

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

FOR A TIME I JOKINGLY THOUGHT of calling this book “2 Gentiles & 7½ Jews”. The ½ Jew is Simone Weil, someone who was reluctant to acknowledge her Jewishness. The Nazi administration in occupied France didn't share her reticence. The gentiles are Edward Said, who once towards the end of his life – not altogether spoofingly – referred to himself as “the last Jewish intellectual”, and me.

Each chapter in the book has to do with an encounter I've had with a specific Jewish writer. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera defines an encounter as “a spark; a lightning flash; random chance”. My encounters sometimes entail sparks, flashes and chance, and sometimes don't.

My first encounter with Harold Bloom took place because of my reading his editing and annotating works by William Blake. Robert Lax seeped into my reading life through the work of his friend Thomas Merton. John Berger came by spark and flash; Muriel Rukeyser, more by chance. My acquaintance with Alberto Manguel came about through assignments from the *Globe and Mail* and the *Literary Review of Canada*. Susan Sontag, with her raven-black hair and alluring shock of white, seduced me by a photograph, or maybe I first read her essay on the eroticism of reading and her words seduced me. Edward Said, I can't

remember, maybe in a literature class; Simone Weil I encountered through the Canadian philosopher George Grant. As for Leonard Cohen, you can't live awake in Canada without having a nodding acquaintance with him as a singer or a poet.

Some of my selected writers speak to each other, which makes them more than a heterogeneous group conveniently Christowrapped under the banner of "Jewish authors". Said has things to say about Sontag, Berger and Bloom, Sontag has things to say about Berger, and both Berger and Sontag have things to say about Weil. Simone Weil was also an important part of Robert Lax's reading and is quoted by Alberto Manguel in his book on Homer. No one reads or writes in complete isolation. There is usually someone holding your hand or standing over your shoulder as you turn pages.

Literary critic Alfred Kazin once asked himself facetiously who he would read if he couldn't read anti-Semites. In similar vein, I interrogate myself: who would I read if not Jews? My idea of a novelist is Philip Roth; a poet, Mark Strand; a critic, Susan Sontag. Many of the deepest reads of my life have been my encounters of Jewish writers and thinkers, going back to Isaac Singer's novels and Saul Bellow's translation from the Yiddish of his long short story "Gimpel the Fool". In the pages that follow I trace the literary steps of a slate of Jewish luminaries.

My one gentile scholar is the Palestinian-American Edward Said, who, in the final years of his life, was exploring Jewish thinkers, Freud among them, with attention and appreciation. You simply can't love language and books without encountering Jews along the way.

My Jewish writers follow a particular path in an old Jewish tradition: commitment to study and debate, reverence for the book and respect for the word. My Jews are for the most part

secular with no particular concern for Judaism (Leonard Cohen and Muriel Rukeyser are exceptions) and no particular attachment to the State of Israel. Historian Isaac Deutscher would be inclined to call them “non-Jewish Jews”, but that oxymoron implies a hierarchy of Jewishness — that some Jews are more Jewish than others.

My authors range from the apolitical Robert Lax to the very political John Berger; they exhibit gradations of pride in their Jewish heritage and varying degrees of interaction with their tradition. John Berger has been mostly silent on his heritage; Robert Lax was also a Catholic; Leonard Cohen from time to time has incorporated Zen Buddhism and Catholicism into the rhythm of his life and writings, although as recently as November 2007 in *Border Crossings* he can declaim proudly, “... I’m a practicing Jew, and I always was ...” Alberto Manguel doesn’t say much about his Jewish heritage in his books, although in his columns for the Vancouver magazine *Geist* — mostly recently in the Summer 2008 issue — he speaks movingly of his familial heritage. Susan Sontag didn’t say a great deal about being a Jew. In many ways, one is inclined to regard her as a New Yorker first.

There are many strands in anyone’s fabric of identity and each individual chooses to emphasize or de-emphasize certain of the strands. One’s Jewishness can be played up or played down or, in the case of Simone Weil, not played at all. “To be a Jew in the twentieth century/Is to be offered a gift ...” Muriel Rukeyser reminds her readers. Weil refused the gift. She also refused the gift of Catholicism although she thought within its framework. The Nazis defined her as a Jew, and she went into exile on the basis of her Jewishness, and yet she never accepted Jewishness as a part of her identity. In her mind, her intellectual inheritance was French and Greek. Is one still a Jew if one decides not to be?

