

PEN IN HAND



# *Pen in Hand*

*Reading, Rereading  
and Other Mysteries*

TIM PARKS



ALMA BOOKS

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## Contents

<i>Foreword: A Weapon for Readers</i>	1
HOW COULD YOU LIKE THAT BOOK?	9
<i>How Could You Like that Book?</i>	11
<i>Reading Is Forgetting</i>	17
<i>The Key to Rereading</i>	22
<i>Why Read New Books?</i>	29
<i>The Pleasures of Pessimism</i>	34
<i>Stories We Can't See</i>	42
<i>The Books We Don't Understand</i>	48
<i>Bob Dylan: The Music Travels, the Poetry         Stays Home</i>	57
<i>Italy: Writing to Belong</i>	62
<i>Clearing Up Ambiguity</i>	68
<i>The Writer's Shadow</i>	74
<i>Too Many Books?</i>	79
<i>Reality Fiction</i>	85
<i>Six Chairs in Search of an Audience</i>	91
<i>Looking for Primo Levi</i>	95
READING AND WRITING	103
<i>How I Read</i>	105
<i>In Search of Authenticity</i>	111
<i>Do Flashbacks Work in Literature?</i>	118
<i>Reading: The Struggle</i>	125
<i>Reading Upward</i>	131
<i>How Italy Improved My English</i>	137

<i>How Best to Read Auto-Fiction</i>	143
<i>Why Write in English?</i>	150
MALPRACTICE	157
<i>A Novel Kind of Conformity</i>	159
<i>Pretty Violence</i>	164
<i>Leave Novelists Out of Fiction</i>	172
<i>The Limits of Satire</i>	180
<i>Stifled by Success</i>	187
<i>The Books We Talk About</i>	192
<i>(and Those We Don't)</i>	
<i>References, Please</i>	198
<i>Raise Your Hand if You've Read</i>	204
<i>Knausgaard</i>	
<i>My Life, Their Archive</i>	210
<i>Book Fair Hype</i>	215
<i>After Brexit</i>	220
<i>God's Smuggler</i>	225
GAINED AND LOST IN TRANSLATION	231
<i>In the Tumult of Translation</i>	233
<i>A Long Way from Primo Levi</i>	244
<i>The Translation Paradox</i>	258
<i>Raw and Cooked</i>	268
<i>When Not to Translate</i>	276
<i>A No-Nonsense Machiavelli</i>	282
<i>The Expendable Translator</i>	289
<i>Gained in Translation</i>	298
<i>Does Literature Help Us Live?</i>	305
Acknowledgements	313
Note on the Texts	313

## Foreword: A Weapon for Readers

Imagine you are asked what single alteration in people's behaviour might best improve the lot of mankind. How foolish would you have to be to reply: have them learn to read with a pen in their hands? But I firmly believe such a simple development would bring huge benefits.

We have too much respect for the printed word, too little awareness of the power words hold over us. We allow worlds to be conjured up for us with very little concern for the implications. We overlook glaring incongruities. We are suckers for alliteration, assonance and rhythm. We rejoice over stories, whether fiction or "documentary", whose outcomes are flagrantly manipulative, self-serving or both. Usually both. If a piece of writing manifests the stigmata of literature – symbols, metaphors, unreliable narrators, multiple points of view, structural ambiguities – we afford it unlimited credit. With occasional exceptions, the only "criticism" brought to such writing is the kind that seeks to elaborate its brilliance, its cleverness, its creativity. What surprised me most when I first began publishing fiction myself was how much at every level a novelist is allowed to *get away with*.

