



Translated by: *Loredana Vasilache*

Proofreader: *Laura-Andreea David*

MTTLC, Bucharest University

LiterNet.ro



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