

## Shami's special document of distractions to steer the spirit away from depressive dissertating

One of the particular quirks of academia that for which I reserve a special hatred is the view, held implicitly and/or expressed explicitly by many, that because we love what we do, we should do it all the time, and therefore appropriate bedside reading could include books (or 'novels' as some undergraduates erroneously describe such things) by authors like Peter Brown or Caroline Walker Bynum. We are indeed privileged to have work that we love; but it's still work, and it's fundamental that we cultivate habits of balancing work and life from early on—otherwise there's no escape from seriously bad mental health. I insist that my students count their working hours and do not work more than 40 hours per week for at least 40 weeks of the year. There will be some occasions when more intense periods of work will be needed; but these will be brief and exceptional.

This means, of course, that one must have things to do in the remaining hours that are suitably distracting, because I also insist that not working cannot mean doing something else with the mind half on the work: chopping vegetables while wondering about a footnote or feeling stressed about deadlines or whatever. The more effectively you switch off, the more focus you will have when you switch on; if you are able to put in 40 hours of fully focussed, highly concentrated work every week, you won't need more, and you will only be able to do that if you really don't work when you're not working.

There are all sorts of means of distraction—exercise, yoga, meditation, cooking and baking, games of various kinds, reading, watching tv, social events, etc. are standard options—and I don't prescribe things for my students. But just for the fun of it, I thought I'd provide an annotated list of some of my preferred distractions. Yes, these are all books, which doesn't mean I don't do other things: my children are obviously very distracting, and I cook and bake, and used to watch tv quite a bit (the usual: *Downton*, *Pride & Prejudice* [has to be the old BBC version with Colin Firth, otherwise you have no taste or judgement], *Strictly* [yes, sometimes], *House* ['Being miserable won't make you a better doctor, it will just make you miserable'—applies to academia too!], loads of cooking shows especially the UK Masterchef and spinoffs, and the CBC and BBC/ITV Bake-off, etc., standup comics on YouTube) and more or less random things on YouTube (ATC conversations—yay Kennedy Steve!; cab views of Norwegian trains; videos of complex model train layouts; villagers in Central Asia cooking; planes taking off and landing in bad weather).

But books are best for me, and I have built up a library of distractions that I have no more space for—and perhaps you might like to try some. No serious literature is included here because it is, well, serious... and although once upon a time that was also a good distraction for me, I can no longer handle it. Nor do they include anything to nourish your spirit: these are just distractions, though nourishment is also very necessary. But if you want recommendations for (often gloomy) and (extremely) long but soul-nourishing German novels (and a few in other languages, sometimes less long and gloomy), just ask, and you shall receive.

The longer list (thrillers, romances, murder mysteries) is a little bit further below; first, and in brief, and no matter if you last read them as a child: *Calvin & Hobbes*, *Asterix*, *Tintin*, *Peanuts*. *What Katy Did* and the sequels (which I prefer). *Little Women* and the sequels. *Anne of Green Gables*. *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner* (yes, the books and not the Disney rubbish, and with the original E H Shepard illustrations). *The Wind in the Willows*. Beatrix Potter. *Heidi* (the book by Johanna Spyri, not a biography of the model!). Less well known: the 'William' series by Richmal Compton, the Bunter series by Frank Richards, the Chalet School series by Elinor M Brent-Dyer, the Biggles series by W E Johns, and the unfortunately now somewhat notorious Enid Blyton.

Yes: I unapologetically read old children's books, many of which are politically incorrect (but I grew up on them and my students and colleagues think I turned out okay) and I am unabashed in stating that I still love them and even read them. The Willow Farm / Cherry Tree Farm are my favourite Blytons, and I love the Chalet School series, but William and Bunter are well worth a try. And if you don't know Pooh and the Mole and the Water-Rat and Heidi and Mr McGregor from the books and not animations, merchandise, or other such rubbish then you need some remedial work on your primary education.

Also good distractions, works of popular history or biography written in a more or less novelistic style: I am hooked on **Ben MacIntyre** and almost equally on **Erik Larson**; I thoroughly enjoyed **Mary Lovell** on the Mitford sisters and look forward to more of her biographies; **Simon Winchester** is always worth a read. **Ariel Sabar's** *Veritas* and **Roberta Mazza's** *Stolen Fragments* are somewhat hair-raising accounts of skulduggery in academia at the highest levels of scholarship and prestige—fortunately in a field far enough removed from ours to be not too close to the bone.