This extravagant regard, which seemed to reach a peak in the second half of the twentieth century as the modernists of a generation before were canonized as performers of the ever more arduous miracle of conferring a little meaning on life, is reflected

in the treatment of the book itself. The spine must not be bent back and broken, the pages must not be marked with dog ears, there must be no underlining, no writing in the margins. Obviously, for those of us brought up on library books and school-owned textbooks (my copy of Browning bore the name of a dozen pupils who had used the text before me), there were simple and sensible reasons supporting this behaviour. But the reverence went beyond a proper respect for those who would be reading the pages after you. Even when I bought a book myself, if my parents caught me breaking its spine so that it would lay open on the desk, they were shocked. Writing was sacred. In the beginning was the Word, the word written down, hopefully on quality paper. Much of the resistance to e-books, notably from the literati, has to do with a loss of this sense of sacredness, of the vulnerable paper vessel that thrives on our protective devotion.

But the absolute need to read with a pen in one's hand became evident to me watching my students as we studied the art of translation together. I would give them the same text in English and Italian and ask them to tell me which was the original text. Or I would give them a text without saying whether it was a translation or not and ask them to comment on it. Again and again, the authority conveyed by the printed word and an aura of literariness, or the excitement of dramatic action, or the persuasive drift of an argument, would prevent them from noticing the most obvious absurdities. They would read a sentence like "For a little while in his arms Maria was like a doll, she allowed herself to be undressed and turned in the bed without taking a breath" (from William Weaver's translation of Rosetta Loy's *Le strade di polvere*) and be so captivated by the romantic context as to miss the fact that one cannot be undressed and turned in a bed without taking a breath; it takes rather longer to undress someone and have your way with them than most people can survive without breathing. This is a poor translation of an Italian mix of idiom

and invention – *senza emettere un fiato* – which might best have been translated “without so much as a sigh”.

Or they would read, “Then came the train. It began by looking like a horse, a horse with its cart raised up on the rough stones” (from Isabel Quigley’s translation of Pavese’s *The Moon and the Bonfires*), and amid the drama of the action they wouldn’t see how incongruous this image of a cart “raised up on rough stones” was, how unlikely it would be to raise up a cart on rough stones. It was just a poor translation of a horse and cart on cobbles (*un cavallo col carretto su dei ciottoli*).

But beyond these small technicalities, the kind of internal inconsistencies that someone like Beckett actually introduced into his work deliberately in order to wake the reader up (and again many students do not notice such deliberate inconsistencies), I would find that we had read a page of Virginia Woolf together without the students appreciating that we were being encouraged to think positively about suicide, or we would read D.H. Lawrence without their being aware that the writer was insisting that some lives were definitely worth more than others. I even remember a class reading this passage from Henry Green (admittedly as part of a larger scene) without any student being aware of its sexual content:

But in spite of Mrs Middleton’s appeal, the girl, with a “here you are” leant over to the husband and opened wide the pearly gates. Her wet teeth were long and sharp, of an almost transparent whiteness. The tongue was pointed also and lay curled to a red tip against her lower jaw, to which the gums were a sterile pink. Way back behind, cavernous, in a deeper red, her uvula seemed to shrink from him.

Aside from simply insisting, as I already had for years, that they be more alert, I began to wonder what was the most practical

way I could lead my students to a greater attentiveness, teach them to protect themselves from all those underlying messages that can shift one's attitude without one's being aware of it? I began to think about the way I read myself, about the activity of reading, what you put into it rather than what was simply on the page. Try this experiment, I eventually told them: from now on always read with a pen in your hands, not beside you on the table, but actually in your hand, ready, armed. And always make three or four comments on every page, at least one critical, even aggressive. Put a question mark by everything you find suspect. Underline anything you really appreciate. Feel free to write "splendid", but also, "I don't believe a word of it". And even "bullshit".

A pen is not a magic wand. The critical faculty is not conjured from nothing. But it was remarkable how many students improved their performance with this simple stratagem. There is something predatory, cruel even, about a pen suspended over a text. Like a hawk over a field, it is on the lookout for something vulnerable. Then it is a pleasure to swoop and skewer the victim with the nib's sharp point. The mere fact of holding the hand poised for action changes our attitude to the text. We are no longer passive consumers of a monologue but active participants in a dialogue. Students would report that their reading slowed down when they had a pen in their hand, but at the same time the text became more dense, more interesting, if only because a certain pleasure could now be taken in their own response to the writing when they didn't feel it was up to scratch, or worthy only of being scratched.