Muriel Rukeyser wasn't shy about her Jewishness, and Harold Bloom isn't shy about his, even though his way of being Jewish seems primarily to consist of reading a great many books and commenting on as many as possible. Can one be exclusively a literary Jew? Yes, if polyglot George Steiner is right in asserting, "Addiction to textuality has characterized, continues to characterize Jewish practice and sentiment." Further: "No other community in the evolution and social history of man, has from its outset, read, reread without cease, learnt by heart or by rote, and expounded without end the texts which spell out its whole destiny."

As a solitary reader, I'm drawn to a tradition that encourages questions and debate, self-examination and self-challenge, a tradition that doesn't separate the word from the book or the book from the spirit. Spiritbookwords are an important part of my individual consciousness; they also form a part of the consciousness of the individuals I write about.

My selected writers take seriously what they perceive as "a moral obligation to be intelligent", to be alert and awake and engaged. They also have a spiritual dimension, which in some cases may simply mean that they have poetic and imaginative dimensions beyond what happens to flesh or can be accounted for by flesh. Magic, as Leonard Cohen memorably says in his novel *Beautiful Losers*, is always afoot.

# I, READER & THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK(S)

I READ. I DREAM. I take notes. I write.

Reading is what I do. Reader is who I am. I write books on my readings, books on other people's books, and construct sentences from other people's sentences. My words sometimes turn up as anonymous fragments on the covers of other people's books. If I could only declare one item of identification at the border, it would be reader.

I like books in the same ways I like dogs. I like the look of them, the feel of them, the smell of them. My heart quickens when I see someone reading. I feel most myself when turning and underlining pages.

I like to look at pictures of people reading. I enjoy Vermeer's painting of a woman reading, and Van Gogh's, and Edward Hopper's many paintings of women reading. A particularly striking painting is by Gustav Adolph Hennig of a young dark-haired woman reading a small dark-covered book. The painting is called *Girl Reading*, 1828. It was used as the cover for the German edition of Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*. The girl has a look of concentration, even reverence, towards what she holds in her hands.

The most telling portrait of me is the picture my wife took of me in New Mexico. I'm lying on a bed covered from head to toe in books. My favourite photograph of my father is the one taken of him lying on a Mexican beach with a book and a pen in his hands. The supine position seems ideal for reading. I like to look at pictures of family members reading. One of my favourites is a photograph of my son reading to my grandson. The picture was taken when my grandson was 3 ½ months old. On his wedding day, my son gave me a picture of me reading to him when he was about 2 ½ years old.

My father read poetry, theology, biography and philosophy in that descending order of significance. The book was his means of transportation, his airplane to elsewhere, his frigate out of Ireland. He took to heart Wordsworth's words: "Dreams, books, are each a world." In descending order of significance, I read poetry, life stories (in which I include biography, autobiography, memoir, diaries, journals and letters), theology, art and literary criticism, and books of ideas. For both Dad and me, the book, in Ezra Pound's memorable phrasing, was "a ball of light" in our hands. It stored our dreams, exercised our imaginations and developed our hearts.

Professor Daniel Coleman, in his *In Bed with the Word*, writes: "Reading is not solely an exercise to feed one's inner life. Rather, eating the book — not just nibbling at it, or having a little taste here and there, but eating it wholesale — produces a changed person, an empowered person, a different kind of person ..." Dad shared Daniel's hunger, and so do I.

Words were always potentially revolutionary for my father — life-altering, especially words in a book. He always gave me the impression that he believed that a great book could turn him around, reposition him in the world, remake him in some

fundamental way, in much the same way as Proust was remade by his reading and translating John Ruskin and that Gandhi was remade by reading a single work by Ruskin.

Recently I've come across V.S. Naipaul talking about a book Gandhi read on the train from Johannesburg to Durban in South Africa. The book was John Ruskin's *Unto this Last* and by the time Gandhi arrived in Durban, a twenty-four-hour journey, he was transformed. Ruskin, Gandhi said, brought out "the latent goodness in his own heart".

Gandhi learned three things from Ruskin's book. First, the good of the individual is in the good of the all; secondly, a barber's work is as important as a lawyer's; and thirdly, the life of labour, physical labour involving the hands, by craftsmen or tillers, is a life worth living. It may not be an exaggeration to say that Gandhi formulated the germ of the Indian Revolution by his encounter with a book on a train. Weaving and cottage industries — works of the hands — became his defiant way of resisting the commercial power of an empire.

