**ANXIOUSLY ENGAGED**

**FOR THE LOVE OF READING**

By Jana Riess

“What are you up to?” I asked a friend on the phone.

“Oh, the usual,” she replied airily. “Sitting here at my desk, eating bon bons and reading a juicy novel.”

“Really?” I responded.

“Noooo.” I could almost see her eyes rolling. “I’ve got work to do!”

His Conversation, Which took place a couple of years ago, made me realize anew that I’m an amazingly lucky person. I’m lucky because there are some days when reading novels at my desk is my job. For the last six years, I’ve been working as a professional reviewer and editor for a magazine about the publishing industry. And while I’ve gotten cynical about some aspects of the business, I never stop feeling like a kid in a candy store when I attend a trade show and publishers thrust free books in my arms. It always feels new and exciting, this love affair I have with literature.

I want to in this lifetime.

Some of my best memories revolve around reading. I remember as a child reading the memo aloud. I went to first grade the very next day and I’ve been reading ever since with the desperate knowledge that I’ll never be able to read everything I want to in this lifetime.

Some of my best memories revolve around reading. I remember as a child making a nest for myself under the dining room table and reading Laura Ingalls Wilder’s On the Banks of Plum Creek. Then there was the Friday afternoon in high school that I checked out Madeleine L’Engle’s The Small Rain from our local library and brought it home. Even though I was supposed to meet my friends at a football game, I bagged the outing entirely because I was so engrossed in the book. I stayed up until 4 a.m. to finish it then felt too keyed up and excited to sleep. Somehow, I look back on that act of willfully abandoning my peers and doing what I loved most as a defining moment in my adolescence. I would be who I wanted to be, all others be damned. It was just the first of many sleepless nights I would spend jacked up on my drug of choice, the written word.

Since I’m surrounded in my job by other rapturous readers who can steer me toward what is worthwhile, people often imagine that I read only the cream of the crop. To a certain extent, that’s true. But it’s also true that in my job, I have to read a boatload of utter dreck, week in and week out. Actually, doing this is tremendously helpful to me as a critic, because reading books that don’t work is essential to understanding the ones that do. But even on my own time, I’ll read almost anything, whether it be highbrow (I’ve recently finished Doctor Zhivago, which I confess to reading more for the verboten love story than the revolution), middlebrow (this past winter I tore through all of The #1 Ladies’ Detective Agency series), and decidedly lowbrow (I’ll tell you if you’ll tell me). I read Pulitzer prizewinners and Oprah picks, classics and contemporary novels, history and biography, plays and self-help and humor, summer thrillers and YA fantasy. I don’t typically read true crime, sci-fi, genre romance, or political non-fiction, though I make exceptions for political biography (David McCullough’s John Adams and Truman being the standards by which I have come to judge all others) and autobiography (I’ve just finished listening to Bill Clinton’s memoir—required reading if I wish to remain a member of my extended family).

You’ll have no trouble guessing what my afterlife is going to be like as I catch up on everything I wanted to read but missed. You know you’re a biblioholic when one of the reasons you are most looking forward to the spirit world is that you may have the opportunity to read all the books you couldn’t get to here. Possible catch: Can spirits read physical books? Or will we have to hover over the shoulders of people with physical bodies, becoming quietly irritated that they read too slowly or too hastily? For me, this is a pressing theological question.

**Book Chemistry**

Why do we read what we read? In So Many Books, So Little Time, Sara Nelson sets out to spend a year reading one book a week and then writing about the experience. Like me, Nelson usually reads far more than a book a week, but something about the intentionality of chronicling the experiment teaches her—and us, her readers and bibliophilic voyeurs—that what makes books resonate is always intensely personal. On Amazon.com, the reviews of Nelson’s book are all over the map, with some readers complaining that the book was too much about her and not enough about reading. What they are really saying, though, is that it’s not enough about
them; her choices—which she explains in almost memoir-like detail—would not necessarily be their choices. The kismet of reading simply can’t be reduced to a formula or a list.