Looking back over a book we have just read and scribbled on, or coming back to the same book months and maybe years later, we get a strong sense of our own position in relation to the writer's position. Where he said this kind of thing, I responded with that, where he touched this nerve, my knee jerked thus.

Hence a vehicle for self-knowledge is created, for what is the self if not the position one habitually assumes in relation to other selves? These days, going back to reading the novels and poetry that have been on my shelves since university days, I see three or four layers of comments, perhaps in different-coloured pens. And I sense how my position has changed, how I have changed.

In this regard, you might say that the opportunity to comment on articles published online is an excellent thing. And it is. I do not share the view of some fellow writers that those commenting, criticizing and protesting are beyond the pale. Often I will find comments below an article (on occasion, alas, below my own articles) that are more intelligent, even better informed, than the article itself. This is exciting, even when it is mortifying.

Nevertheless, commenting on articles online is not the same thing as writing in the margins of the novels one has bought. Online one is expressing one's opinion for other readers. There is a risk of falling back on partisan positions, of using the space to ride old hobby horses, of showing off. Often the debate moves far away from the article itself. And once the comments are made it is unlikely one will go back to look at them, certainly not in the way one is more or less bound to go back, over the years, to Hemingway or Svevo, or Katherine Mansfield, or Elsa Morante; and then it is fascinating to see what you did and didn't see in the past. You criticized an opinion that makes perfect sense now; you applauded a detail that now looks suspiciously fake. What will I feel about today's comments on my next reading?

Some readers will fear that the pen-in-hand approach denies us those wonderful moments when we fall under a writer's spell, the moments when we succumb to a style, and are happy to succumb to it, when suddenly it seems to us that this approach to the world – be it Proust's or Woolf's or Beckett's or Bernhard's – is really, at least for the moment, the only approach we

are interested in, moments that are no doubt among the most exciting in our reading experience.

No, I wouldn't want to miss out on that. But if writers are to entice us into their vision, let us make them work for it. Let us resist enchantment for a while, or at least for long enough to have some idea of what we are being drawn into. For the mindless, passive acceptance of other people's representations of the world can only enchain us and hamper our personal growth, hamper the possibility of positive action. Sometimes it seems the whole of society languishes in the stupor of the fictions it has swallowed. Wasn't this what Cervantes was complaining about when he began *Don Quixote*? Better to read a poor book with alert resistance than devour a good one in mindless adoration.

And so, dear reader, before going on to read the following pages, where I try to speak intelligently about the arts and mysteries of reading and writing and translation, please by all means pick up a pen, a sharp pen, keep it tightly gripped between your fingers and be ready to use it whenever and however seems appropriate, viciously, generously, above all judiciously.

*Pen in Hand*



How Could You  
Like that Book?



## How Could You Like that Book?

I rarely spend much time wondering why others do not enjoy the books I like. Henry Green, an old favourite, almost a fetish, is never an easy read and never offers a plot that is immediate or direct. “There’s not much straight shootin’,” he admitted, in the one interview he gave. Elsa Morante is so lush and fantastical, so extravagantly rhetorical, she must seem way over the top to some. Thomas Bernhard offers one nightmare after another in cascades of challenging rhetoric; it’s natural to suspect he’s overdoing it. Christina Stead is so wayward, so gloriously tangled and disorganized, it’s inevitable that some readers will grow weary. And so on.

Perhaps it’s easy for me to understand why so many are not on board with these writers, because I occasionally feel the same way myself. In fact, it may be that the most seductive novelists are also the ones most willing to risk irritating you. Faulkner comes to mind, so often on the edge between brilliant and garulous. Italy’s Carlo Emilio Gadda was another. Muriel Spark. Sometimes even Kafka. Resistance to these writers is never a surprise to me.