Reading the letters of St. Paul and the parables of Jesus had an electrifying influence on my father. The letters and stories contained in an ancient book sowed the seeds of his own personal revolution, the remaking of his self. He was to supplement his remaking by the poets, particularly Shakespeare and Wordsworth, but no subsequent exposure to books had the transformative power of his early encounters with the New Testament. It brought out "the latent goodness in his own heart".

What, if anything, has brought out the latent goodness of my heart? Works by Robert Lax and Simone Weil and John Berger have, to some extent. Berger's refusal to abandon ethics at the altar of aesthetics (Bloom would be unforgiving of such misplaced high-mindedness), Weil's refusal of the easy life, the easy

way, Lax's and Cohen's insistence on play as a form of sacrament. These writers, along with a strange monk from Kentucky, and a handful of others, have opened my mind and kept my heart from closing.

You read alone. You write alone. Most of the time. Not always. Jacob Lawrence's painting *The Library* with its multitude of readers turning pages, used as the front cover of Nadine Gordimer's *Writing and Being*, suggests that we sometimes read in company. A public library is a public reading space. In certain ways, you write alone and in company. You write alongside elders and ancestors and sometimes, if Harold Bloom is right in his theory, against them. You read for the dead as well as the living.

My selected authors in this book are readers as well as writers. Susan Sontag says it well: "A writer is first of all a reader. It is from reading that I derive the standards by which I measure my own work and according to which I fall lamentably short." What one reads sits in judgment of what one writes; reading is the standard by which the quality and worth of writing is measured.

Sontag goes on: "It is from reading, even before writing, that I became part of a community — the community of literature — which includes more dead than living writers." Sontag has the order right: first one reads, then one writes. She also has the ratio of the dead relative to the living in the right proportion. Of my authors only Bloom, Berger, Cohen and Manguel are still living. All, the living and the dead, belong to the community of readers and writers.

A particular one-word cluster stands out for me in Edmond Jabès' *The Book of Questions*. "I is a book." One of the things the sentence means, it seems to me, is: the "I" is built by books; the self comes into being from seeing its reflection in the mirror of books. Once upon a time that was so. The self is built by other

things now, by three screens in particular: television, movie and computer. I is a screen. Throw in video games and music and you have several important building blocks of contemporary self-hood. But this self, this I, the I that is speaking to you, was built by books. My father was also built by books.

The book is a slow technology. Reading requires an investment of time, patience and concentration. It also insists on stillness and slowness. You don't motor through Shakespeare the way you would motor through a rerun of *Seinfeld*, fast-forwarding as you go. You can't read Henry James in a hurry.

Speed seizes our lives now and it doesn't graciously tolerate indulgences in the slow turning of pages or in the slow dreaming that accompanies the turning. I had time for dreaming in my childhood, time for the slow turning of pages. Dad, being a full-time worker at 14, had less time for dreaming, but he somehow got exposed to a book he cherished all his adult life – *Palgrave's Golden Treasury*, a book designed for dreaming.

Dad cloaked me in poetry by making available to me a fairly extensive library in poetry, but more importantly through records on a turntable. His playing, and my listening to, English actors reading from Blake, Wordsworth, Keats and Shakespeare had an enormous impact on my ear. His taking me to Stratford in my preteens to see Shakespeare's cycle of history plays also provided recurring music in my ear, a seashell with the sea's roar.

I don't know the biography of John Berger well enough to know if he was similarly blessed by his father, but lines from one of his poems ring true to my experience:

My heart born naked  
was swaddled in lullabies.

Later alone it wore  
poems for clothes.  
Like a shirt  
I carried on my back  
the poetry I had read.

I carry on my back the poetry I've read, the poetry I've listened to.

Dad also made sure that we had good journals and newspapers coming into the house. We had subscriptions to *The Saturday Review* edited by Norman Cousins, *The Guardian Weekly* which, at the time, contained full supplements from *Le Monde* and *The Washington Post*, and a Scottish theological journal called *The Expository Times*. He also made sure I was familiar with the English journals *Encounter* and *The New Statesman*.

“Live as though all your ancestors were living again through you.” These are the words from the ancient Greeks that the poet Ted Hughes shared with his son. My variation on the theme is: Read as though the dead were still living in you. I read for my dead father and my dead friend Mark Garber, as a pregnant woman eats for two, for her own nourishment and the nourishment of the life within her. I read for the living spirits within me. My reading of books on Shakespeare, for instance, is a way of carrying on my father's reading in literary criticism.