I used to enjoy reading books (and watching shows) about animals and nature; but it's far too depressing nowadays. Still, as transformative to my knowledge and thinking, I'd really recommend **Zoë Schlanger's** *The Light-Eaters*, which is on how science is completely changing how we understand plants, who (yes, I said 'who') now seem to be approaching animals in terms of our knowledge of their consciousness; and **Susan Casey's** *The Underworld* (some of its cast were in the news with the submersible that died near the *Titanic*), which is moving, breathtaking—and of course, ultimately hugely depressing (Budweiser cans thousands of metres under the ocean? Humans!).

Then, and in no particular order:

**P G Wodehouse:** an acquired taste, perhaps, and certainly a very old-fashioned one that might offend modern sensibilities sometimes—but I do think even if you didn't grow up with him. Ridiculously stupid English aristocratic figures behaving idiotically. They're all the same, they're all absurd; they're beautifully written, and unless your tolerance of silliness is very low (in which case I would advise you to be less serious), they're really amazingly funny. The standard favourites are the Jeeves and Wooster series (also a very popular tv show; and watch Hugh Laurie as the idiot Bertie Wooster, and then as Gregory House, and you'll see what a great actor he is; then listen to him doing jazz and blues and feel some awe at his multiple talents); the Blandings Castle series is the one I personally prefer; and many of the one-off books are also excellent, e.g. *Picadilly Jim*, *The Adventures of Sally*, *A Damsel in Distress*.

**Alistair MacLean:** old-fashioned thrillers, some of the earlier ones (*HMS Ulysses*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *Where Eagles Dare*) are the best, though there are some later ones that are good too (*Ice Station Zebra*, *San Andreas*, *Goodbye California*). He had drinking problems, and that shows in some of his later works which are less tightly plotted and sometimes even kind of badly written. The UNACO series that he had plotted out but were written by others are also good thrillers. All of these seem very, very antiquated when I think of it: there's no cybercrime of any sort. How comforting!

**John le Carré** is brilliant and almost too literary and serious for this list. Can't be left out, but Oh My Dog, the moral complexities and especially his righteous anger in some of his post-Cold War novels (*The Constant Gardner*, for example—and for Dog's sake, read the book, don't just watch the movie) is too depressing after having to cope with Latin stress and suchlike. But if you've got more backbone than me, he's great (though he can't write women characters very convincingly at all). I loved *The Perfect Spy* and the Smiley novels; one of the main characters shakes hands with Thomas Mann in the former, and Smiley's heart is really in German baroque literature... need I say more? Some of the movies are excellent: the BBC mini-series of the Smiley novels with Alec

Guinness as Smiley; *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, very grim, with Richard Burton at his grimmest; *Russia House* with Sean Connery being the absolute not James Bond; everything until the last bit of the *Night Manager* mini-series (Tom Holland is at his drool-worthy best). But the books, as ever, are much better.

In contrast, black and white with no moral complexity: **Lee Child's Jack Reacher** series (do NOT start with the most recent ones written along with Andrew Child, they're crap). Warning: there's a lot of violence in these. But the characters are not developed sufficiently for you to feel anything for them. They're goodies and baddies, and Reacher is (the author himself said—he had the old-fashioned classics education in the British school system and then did English) modelled on the medieval knight who goes off alone and finds baddies and kills them, except that the author keeps this mainly fixed on action and there's rarely anything smacking of romance. Reacher is an impossible person, muscles hard as rocks, 6'4", never needs to exercise, lives on coffee and McDonalds (carbs, proteins, fats, all that's needed), former military cop posted all over US bases abroad since he was born since his father was a US marine (and his mother was French), now discovering the US by Greyhound and hitchhiking. My recommendations: *61 hours*; *Worth Dying For*; *Echo Burning*; *The Midnight Line* (where you also learn a lot about the US opioid crisis and how the army was responsible). There's a lot of plot complexity; excellent retardation techniques which really keep you turning pages: Child is a real master craftsman that way, and he writes brilliantly (not beautifully). There is also, perhaps surprisingly, a fair bit of understated politics, which makes me wonder whether these books sell that well in the southern United States. These are, I suppose, very stereotypically male books, but apparently also super-popular with women; Reacher is very sexy. (So, I am told, is Tom Cruise; but he's short and therefore can never be a good Jack Reacher.)