On the other hand, I do spend endless hours mulling over the mystery of what others like. Again and again the question arises: how *can* they?

I am not talking about genre fiction, where the pleasures are obvious enough. Reviewing duties over the last few years have had me reading Stieg Larsson, E.L. James and a score of Georges Simenon’s Maigrets. Once you accept the premise

that you are reading for entertainment, their plots and brightly drawn dramatis personae quickly pull you in. However “adult” the material, one is reminded of the way one read as a child: to know what happens. You turn the pages quickly, even voraciously, and when something galls – the ugly exploitation of sexual violence in Larsson, the cartoon silliness of James, the monotonous presentation of Maigret as the dour, long-suffering winner – you simply skip and hurry on, because the story has you on its hook. You can see why people love these books and, above all, love reading lots of them. They encourage addiction, the repetition of a comforting process: identification, anxiety/suspense, reassurance. Supposedly realistic, they actually take us far away from our own world and generally leave us feeling pleased that our lives are spared the sort of melodrama we love to read about.

But what are we to say of the likes of Haruki Murakami? Or Salman Rushdie? Or Jonathan Franzen? Or Jennifer Egan, or recent prize-winners like Andrés Neuman and Eleanor Catton or, most monumentally, Karl Ove Knausgaard? They are all immensely successful writers. They are clearly very competent. Knausgaard is the great new thing, I am told. I pick up Knausgaard. I read a hundred pages or so and put it down. I cannot understand the attraction. No, that’s not true, I do get a certain attraction, but cannot understand why one would commit to its extension over so many pages. It doesn’t seem attractive *enough* for what it is asking of me.

Take Elena Ferrante. Again and again I pick up her novels, and again and again I give up around page fifty. My impression is of something wearisomely concocted, determinedly melodramatic, forever playing on Neapolitan stereotype. Here, in *My Brilliant Friend*, the narrator is remembering a quarrel between neighbours:

As their vindictiveness increased, the two women began to insult each other if they met on the street or the stairs: harsh, fierce sounds. It was then that they began to frighten me. One of the many terrible scenes of my childhood begins with the shouts of Melina and Lidia, with the insults they hurl from the windows and then on the stairs; it continues with my mother rushing to our door, opening it and looking out, followed by us children; and ends with the image, for me still unbearable, of the two neighbours rolling down the stairs, entwined, and Melina's head hitting the floor of the landing, a few inches from my shoes, like a white melon that has slipped from your hand.

What can one say? Making no effort of the imagination, Ferrante simply announces melodrama: "Harsh, fierce sounds"; "One of the many terrible scenes of my childhood"; insults are "hurled". The memory is "for me still unbearable", though in the following pages the incident is entirely forgotten. Is "entwined" really the right word for two people locked in struggle on the stairs? As in a B-movie, a head hits the floor a few inches from our hero's shoes. Then comes the half-hearted attempt to transform cartoon reportage into literature: "like a white melon that has slipped from your hand".

I can't recall dropping a melon myself, but if the aim of a metaphor is to bring intensity and clarity to an image, this one goes in quite a different direction. The dull slap of the soft white melon hitting the ground and rolling away from you would surely be a very different thing from the hard crack of a skull and the sight of a bloody face. I'm astonished that, having tossed the metaphor in, out of mechanical habit one presumes, the author didn't pull it right out again. And even more I'm astonished that other people are not irritated by this lazy writing.

It's not only fiction that does this to me. I am told, for example, that Stephen Grosz's book *The Examined Life* – a psychoanalyst giving us his most interesting case histories – is a work of genius and is selling like hotcakes. I buy a copy, and halfway through I toss it away, literally, at the wall, in intense irritation. How can people like these stories, with their over-easy packaging of what are no doubt extremely complex personal problems, their evident and decidedly unexamined complacency about the rightness of the analyst's intervention?

