

# THOUGHT FOR FOOD

Jim Lyons

**T**here are thousands of books, all with different spines, and I want to touch and absorb every one of them. Savour their flavours. Float their boats. Kindle their flames, you get the idea. As long I can see more of the worlds that exist beyond the frontiers of wild, ancient space, somewhere in that sunny altitude of human artistic consciousness. Here is a single mother's dream of olive groves in Tuscany, there the bottomless ocean for mer-moles burrowing endlessly in search of worms as dead whales sink past them each time the Oxford-born author gets writer's block. Not a single book on Mao or the Cultural Revolution dares flush any colour but red for fear of denunciation, while some fantasy sagas stretch across entire shelves, half a writer's lifetime spent developing the destinies of farm boys and conjurers and plotting epic revelations at Mount Ishtak and Elbrador. I could read them all, but I only want one book. Read more than one book at a time and I'll start forgetting whether it was Duke Featherstone who married the fisherman, or if the vampire shot the warlock's lover while the fox ate the oyster, or if the plague that took the president was somehow related to the pygmy's massage at Babylon.

No, I must choose one book and one book only. It shall be something unique, inspiring. The kind of book I'd like to write if only someone hadn't beaten me to it. Oh, which one? There are so many. Maybe this one? No...

I browse the fictions, the classics, the quirky know-it-alls with lavish front covers and bold-lettered surnames. I am sure books never looked this good before. One day we'll master the art of cover design to a point where the illustrations move, and each title jumps off the spine and competes with others for cliental acknowledgement. The Fokker-shaped *Es* in *All Quiet on the Western Front* will fire bullets across the aisle at the camera-like eyes of the 8 in *1984*, whose 1 and 9 and 4 like Thought Police will pursue the ardent, armoured *Don Quixote* as he rides his horse along the tops of book shelves. The boys from *The Lord of the Flies* will vie for fair shares of a shelf-like island looked over by *Moby Dick*, who will heartily swallow the entire range of characters in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Paul McKenna books will hypnotise the twelve-volume hardbacks, distorting their information: dictionaries would spell spoon as snoop and carp as crap; thesauruses would declare *goldfish* as a suitable synonym for shock, as in the sentence, *Vulgarity littered Sir Godfrey's speech with such shameless excess that Madame Truff felt utterly goldfished!*

Should things ever come to this, I will look upon my world with a laugh, a cry and then a thought of, 'wait, didn't I envisage this once when I was browsing the fiction section in that bookstore?' When society has made even its books ruthlessly fight one other for self-gain, one must surely step back and say: 'Madness!' (though one should already have said this many, many times before). Without hesitation, I will decree – since by this time I plan to be master of all books – that every one of them be titleless, and given equal opportunity for customer exhibition. Every book

will become the same, and yet each and every one of them will leave you, the reader, completely goldfished upon reading.

So! – I awake, and well, with such an absent drift into reverie just passed, I confirm an alluring sense of stardom is lacking in these here stories. So I wander upstairs to the realm of non-fiction, where knowledge is customised, categorised – maybe even crystallised – so it becomes somewhat less exotic than its brewed form downstairs. There are the meals so rich and yet so unfamiliar, but up here are the ingredients with which I can make my own.

In the self-help section I am tempted to buy HOW TO RAISE YOUR SELF-ESTEEM, though I feel so insecure with my wretched self that I am embarrassed to bring such a book to the counter, big scary capital letters and all.

Philosophy. I am not at all of a deep mind, except in the sense that my mind is forever submerged in the fathomless gloom of a conformist discernment of reality. Perhaps a book on philosophy will give me the answers I need. I flick through a book on ethics and realise the implications of telling your girlfriend to wear red if you're going to a bull fight. I bet Mao would have approved, but then he was never a poster boy for ethics. Reading various paragraphs, I cannot help but feel the book itself will not answer the dilemmas I have every day in relations to what is right and wrong, but morally I wonder if it is wrong of me to make such an assumption without giving it the time it probably deserves. Sometimes there are no answers in life, so I put it back on the shelf all the same. I afford a cursory glance to other books, skim-reading pages of metaphysics, problems of time, musings on miracles and materials, but that is all, for I am bored with every offering.