Many of us feel deep connections with the authors whose work has graced our lives. I’ll never forget seeing my husband Phil’s rapture when we found Roald Dahl’s grave in the village of Great Missenden, England, where we were visiting a friend who, by coincidence, used to be Dahl’s neighbor. He took us by Dahl’s house, which features a caravan (British speak for trailer or mobile home) that Phil excitedly told me was just like the one in Danny, the Champion of the World. Or there’s the night when I was twenty-one and I found out that Madeleine L’Engle had been chosen to be the commencement speaker for my graduating class in college. I sat right down and wrote her a letter, explaining what her stories had meant to me and inviting her to dinner with some of my friends who were also fans. She accepted, skipping dinner with the college president in order to spend time with us. It was an indescribable honor to be the college president in order to spend time with us. It was an indescribable honor to pepper her with questions and be among the first to learn about her latest work in the night when I was twenty-one and I found

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How we read is also an issue. Some folks are dedicated monogamists, reading each book from cover to cover and entertaining no others at the same time. And then there’s my mom, a voracious reader who is my favorite person in all the world to talk with about books. She’s lovely but has one infuriating book-related habit: she’s not even faithful to her characters. She’s lovely but has one infuriating book-related habit: she’s not even faithful within the same book, let alone monogamous about reading only one thing at a time. Once she gets to the middle of a novel, she skips to the end to see if (a) she picked the right killer; (b) the jerk/anti-hero gets his just desserts (as in Olivia Goldsmith’s dishy tell-all The Bestseller, which I slipped her at Christmas); or (c) a bad book gets any better and is actually worth finishing.

Now, I’m not one of those dedicated monogamist types. I am what Nelson calls a “triple-booker”, I always have a book in every port. There’s the one that goes in my purse (which is super-sized for just this purpose), the two or three that are on my bedside table for night reading, another two or three work-related books that are on my desk, and the audio book I’ve checked out of the library to listen to in fits and starts in my car. Oh, and I usually have an “airport book”: one that I don’t buy but will read in snatches of twenty minutes or so when I am passing time in an airport bookstore. Now that I think about it, I suppose I am more like a ‘septuple-booker.” I will certainly do anything to avoid the horrifying possibility of being stranded somewhere with nothing to read. But I would never stoop to my mother’s level of promiscuity: once I’ve made a commitment to read a book, I trust the author’s going to see me through to the last page. And for better or for worse, I typically stick with my end of the bargain till coda do us part.

My fidelity extends to habitual re-reading. I’m a chronic re-reader, pulling favorite books down off the shelf when I’m in a particular mood. Some of these are the comforting, beach-read British women’s novels I favor for relaxation, since I can don them like a set of old tweeds. Editors call these books “the Agas,” not only because Aga rhymes with saga and these usually feature complex stories of multi-generational families, but also because the tales often highlight some character’s Irish or English kitchen, with its humming Aga stove and a pine table that the writer will inevitably describe as “well-scrubbed.” Or I re-read childhood classics, especially now that I have a first grader who is beginning, saints be praised, to discover the glories of those books. There are also certain books that I seem to read every year or two, almost like clockwork. It’s not something that I plan; it’s just something that seems to happen. At some point every winter, I turn to passages from Cheryl Mendelson’s Home Comforts, an acerbic guide to housekeeping that functions as a kind of moral and hygienic compass. And every other spring or so, I check in with Annie Clark Tanner’s A Mormon Mother to assess how I’m now seeing its issues of feminism, Mormonism, and motherhood. In the ten years I’ve been reading it, her autobiography has become a kind of checkpoint for my own spiritual evolution.

