



Books, books, books

TO AVOID writing by reading seems a strange thing to do. Or not. Too often I read the words of others and conclude that, perhaps, the world is better suited to having their words than mine. You are reading this so, fortunately, for me at least, that conclusion is a temporary one.

Reading is a two-way conversation between writer and reader. It is the reader who gives the words meaning and life and, sometimes, when reading something, I have an internal conversation with the author, wanting to put into words what I would say to them if we met. And then I don't write anything but simply shift on to the next page.

Until this page.

Neil Gaiman, one of my favourite writers, reflects in his book *The View from the Cheap Seats* on libraries, bookshops and the books that shaped him. His reflections had me reflecting on the role that books – and places that house books – have had on my life, starting with home.

My father, having been an academic, converted the garage in our new home into his study when I was eleven. In the years before that, he had a typical study in the National University of Lesotho-owned house that we lived in while he was still lecturing. The original study had an oak table, a leather work chair and shelves on one side of the room, filled with books. He had books on every subject conceivable and, for his whole life, he continued to add to that. In my younger years, I gravitated towards the fiction books, of which there were few. He remained a fervent believer in reading for knowledge and I don't remember seeing him actually read a novel.

He must have, at some stage, because we had an impressive collection of the African Writers Series, with novels by the likes of Can Themba, Alex La Guma, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Bessie Head and Wole Soyinka.

I started with the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew, which I borrowed from our neighbours, moving onto the African Writers Series from about ten years old. I do remember going to the National Library in Maseru regularly but very little of what I read from there. My father subscribed to the *Reader's Digest* and, from them, I would get thick, hardcover volumes of fairy tales.

The library that was defining was my high-school library. The librarian was a tall, American woman, Mrs Fritsch, whose two sons were also at my school. I went through a big Louis L'Amour phase and he seemed to put out a book every other month, telling the stories of various American Western families, the gunfights and the feuds. For some reason, Westerns appealed to me. South Africa's TV4 channel used to play a Western, invariably with John Wayne, every Friday and I built an extensive Betamax video collection of these.

This was before I came to understand the politics of the American West and how Black people and Native Americans/First Nation people were portrayed and treated. But this was much later in my life. Whenever a new Louis L'Amour book arrived in the library, Mrs Fritsch would make sure that I got my hands on it before anyone else. This was probably the start of a habit I have when it comes to reading. I get into particular authors, devour all their books as quickly as I can and then spend years lamenting their writing output, while they work on their next book. I

remember waiting for eons for Robert Jordan's next book in the Wheel of Time series, only to discover that he had passed away.

It still bothers me, although I now understand how hard writing a book actually is. It was always better with older writers like Agatha Christie and the Sherlock Holmes series of stories because they had written all they were going to write.

Another library that will always have a special place in my heart is

a foreign-language library in Oldenburg. I sometimes wonder whether it is still there and what it looks like. I had exhausted the library at the university in town, which only had a couple of shelves of books in English, when I discovered it existed. I would make the 30-minute bicycle ride every few weeks; Oldenburg was a bicycle town with pavements divided into pedestrian and bicycle lanes and a bicycle image on the traffic lights.

The building wasn't much to write home about. It was a rectangular building, with brick walls (I think), not that big, but big enough to house enough books to satisfy my needs. Funnily enough, I would read the back cover of the same books constantly, before taking one or two out. I reckon there are books I looked at over ten times before something about them caught my fancy. I still do that.

It was here that I discovered Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. There are books that you can't get enough of, and this is one of those for me. I couldn't tell you why. I probably read it about five times in that year and have reread it countless times since. It is also one of the few books that I have read that was turned into a film/TV series that I also enjoyed.

I read Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn* and *Tropic of Cancer* several times, but, I suspect, being a nineteen-year-old, the explicitness of the books appealed to me. I haven't read them since.

That library in Germany is probably the last library I frequented. I don't even remember whether the library at my university in Durban had fiction. It was the place I went to read thick, sometimes dreary, books on Economics and the like when I was studying. I got novels from friends and then, later, from bookshops when I could afford them.

With the advent of Amazon, I initially started ordering books and, after buying myself a Kindle, I switched to digital books. Most recently, I have switched back to physical books and order most of them online, with the occasional visit to a bookshop.

My home bookshelves are starting to look like my father's. Plus, there are some of his books on my shelves. When he passed away, all I could think was, how do I save the books?

A part of me hopes my children will have the same dilemma. A part of me is just grateful for the opportunity to escape into other worlds, although, ironically, I now read more non-fiction than fiction. I suspect my father is pleased.