Next section, cookery. Smoothies with strawberries floating in them. Why didn't I think of that? The cooking makes me hungry, all the wonderful foods.

I could really enjoy learning about the Battle of the Crimea or the nature of physics in the universe. I could read the Bible of the Koran or the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Just need to settle on something, just need to pick one.

A lady soon approaches. 'Excuse me, young man, we're closing soon.'

I look at my watch. By jove, it's nearly half past five already? 'Thank you,' I say to her. Damn it, I have to pick something...anything. But there are so many. I can't let this be a wasted trip! I skim-read the shelves, desperate for something to grab my attention. Books of Hopes, Books of Facts, Books of Signs, Books of Songs, Books of Life, Books of Sorrow, Books of...

I lean around the staircase to peak at downstairs, and see the security doors half-closed. The shop assistants goodbye the last few customers. 'Carol, can you check upstairs to see if there's anyone left?' asks a supervisor. I look at the tills. They're closed. There's no more time. I sneak back up the stairs. I run over to the art section, which is concealed from the rest of the floor in a two metre-deep depression. I hear the shop assistant's heels clicking louder against the stairs as she slowly reaches the top. I slide into a gap between the end book cabinet and the wall, where discontinued titles and damaged books are left. This gap continues around the edge of the entire floor, a narrow strip running behind every book shelf. I can see the light of the room and the lady as she inspects the floor. 'All empty,' she cries, and leaves. I wait a while, listening to the staff chat as they finish up down-

stairs. Eventually the lights dim somewhat, and the doors shut. All I can hear are cars and a few distant voices in the night. I haven't had water in so long an ache besets my head, but I'm determined not to leave until I find a book I like, a book that's just for me, a book that will resonate with my soul so intensely I will become a different person. All the pages here, they must contain at least something that could change my life for the better.

I settle down behind the shelf. I can't read the spines from here, and I'm worried there might be motion sensors at the floor, so I grab a book at random and make myself comfortable. I figure the only way to find what I'm looking for is to read, and since the lights are still just bright enough for me to do so, I stay here, hidden. The book is *20th Century Art: An Overview*, a bulky hardcover comprised half of text, half of pictures. I spend all night reading about Jackson Pollock dripping oils across the floor, Damien Hirst cutting cows into pieces, and Yves Klein asking nude models to clothe each other in paint. When morning comes I finish, and start on Renaissance. I'm so absorbed by the stories surrounding the revolutionary changes that ensued during this period that I barely even notice the sound of the doors opening downstairs, the staff returning for another shift, and customers growing in number as they browse nearby. I keep on reading throughout the morning. By mid-afternoon the shop is bustling, and I begin to worry that my position is compromised. It would not take much for someone to peak around the edge of the shelf and see me lying here, bleary-eyed. Careful not to make any noise, I drag my body deeper into the gap, following the angles of the wall until I am hiding behind a different section. It means I have to leave art for a while, but I can always return at night when it's safer. I start reading a political commentary on the role of women in Modern Latin America.

The days go quickly, such is my level of utter absorption in these books. My thirst and hunger subside, since the knowledge I gain from reading provides all the nutrition I need. I remember once reading about a man found in India who claimed not only that he was over a hundred years old, but that he hadn't eaten in over fifty. He had survived purely through divine energy acquired through contact with the powers that be. As you know, Buddha himself is depicted as fat not because of over-indulgence but because of an abundance of wisdom and an understanding of the world. This reminds me how my father used to have such a big appetite and all by himself would eat meals big enough for two, and people would say, 'caw, blimey! That's a big dinner, n't it?' and he always replied with, 'Well, I'm a growing lad!' even though he was well into his forties. He claimed that one continues to grow in adulthood, that you need food not only to strengthen your body but to help the mind grow bigger too, and that one would have a healthier mind if one ate big meals. He was terribly fat though. In any case, I realise now that the principal works both ways. I can stay here for as long as I like, obtaining knowledge as a means of survival. Now it is not one book that matters to me, but all of them. I read every word, even the blurbs, the forewords, the publishing information.