The Community of Readers

For the last four years, I’ve been involved with a phenomenal book club called the Bourbon County Bookworms. We are a dozen women, about half of whom are Mormon. We’ve read the usual book club favorites: contemporary fare such as The Lovely Bones, Gap Creek, The Lake of Dead Languages, and The Prize winner of Defiance, Ohio. We’ve dipped into classics by Pearl S. Buck, Willa Cather, Charles Dickens, Kate Chopin, and Jack London. (No Jane Austen as yet, though.) We do fiction and non-fiction, and what I like most about book club is that I read things I would probably never pick up otherwise. This is how I became a fan of Kentucky author James Alexander Thom, whose novel Follow the River, based on the true story of an eighteenth-century woman who was kidnapped by the Shawnee, ranks as some of the best historical fiction I’ve encountered.

Being in a book club reminds me of the importance of reading as a communal activity, with all the sacramental imagery that the word “communal” implies. We feast together, this body of readers, on the written word, giving of ourselves and our stories as we try to make sense not just of books, but of life itself. The flip side of this communal sharing is that there’s always an element of danger in recommending a book. When I suggested the group try Lee Smith’s Oral History, one of those dog-eared paperbacks I’d read and re-read since college, I thought it would be a no-brainer: surely Kentucky women would love a story about several generations of an Appalachian family. Boy howdy, was I wrong. The ladies found it stereotyped and unnecessarily graphic. I was crushed. Still, they made me see aspects of the novel I had not noticed myself. Such communal encounters are a neglected and

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incredibly important aspect of the otherwise solitary activity of reading.

So Many Books . . .

Between the books I buy for entertainment or book club, the books I take home from work, and the books other members of my family accumulate, we’re pushing the outer limits of known shelf space. As of this writing, my husband/resident calculator estimates that we own about 4,000 books, but the scary thing is we’re just getting started. We feel like we’re being so prudent, too; since we’ve run out of bookshelf space for the time being, we try to donate one book to the library for every new book we bring into our home. But that often feels like an adulterous betrayal. I have no problem getting rid of clothes that don’t fit, or tchotchkes that someone gave us for Christmas, or magazines and newspapers that I’ve already read. But books are friends—lovers, even—and I cannot march them out the door so lightly.

And so we organize them. I’ve always done my non-fiction topically, sometimes in creative ways. (Since my early twenties, for example, Mary Lefkowitz’s Women’s Lives in Greece and Rome has been the transitional book between my sections on women’s studies and ancient mythology.) However, our book collection is getting out of hand. We are thinking that when we move next year, we might put all of our books into the Library of Congress classification system. That way, we’ll always know how to find what we need.

In the end, reading isn’t just about entertainment; it’s a spiritual discipline for me. President Hinckley has spoken often and affectionately about his childhood, which was infused with a love of literature. His parents made it a priority to fill their house with marvelous books, and he has repeatedly encouraged Latter-day Saints to do the same. However, our book collection is getting out of hand. We are thinking that when we move next year, we might put all of our books into the Library of Congress classification system. That way, we’ll always know how to find what we need.

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Now if you’ll excuse me, I have books to read.

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**CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS**


A comic novel with the depths of tragedy, a cowboy novel with profound theological resonance, a coming-of-age novel which gets better read in middle age, a “Mormon” novel and an un-Mormon novel, a novel of lust whose consumption is a moving affirmation of monogamous love—*The Backslider* is a book with many readings and many meanings.

Join us in celebrating twenty years of *The Backslider* for a festschrift collection of essays.

We are seeking reader responses, ruminations, and personal essays about *The Backslider*. Selected essays will be published in *Sunstone* magazine, on the Sunstone website, and possibly in a book.

First contributions to this celebratory conversation on the novel—from Eric Samuelsen, Gae Lyn Henderson, Morgan Adair, Bruce Jorgensen, Marylee Mitcham, and Cherie Woodworth—were presented at the 2005 Salt Lake Sunstone Symposium (Tape SL05–236).

If you have ideas, suggestions, submissions, or questions, please send them to Cherie Woodworth, executive editor of the Festschrift project, at cherie.woodworth@aya.yale.edu.

Preliminary deadline for submissions, for priority consideration, is MAY 1, 2006.

Final deadline for all submissions is JULY 1, 2006.