



THE WRITING LIFE

Nourishment for Writing

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By Janet Holmes

In high school, in college, I wanted to read everything, and somewhere along the way I developed a need to actually *own* the books I was reading. I wanted to build a library for myself, containing all the books that fueled the writing I was beginning to do and knew I would do forever.

To that end, I began to haunt an enormous new-and-second-hand bookshop called The Book Exchange that was, among many other things, the textbook store for the university I attended. It was probably much smaller than the renowned Powell's in Portland, but at that time I had nothing with which to compare it, and its warren of rooms was a fecund labyrinth of potential joys.

The textbooks were safely away on a far side of the shop (with its own entrance); on the side I began to think of as "my" side, the books were peculiarly arranged not by subject, but by *publisher*. To see an entire orange or blue wall of Penguin spines was a thrill—but it also emphasized how vast a task reading everything was going to be. Even more intriguing to me was the New Directions wall, with its black-and-white covers stacked ceiling to floor, shelf upon shelf with European influences, poetry like none I'd ever encountered!

At the time, I didn't feel that what I was doing was unusual. All my friends who were writing, contributing to the literary magazine, sending out their SASEs with fresh poems every now and then, did much the same thing. Nobody was talking about "the death of the book" back in the 1970s, Marshall McLuhan notwithstanding. (These days, when I see my students lining up to sell back copies of the poetry and fiction they'd studied the previous semester, my heart sinks for them as if I'd seen them lining up to sell plasma to get money for their lattes and electronics: *that's a writer's nourishment there on that counter. How will you live?*)

Well, they'll do fine, I suppose; their references will sway toward the cultural rather than the literary. But much as I love sitting in the darkness of a theater watching a film or play, or listening to music of any stripe, I wouldn't miss the complete immersion of reading, as I did in college, something like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, or the novels of Faulkner (there was always another one, never fear!), or my very favorite undergraduate assignment: to read *Mrs Dalloway* in one sitting. (It does make a difference.) I lately had the same feeling of immersion reading Denis Johnson's *Tree of Smoke*: I could swear the descriptions of the Vietnamese tropics caused perspiration.

Those books made me want to work with language, aspiring to learn the craft of writing and elevate it to art. I don't know whether The Book Exchange still exists, but I know there are places (ever fewer) like it, and as long as books are printed and sold, I'll be adding to my library. Reading everything gets much more difficult with all these books still being written, but I soldier on.

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