The total opposite: Regency romance, **Georgette Heyer**. Most of them are set in the same period as Jane Austen and very Austen-like, basically all about finding love and getting married within the social constraints of the time, absolutely beautifully written in very period style—so very long sentences with complex subordinated structures and lots of semi-colons (and I'm a huge fan of semi-colons)—and independent-minded women often not seeking husbands, in some cases also a good deal of insight into character and very well-defined characters, all from a female point of view with the occasional (and for me at least) very refreshing female ogling of extremely male thighs and legs and shoulders in the form-fitting clothing of the time. My recommendations: *Frederica* (absolute favourite for characters, insight, and a dog), *Arabella* (also a dog), *Venetia* (no dog, but even more unconventional), *A Lady of Quality*, *A Civil Contract* (less light than the others), and two utterly hilarious ones, *The Reluctant Widow*, and *The Talisman Ring*. These are, I suppose, stereotypically female books, and I don't know if they're super-popular with men too, but they are super-popular with me (read many of them 3+ times).

Outstanding historical murder mysteries: **C J Sansom's Shardlake** series. Tudor, Henry VIII, hunchback lawyer known to Cromwell investigating deaths in suspicious circumstances that could have political consequences and his results might or might not get him into trouble with Cromwell / Henry etc. Brilliantly written, very carefully and thoroughly research in terms of historical accuracy (author has PhD in history, albeit 19<sup>th</sup>-century), absolutely fantastic in terms of plotting; but often rather grim.

Also outstanding but more than rather grim: **Peter Robinson's Inspector Banks** series. (Yes, the books please, not just tv!) Robinson is from Yorkshire but settled in Toronto (recently died), the books are set in Yorkshire, with excellent plotting as police procedurals, so lots of proper police work (paperwork and autopsies—plenty of these with a lot of detail, careful about reading while eating—rather than spotting bloodstains with a magnifying glass, really well-drawn characters, very, very dark crimes, and the detectives are complex people with Banks given to a lot of introspection sometimes listening to opera or Takemitsu or classic rock while nursing single malt.

Don't read when feeling low. Don't read if in danger of feeling low. Don't read if either of those and have a tendency to reach for single malt. Can be bad for mental health and liver. But if not in danger on these counts, excellent distractions.

Very gory but fascinating: **Kathy Reichs' Tempe Brennan** series. Kathy Reichs is a forensic anthropologist who is a consultant for the cops in Montreal and a prof at UNC (or was, now retired); Tempe Brennan is also both of those things. Every single book has 'bones' in the title; the pathologist examines bodies with soft tissue remaining, she gets called in when it's just bones, but then she also ends up doing her own investigating too, often facing the disapproval of the cops, who include a total hunk (Canadian!) with whom she has an on-and-off relationship until they get together at the end of the series. Unlike Heyer's heroines, Brennan is a very non-genteel and unladylike character who sometimes drinks too much and swears rather a lot. Excellent stuff; but do bear in mind that there's a lot of detail about human insides.

Totally non-gory, wonderfully written, a must if you're interested in Egypt and also if not: **Elizabeth Peters's Amelia Peabody** series. Peabody is a woman of independent means in the 1880s who leaves England to go to Egypt because she's interested, meets a terribly foul-mouthed English archaeologist who is (he says, and eventually she does too) the very best archaeologist in the world at the time and a not-at-all likeable character who is very nasty to her; of course they get married by the end of the first book. They go on digs in every book, and somehow there's a murder; they call each other by their last names, Emerson and Peabody; it's all wonderfully written, first-person from Peabody's perspective, great tongue-in-cheek humour, and there's no actual swearing (though Emerson is known as 'Father of Curses' in Egypt) because Peabody is, after all, a lady. Peabody is famous for her parasol, made with reinforced iron so she can bop criminals on the head with it (which she indeed does); and for her unconventional but practical clothing (no corsets, divided skirts and then trousers); they have an obnoxious son who is nicknamed Ramses (she just stops short of calling him obnoxious herself) who reads hieroglyphs by the age of 5 and swears fluently in Arabic by 10 and irritates his father by correcting the latter's scholarly manuscripts at the same age. Light, wonderful, author has a PhD in Egyptology. By the same author, the Vicky Bliss series: Vicky is an art historian in the 1970s who happens to be super-smart, extremely tall, and extremely beautiful, which is an awful combination for a woman in the sexist 1970s: other female academics hate her, men find her an irresistibly sexy combination of beauty and brains whom they want to take to bed so that they can forget about the brains. Nowhere as good as the Peabody series, but fun, not least (for me) because the first one is set in Germany and from the second one she works in Munich (though mostly they're set elsewhere).