By the end of the first year here I have read approximately three hundred books. I find that the store does not have motion sensors, so at night I sneak up and down the stairs between the fiction and non-fiction departments. Only upstairs

are the shelves sufficient for hiding behind, but I carry hoards of fiction up there as a stock for whenever I tire of the real world. From time to time, members of staff come to the back of the shelves to store flops and returns, at which point I climb up the shelves and lie on top, just out of site of both them and the customers. There are many close calls, but no one finds me, and I still keep my beard.

Do I miss my previous life? Well, I have everything I could ever need right here in this bookstore. I exercise with Mensa puzzles and illustrated football rules (it is true that one can strengthen one's muscles merely by imagining one is undergoing a heavy workout). I journey around the world with travel books (I can smell the salty air in Marseille, I can imagine the conversations I have with Mongol herdsmen; it is not so hard). I chuckle (quietly) at limericks and comic strips. I read language aid books, perfecting my grasp of French, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese and even Dutch. This way, I can finally begin reading Thomas Mann's books in the original German, or Sartre's texts in French.

More years pass, and though I am isolated from the world outside the store, I find plenty of books highlighting recent major events. I drag my eyes through jungles of text in American pathways to the loss of Saigon. Beneath the glare of Khmer Rouge troops I march from Phnom Penh into an abyss of countryside fire. Rhodesian commandoes on the Mozambique border share bullets with brethren in pursuit of a white reign in Africa.

Decades more go by; many of the books I read have been replaced by new ones. As I had imagined, the texture of the covers is even glossier than it used to be. As with the visual quality of movies and television shows, one always imagines it could get no crisper, and yet somehow it does. The books even begin to compete with one another, though not in the manner I had foreseen. They do in fact talk, like little people, sometimes about the humans who made them, but mostly about themselves. I tell them, 'you just wait, you'll get your turn. I'm going to read you all before I make my choice.' From what I can see, they do not talk to the other customers. What it is that makes me so different, I will never know.

After thirty-five years, seven months, and five days, I have read over twelve thousand books, and my body is obese with knowledge. I barely fit behind here anymore. I squeeze back and forth like an earthworm, a bookworm, munching my way through knowledge. I read words as if they are songs in my ear, whispers from the minds and memories of other people. I do, in this way, still see myself as in constant communication with the rest of the human race.

One day, something different happens. My routine has remained fairly consistent during my stay here, but today there are no customers like there would normally be on a weekday, and the staff are taking all the books off the opposite cabinets and putting them into boxes. Removal teams carry the boxes and the shelves out on their shoulders. Could it be...No, I must be imagining it. Oh, turbulent travesty, oh, witch-sticks of woe! They're shutting it down. How dare they? I haven't found the book I want yet, for heaven's sake.

As they clear more and more shelves I shuffle around the edge of the wall so that they won't find me, but finally there is but one cabinet with which to conceal myself. A young man begins to empty it from the top down, and I crouch awk-

wardly as he does so. Finally, I decide my time in this scholarly sanctuary is up at last. Standing, I push the cabinet over, nearly crushing the man. All the members of staff turn round.

‘This is a shambles, a shame, a crying shame!’ I cry. They stand motionless before me, jaws agape. ‘How you could have the audacity to begin closing while one of your most faithful customers – thirty-five years have I browsed here, no less – still attempts to facilitate a purchase of benefit to both you and himself, is beyond me. A true merchant would never be so discourteous to his clients. That you should close so soon is, to my mind at least, a disgrace to the notion of customer service, an act so scandalous as to become a blistering eyesore upon your future credentials. I’m sure you and your pretty company will be thankful to know I shan’t be shopping at any of your other branches ever again! HMPF!’

Immediately I run across the floor, jump down the staircase four steps at a time, pass the tills and push open the fire exit doors, flying out onto the streets. The light blinds me, but I sprint as fast as my large legs will carry me. They ache, so long has it been since they scampered at such a pace. My vision returns slowly. I remember these roads, these dirty roads. There are different shops here now, different colours, different hues, but the roads are the same. Those buses, those tall, red buses; I remember the 174 route. I run until my breath caves in, and then I stop to rest at a bench near a war memorial.