Friend and fellow writer Marilyn Gear Pilling says that I read piggishly, with full body engagement. My tongue and teeth sink into a book, my skin tingles, my spine shivers.

Divide the world  
 into those who tiptoe into  
 the hallowed chapel  
 of the book, wearing gloves  
 and those who roll  
 in the written word  
 as a pig rolls  
 in the slob slop  
 of the unmucked pen ...

She numbers me as one of the ones rolling in the slob slop, in the unmucked pen. I tell her that I'm happy to be among the pigs. I always thought that Orwell gave pigs a bum rap in *Animal Farm* by making them the tyrants.

My wife recently bought me Mahmoud Darwish's *Mural* translated by Rema Hammami and John Berger. She inscribed, "It's a small book you can easily put in your pocket." Berger wrote the introduction and provided drawings with handwritten lines from Darwish's poems. The lines and fragments from Darwish include these:

*In each thing I see my soul and what I cannot feel hurts me.  
 And what doesn't feel the hurt my soul causes, it also hurts me.  
 ... the land of my poem is green ...  
 And the welcome is as warm as bread.  
 How am I born from a thing I later make?*

These lines and others like them share the page with Berger's lines of a human face or a flower.

As Berger was mourning the death of Palestine's national poet on August 9th, 2008, his hand began drawing in remembrance of an articulated life. Lines from Darwish's poems began, "like rhizome plants, to intermingle and entwine with the drawn lines" and what resulted was a kind of hybrid of word and image. This book is precious to me because my wife has her hand in it, a poet I admire is present in it, and a poet-critic with immense gifts of the heart and mind is at work in it.

Berger was a gift from Wayne Allan to me. Very early on in our friendship, he would talk about a certain English art critic. The college where we taught owned the BBC tapes, *Ways of Seeing*, and I used them in the classroom whenever I could. I also read Berger's novel, *A Painter of Our Time*, first, on Wayne's recommendation, and then everything I could get my hands on, from *Permanent Red* to *Hold Everything Dear*. Berger, along with Wayne himself, educated my sight.

I count Berger among my heroes, someone who maintains a lively banter in my mind with George Orwell, Albert Camus and Edward Said. They are four artists of the word who committed their lives to defending underdogs.

Several of Berger's lines have entered my consciousness for good, so I pull them out for rethinking, and religious repetition: "The number of lives that enter any one life is incalculable." Berger has always tried to acknowledge the lives that entered his, the lives with whom he has become intimate. He has also written an exquisite line on the writer's duty that I want to take to heart in my own work: "All you have to know is whether you're lying or whether you're trying to tell the truth ..."

He's a beautiful mixture of clashing and clanging things: Marxist, Christian, a Jew, an intellectual Englishman who also works with his hands alongside French peasants, a man of words who draws and paints, a walker who also rides a motorcycle, a smoker, a blindingly fast talker and a ploddingly slow writer where every other word is an invitation to pause and reflect.

I have in my hands a black and white photograph by Clemens Kalischer. I wonder if Berger has seen it. I cut the photograph out of the magazine *The Sun*. Sun is about the best word in the language, in any language. *Le soleil* in French, *el sol* in Spanish. The word works beautifully in compounds and hyphenated words: Sun-up, sundown, sunburn, sun-showers, sun-speckled, sun-streaked, sunspots, Sunday and so on.

In the photograph, a man, perhaps 60ish, looks out to the viewer, peering dreamily at the camera or into space in a self-reflective moment. The man sits on a bench near an open window; he is holding an open book in his hands. He is wearing a kippah as worn by observant Jews. His elbow rests on the windowsill, books are stacked to his right, he is comfortably slouching, his right foot under a chair or another bench. Above him is writing in Hebrew, light crosses his face, a fedora lies beside him on the bench. Has he taken off one hat and put on another? His shirt is light-coloured, his pants, skullcap and book cover are dark. He's bearded.

A Jew reading. A Jew at read. In the house of reading, there is always in my imagination at least one Jew reading. Is this anonymous man reading what I read: poetry, politics, theology, biography, autobiography, philosophy? I read with a pen in hand. Does he? Words tap on my ear. I read with my body as well as my mind. Does he?

Bloom likes to say that systematic reading begins with St. Augustine. I don't believe him. For me, reading begins with a Jew. A Jew, probably an anonymous one, not the philosopher-theologian from northern Africa, is the archetypal reader. He's the man in the photograph sitting by a window holding a book.