There. I live under the constant impression that other people, other readers, are allowing themselves to be hoodwinked. They are falling for charms they shouldn't fall for. Or imagining charms that aren't there. They should be making it a little harder for their authors. Reading Neuman's *Traveller of the Century*, I appreciate that he is brilliant, that he effortlessly churns out page after page of complex prose, but I feel the whole thing is an ambition-driven exercise in literariness. Same with so many who flaunt their fancy prose. Even when I read an author I recognize as a very serious and accomplished artist – Alice Munro, Colm Tóibín – I begin to wonder how people can be so wholehearted in their enthusiasm. Both writers, it seems to me, equate fiction with the manufacture of a certain rather predictable pathos, an unspoken celebration of our capacity for compassion and the supposed redemption of suffering in the pleasure of fine prose and good storytelling. No doubt these things do have their worth – I acknowledge that – it is the growing impression that they are merely being rehearsed that is wearisome. Toni Morrison is another. The writer has learnt how to concoct our sophisticated drug for us. How can readers feel at ease with that?

No sooner have I articulated my amazement, my sense of betrayal almost, than I begin to feel insecure. Is it really possible that so many people I respect have got it wrong? Close friends as well. Am I an inveterate elitist? A puritan? Or resentful of

other people's success? Shouldn't I perhaps relax and enjoy my reading a little more, rather than approaching books with constant suspicion?

On the other hand, there are those moments when a work overcomes my suspicion, and persuades me that what I'm reading really is something more than a carefully calculated literary operation. I remember my first encounters with W.G. Sebald or J.M. Coetzee or Natalia Ginzburg – and those moments give me great pleasure and make me feel happy with how I read. Then I'm glad I didn't waste too much time with the white melons.

Where to go with this uncertainty? Perhaps rather than questioning other readers' credulity, or worrying about my own presumption, what might really be worth addressing here is the whole issue of incomprehension: mutual and apparently insuperable incomprehension between well-meaning and intelligent people, all brought up in the same cultural tradition, more or less. It's curious, for example, that the pious rhetoric gushing around literature always promotes the writing and reading habit as a powerful communication tool, an instrument for breaking down barriers, promoting understanding – and yet it is exactly over my reaction to books that I tend to discover how completely out of sync with others I am.

I have often argued not just over whether *Disgrace* is a good novel, but over what it means. How can you suppose (I grow heated) that Coetzee is too austere, that he lacks a sense of humour? How can you imagine that he is claiming a direct moral equivalence between a professor sleeping with one of his students and a band of young men raping a woman in her isolated farmhouse? Yet people do suppose Coetzee has no humour, and they do imagine he means that equivalence. And perhaps he does. Certainly I have no way of proving he doesn't.

Could this be the function, then, or at least one important function of fiction: to make us aware of our differences? To have

our contrasting positions emerge in response to these highly complex cultural artefacts? Not that superficial togetherness in celebration that the publishing industry, the literary festivals and the interminable literary prizes are forever seeking to generate, the happy conviction that we have found a new literary hero and can all bask together in his or her achievement – but all the heated debate that actually preceded the prize-giving: the shifting alliances as each book was discussed, the times you just couldn't believe that the fellow juror who supported you over book A is now seriously proposing to ditch book B, and so on.

In this view, our reaction to literature becomes a repeated act of self-discovery. Our contrasting reactions to the books we read tell us who we are. We are our position in relation to each other as understood in the reaction to these books. Reading other people's takes on Primo Levi, Murakami or David Eggers and comparing them to my own, I get some sense of who we all are and what we're up to. Sometimes this turns out to be far more interesting than reading the book itself.

If this is the case, then, the important thing would be, first, really to understand one's own reaction, to observe it with great care; and, second, to articulate it honestly, without any fudging for fear that others might disagree. Though even a fudge is a declaration of identity. And nothing could be more common among the community of book reviewers than fudging.

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## Note on the Texts

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