I sleep for an hour, and then I return to my old home. It is surprising how instinctively I find my way there, following that same roads I used when I was younger. Some things your brain refuses to set free. But as should be expected, someone else is living at my home now, an old lady and her dog. I shall cause her no problems. I leave and stumble away from the town centre. I try to find the country roads that once lead to the sea, but there is no end to the busy A-roads and industrial estates, so instead I wander aimlessly around town, wondering what to do. I already miss words, wonderful words, so I find new things to read. Road signs, billboards, adverts on the sides of buses. Discarded newspapers are a welcome change to the prose I am used to reading, but somehow they do not give me the same satisfaction as when I was resting in those hidden walls with the sound of oblivious footsteps nearby. I walk on, scratching my ears and rubbing my eyes.

Over the next few days I kick tins and play scrabble with letters I tear from newspapers. I press cryptic messages onto park benches in the hope that some unhappy soul may discover them and draw hope from their meaning. But soon enough the wind picks them up and scatters them across the road like confetti.

I spend many months living on the streets. I do not pity myself so much as to beg, but I admit my hefty weight does not take long to diminish, and eventually I am mere skin on sticks, the length of my beard now serving to accentuate my wiry frame. With little food, and little reading, I am finding it hard to gather the strength to get up each morning. Some days I just sit and watch the pigeons hooting from the tops of old bridges. I wonder if I should buy some food. I still have five pound-coins in my wallet from that day long ago when I first began browsing the bookstore. Ah, the bookstore! Now, I cannot help remembering those splendid days! Curious, I decide to see what has become of that once-wonderful place.

Maybe they were only refurbishing the building. By now, the store may already have returned, with brand new books and another chance for me to peruse its wares! I hobble down the main street and find myself licking my lips merely with the thought of reading entire novels again. My eyes are wide open.


When I reach the building, I find it now occupied not by a bookstore, but by a mini-supermarket. I admit, despite my anger at the book company, I was truly hopeful my beloved literary lair had resumed its seat at this lively district of town. Still, at least this replacement sells food. I just hope my cash is still legal tender.

I enter the brightly-lit store, where glistening magazines and a hundred varieties of cigarette packets hang beneath a kiosk sign. The smell of cold sandwiches and energy drinks wafts over from the refrigerators. Mmm. Real food. I wander down the aisles, past multi-coloured crisp packets, “healthy-option” microwave meals, meat wrapped in plastic, seasonings in tubes...over there is a hot chicken counter. Why, I could buy a half-chicken or some barbecue legs with the money I have. They do smell so good. But then I see hobnobs and jaffa cakes in the biscuit aisle, doughnuts near the bakery, packets of stir-fry vegetables in the freezers. There are pots of marmite and chocolate spread, and dry spaghetti near the tins of baby carrots. Thousands of baked beans and tomatoes and olives and...my god, there is so much. I see a clock just by the store’s entrance. Four o’clock already?

I continue browsing, reading the labels on foreign cheeses, wondering which yoghurts would taste the nicest. Cereal box mascots grin as I walk past them, some bathing in bowls of corn, others in basins trickling with treacle-coated rice. Bags of raisins sit near the sugar. Oh my, with all this, I could make my own cereal! But then the Scotch eggs look so wholesome I’d probably be contented for weeks with merely two of them. No, I should find something sweeter to give my tongue a buzz after all these years without feeding. Or perhaps I need to perk up with some coffee. Or is alcohol what I need? I stop, feet squeaking on the shiny floor, and sigh. I gather my surroundings, these endless aisles of nutrition, and ask myself, how will I possibly choose something to eat before five-thirty?

No matter, I keep searching, searching, searching. There must be some kind of food here that would be just perfect for me, some kind of food that would change my life. Meatballs. No, they’re not my thing. I could just take a few loafs of bread, but I do fancy something with more zest. **What about these...?**

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