Sometimes I think of three Jews reading. I think of George Steiner, Harold Bloom and Susan Sontag, three of the great readers of our time. I can see each one as a replacement for the anonymous Jew, sitting on the bench, looking out into space reflectively. I can even visualize each one reading beside the others even though none has had a good word to say about the other two. Wouldn't that be a photograph — the three of them reading together? I shook Steiner's hand. Once. I shook Sontag's hand. Once. I've never had the opportunity to shake Bloom's hand. Any one of them could be in the picture. But they're not. Instead, a single man, a man alone and anonymous, reads.

We readers, aglow in the word, huddle together like penguins against the world's chill, its indifference and amnesia. We're reading all the time, reading the world, reading friends and people we've barely met, reading intentions and motives and emotions, reading books. When you read, you read against the grain of death. You read stubbornly, defiantly. You read desperately, as if looking for a missing child. You read deliriously, in the hope of ecstasy and the fear of the inevitable misreading.

Steiner says that the Jewish homeland is the book. Not Israel, not a chunk of geography or a spot in time, but the transportable book, bound neither by place nor time. It doesn't matter where you are when you read, or at least it doesn't matter very much. You can be in prison, you can be on a boat, you can be near a window. The book is what matters. In a certain sense, the book is more important than you, more important than your culture,

country or language. That's what Kalischer tells me in his photograph. He might have chosen a celebrity for his subject. He didn't. He chose an anonymous man with a beard and a skullcap, reading.

As the [myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com) website notes, while Jews are frequently referred to as “the People of the Book”, they “have always been a people of many books ...” Books in Jewish traditions have been a means to enfleshing a phrase associated with Lionel Trilling, “the moral obligation to be intelligent”. In addition, they “have become the territory through which and in which Jews have traveled and interacted with other Jews”.

Steiner reinforces this thought in *My Unwritten Books*:

*The tablet, the scroll, the manuscript and the printed page become the homeland, the moveable feast of Judaism. Driven out of its native ground of orality, out of the sanctuary of direct address, the Jew has made of the written word his passport across centuries of displacement and exile.*

Putting experiences into books has helped to ensure the survival of the Jewish people. Steiner, a man of religious temperament and sensibility, although not a man of religious conviction, regards the survival of his battered and buffeted people as a miracle. For some experiences, only the religious vocabulary suffices.

In my imagination, and in Steiner's, there is something deeply Jewish about turning pages, commenting on commentaries, making footnotes, scribbling notes in margins. Steiner solemnly catalogues “the textual proclivities”, the ongoing secular Midrash, of Jews and their contributions to “the climate of Western consciousness”. Of the principal shapers of that consciousness — Darwin, Freud, Marx and Einstein — only Darwin is a non-Jew.

I would seat a fifth person at the table: Nietzsche, the son of a Lutheran pastor. Nietzsche is a great spawner of isms: existentialism, perspectivism, even deconstructionism. I also do not forget that Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus are Jews with world-wide impact.

Jews, in Steiner's imagination, and in mine, are a book-built people. In his chapter called "Zion" from his book on his unwritten books, Steiner asks the question: *Why has the self-designation and designation from without of certain communities and individuals as Jews, however contentious it is, endured?* His answer is the book. If my personal I can be book-built, why can't a whole people, allowing for individual exceptions, be book-built? Certainly the forthcoming Jewish writers and readers, the subjects of the following chapters, are book-built.

## II ALBERTO MANGUEL AT READ

ON THE BACK COVER OF Alberto Manguel's *The Library at Night* is a blurb from George Steiner with these words: "A love letter written to reading." And then below Steiner's blurb is one from *The Globe and Mail* with these words: "Alberto Manguel [is] a keeper of the word and a guardian of the book" by an anonymous writer. I am that anonymous writer and the book I was writing about was an early collection of essays entitled *Into the Looking-Glass Wood*. In any case, much of Manguel's work is a love letter to reading and he really is a keeper of the word and a guardian of the book.

Born in Argentina, raised in Israel while his father was the Argentinian ambassador, groomed in Canada where he began to write and publish, Manguel presently resides in France. He's a translator and an anthologist; he's a reader and writer. He's also a book-built man with a story-stocked mind. You can readily picture him at Clemens Kalischer's window reading with the ever-present Jorge Luis Borges at hand.

If Manguel were stopped at one of the many borders he crosses and forced to declare only one nationality, I suspect that, like me, he'd respond, "Reader." It seems to me that, like his mentor Jorge Luis Borges, he is principally a reader. He writes