

M Y R E A D I N G H A B I T



P A U L A M A R A N T Z C O H E N

I was a great childhood reader. Between the ages of seven and seventeen, my nose was always in a book. This was viewed as a sign of unusual precocity, and I received much acclaim for it from my parents and teachers. Looking back, however, I realize that I began reading by default and continued doing so out of habit.

The philosopher William James wrote insightfully about the role of habits in our lives. He explained that we form habits through practice but that they eventually become embedded in our character: “So far as we are thus mere bundles of habit, we are stereotyped creatures, imitators and copiers of our past selves,” he wrote. Our habits, in short, are us, and my reading habit helped make me who I am.

Habits form for many reasons, but often because they are useful in some immediate, often primitive, context. Was my childhood reading habit the result of my being hungry for knowledge? No. I read because I was a self-conscious and anxious child; books were soothing forms of escape. As a teenager, I lacked athletic acumen and had problems with my skin, not to mention my hair; it seemed safer to stay inside with a book than to display my imperfections to the world and be picked last for the team.

My parents, children of Jewish immigrants, had jettisoned the old-world Bible in favor of secular literature. They saw my reading as what James would call a “moral habit,” and allowed me to skip meals and bypass chores when I was engaged in it. “Lower your voice; Paula is reading,” I would hear my mother whisper as I lay stretched out on the couch engrossed in, say, *The Old Curiosity Shop* or the third volume of *The Forsythe Saga*. I was applauded if I finished a book, especially if the book was long and a classic. Such reverence for what felt like a pleasure, if not an indulgence, was an incentive for me to read more.

The books that fed my reading habit fell within the tradition of the English domestic novel – those nineteenth-century triple-deckers that ended with the hero and heroine united in perfect harmony. The promise of a final clinch (not always represented, but all the more satisfying in being left to the imagination) was what kept me reading. These books were romances in the narrow definition of the word – love stories.

The term *romance* has a broad as well as a narrow definition. The Romance languages – French, Spanish, and Italian – are derived from Latin, the language of the Church and of erudition, but used for everyday life and for popular story and folklore. As the novel emerged as a genre in the eighteenth century, romance became affixed to a combination of the mundane colloquial and the idealized make-believe (the word for novel in French is *roman* and in Italian *romanzo*). Henry James (William’s younger, novel-writing brother) explained the amalgam in his preface to *The American*: “The real represents to my perception the things we cannot possibly *not* know sooner or later. . . . The romantic stands . . . for the things that . . . only reach us through the beautiful subterfuge of our thoughts and our desire.” Novels are the place where the real and the romantic meet and are interwoven.

The books that constituted my reading habit were, as I said, love stories, but they were also romantic in the sense James described: they drew on a world that was recognizable in its broad outlines but arranged to produce an idealized, emotionally satisfying conclusion. In this sense, they were not so different from the romantic adventure stories that fed my husband’s reading habit. He, like me, had read voraciously growing up, but where my favored stories culminated in the heroine’s marriage, his led to the

hero's triumph over physical obstacles and fierce adversaries. Our respective tastes conformed to our gender conditioning, but we were both drawn to reading about imaginary worlds within a nominally realistic context.

On the surface, it might seem that I was the loser in my tastes. Love stories are not held in high esteem by our society (hence, the dismissive nomenclature “chick lit” today and the denigrating assessment of Mark Twain: “Every time I read ‘Pride and Prejudice’ I want to dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone”). Novels built around love stories have the further disadvantage of reinforcing young women in conventional female roles in which love and marriage are the central preoccupations.

But since I was reading a lot – and reading a lot tends to hone one's discriminatory capacities – the novels I read were increasingly good ones. I may have started with Harlequin romances, but I quickly graduated to Trollope, the Brontës, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Henry James – not to mention, recurrently, Jane Austen, the ur-novelist of highbrow romantic fiction. These were great books by any standard. They taught me to critique and see around the conventional assumptions on which they were built.

There was another advantage to reading these novels. Unlike the pirates and warriors of adventure stories, the heroines of these books have a socially useful goal: to find a soulmate who will value them and with whom they might eventually reproduce. This is a goal at the core of what it means to create a good life and perpetuate a good society.

Unfortunately, the novels I was addicted to ended with a triumphant marriage and left the fine points of “happily ever after” unexplored. When I ventured into more modern fiction, the follow-up was disappointing: regret, alienation, infidelity. This was not the sort of thing I had been conditioned to like. Joyce, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, even Woolf and Doris Lessing, sent me running back to Austen.

The positive side of my reading habit was that the novels I was drawn to contained lessons about how to discern good character and be honest and upright in one's judgment. The negative side was that they made other books harder to like – and, more disturbing still, made living itself more difficult. My reading created unrealistic expectations and caused me to become frustrated, an-

gry, and depressed when those expectations weren't met. It seems to me a miracle that I ever got my nose out of those books and eventually met someone with whom I could share my life.

That I did I owe to years in therapy, which helped calibrate my expectations. I also broadened my tastes, turning to philosophy, history, and cultural criticism, the kind of reading that reconciles the mind to life rather than overstimulating it. In time, my reading habit began to weaken. Who had time for novels? All that energy concocting a fictional scenario, all that focus on the twists and turns of a romantic plot – how childish! It seemed amazing to me that George Eliot, the great savant of her age, had written romantic fiction rather than dedicating herself to the more serious occupation of philosophy.

Yet, about a month ago, I picked up Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and, despite a myriad of distractions and chores, found myself caught in its grip.

The Russians had never been a particular source of pleasure for me. I had read Dostoyevsky dutifully during my college years, but his alienated heroes and extreme situations did not conform to my reading tastes. Tolstoy did not appeal either: the tragic outcome of *Anna Karenina* offended my Jane Austen sensibility. *War and Peace*, which I had waded through in my twenties, annoyed me even more. Henry James had referred to George Eliot's novels as "baggy monsters," but Tolstoy's were much baggier. All those scenes on the battlefield. All those ponderous theories of history and causality. All those names.

But reading the novel now, in my sixties, was different. I saw, where I had not seen before, how closely allied Tolstoy was to Austen. His cast of noble families was another version of her "three or four families in a country village." Although his canvas was the vast landscape of Russia, the idea was the same: a group of people, similar but different, visiting each other, misunderstanding each other, and of course and most important, falling in love with each other.

The love story in *War and Peace* is more fragmented than that in *Pride and Prejudice*, but this made it more appealing to me as a mature reader. When I read the novel the first time, I skipped much of the action and philosophical exposition in my eagerness to get back to Natasha and Prince Andrei. Missing the hints that

the true love story lay elsewhere, I thought these two were the Elizabeth and Darcy of the novel. In my earlier reading, I had been infuriated at Natasha for her betrayal of Andrei, and irritated with him for succumbing to death. But reading from the vantage point of experience and age, I now saw that her behavior made perfect sense (what kind of lover leaves his fiancée for a year?), and his death was a relief (so much almost-dying needed to culminate in a body). The casting of Pierre as the sleeper-hero had confounded me before: he was fat and awkward and didn't do anything actually heroic. But now I was charmed by this unlikely Prince Charming, having more insight into what constitutes true wisdom and heroism, and having developed a healthy distrust for physical beauty.

War and Peace was a surprise on another level as well. For despite my revelation that Tolstoy wasn't so different from Austen, the novel's ending thwarted my high-flown expectations. I dare say most readers find the domestic arrangements described at the end of the novel pedestrian and dull: Natasha, Tolstoy's Elizabeth Bennet, reduced to frumpy adoration of her tinkerer, dreamer husband; Marie, the unassuming Jane Bennet type, hovering around her rather boorish, doctrinaire husband. These are not romantic situations, but they have the virtue of helping the reader ease back into life. They do what none of the other novels I had been addicted to ever did — they show me what might constitute a happy ending in a sustained sense.

Closing the book, I was prompted to compare Natasha Rostov not only to Austen's Elizabeth Bennet but to Henry James's Isabel Archer, another strong-willed, highly intelligent heroine. It's true that James, a proto-modernist, overshoots the satisfying romantic closure of earlier domestic novels: Isabel makes a disastrous marriage and at the end returns to her loathsome husband. But though this isn't a triumphant courtship plot in the Austen sense, James compensates by thrusting his heroine into a new dramatic landscape where she is destined, we feel, to be lifted to a higher plane. Isabel goes back to her awful husband, but she goes back in the style of a woman warrior. We sense that she will find a way to prevail in the struggle that will ensue. That is the sequel the book begs us to imagine, and that James essentially gives us in his last completed novel, *The Golden Bowl*.

But no sequel could be written for Tolstoy's Natasha. She has hunkered down into an entirely prosaic life. She has let herself go, gaining weight and ignoring how she dresses, consumed by trivial tasks, knee-deep in diapers. She has, in short, entered into that rather plodding trajectory that we all must follow as our responsibilities proliferate, our looks fade, our passions and faculties decline – as we move toward that definitive endpoint of death. It's true that the great novels of my youth had deaths: Clarissa Harlowe and Maggie Tulliver, for example, both die dramatically. But we don't see the heroines moving toward death as a normal part of life. Tolstoy gives us this in the final portion of *War and Peace*. We see these couples in complacent and uninteresting communion, fallen into conventional routines, engaged with young children and elderly parents. The passion associated with seeking a goal, of struggling to shape a fate, has ground to a halt.

Of course, one cannot read the end of Tolstoy's novel without superimposing knowledge of the future historical cataclysm that awaits Russia – what Pierre predicts and in his feeble way is trying to oppose. Knowing what will happen becomes its own commentary on the relationship between romance and reality: large events in life creep up on us and pass us by, sometimes without our registering them. The pleasure of novels is that they make dramatic experience *prospective* through their fictional characters. The sense of a preconceived destiny is what drives the narrative forward, and this forward trajectory toward a desired goal was what fed the reading habit of my youth.

The late feminist critic Carolyn G. Heilbrun wrote that marriage in the nineteenth-century domestic novel is structurally analogous to death: the heroine's life essentially ends when she achieves the desired goal of union with the hero. But it seems to me that the opposite is true. Life doesn't have the shape of story except in retrospect. We move toward the ultimate closure of death, but live in the flux of life, largely oblivious to its encroaching shadow.

What can I say, looking back on my reading habit? That it taught me to expect a lot from life – at times, too much – but also to understand the difference between fiction and life. It reconciled me to what comes after the romantic happy ending and to appreciate the great and mundane truths of *War and Peace*.