Not light at all, but really excellent and again a total contrast from the previous: **Sara Paretsky's V I Warshawski** series. V I (who does not like being called Vicki, let alone Victoria) is a female private investigator in Chicago in the mid-80s, gritty times, gritty city, gritty female PI, daughter of a Polish immigrant cop and an Italian opera-singer trained housewife, lone woman in a very male profession, drinks way too much, swears way too much, sleeps around way too much, solves lots of crimes, gets beaten up and almost killed lots of times, wonderful stuff. But also gets really, really dark, which is why (with regret) I stopped halfway through the series since I can't handle the dark now.

Very fluffy: **Tasha Alexander's Lady Emily** series. Author has a BA in Medieval Studies from Notre Dame! Lady Emily is a woman of independent means in late-Victorian times, daughter of an earl who gets married to a fabulously rich aristocrat who conveniently goes and dies as soon as they get married; now free of parental and husbandal constraints, Lady Emily learns Greek and becomes an expert on Greek archaeology, first suspects and then falls in love with and marries a super-handsome (think Colin Firth as Darcy, or Matthew Goode in period costume) and very forward-thinking man who works undercover for the British foreign service and with whom she

forms a detecting team. First-person female-centred narrative. After about the first six books, quality drops off considerably.

Also very fluffy: **Sophie Irwin**, whom I have just discovered thanks to one of my students (that's also how I came to Heyer and Peters): Regency romance done quite well, very amusing, very light, with some modern-ish twists that might seem slightly implausible but work well enough. I confess to being irritated by the use of 'I' where what is needed is 'me', but I'm an old fart...

One of the great classics: **Dorothy Sayers**, the **Peter Wimsey/Harriet Vane** novels. Start with *Strong Poison*, then *Have His Carcase*, then *Gaudy Night*, which is the best, a real masterpiece that doesn't even have a real murder but is more thrilling than any murder mystery (and gives you a very good period feel of Oxford a hundred years ago). Lots of real insight. Don't read the many Peter Wimsey novels without Harriet, they're just not good enough. He's a Lord, super-rich, engaged in various undercover diplomatic things aristocrats did between the Wars; she's a Modern Woman of the 20s, smokes like a chimney, drives a car, writes detective novels and is in *Strong Poison* in the dock for poisoning her lover (she's innocent). Sayers was a medievalist; her translation of the *Chanson de Roland* was the Penguin Classics translation that might even now be in print 70 years on, and I'm pretty sure she did Dante for Penguin too. Wimsey proposes to Vane in Latin.

I greatly prefer Sayers to **Agatha Christie**, but of course if murder mysteries are your thing, you have to read Christie, who really is a genius at writing the same thing a million times and still keeping you gripped even on the tenth reading. (But not so much, for me, after the tenth reading.)

Also, and totally different (and the only non-fiction on this part of my list): **Gerald Durrell**. If you haven't heard of him, [hear of him now](#). He was a conservationist before such things existed (1950s), unconventional childhood, didn't go to school, grew up on Corfu—his English family that was from India but went 'home' when Father died even though they'd never lived there, then found money running out so moved to Corfu—he grew up looking at and collecting animals, set up his own zoo (which still exists, on Jersey) as a conservation institution intending to focus on captive breeding of endangered species to reintroduce into the wild when their habitat was more secure (and they still do precisely that, and have had successes with a number of species), at a time when zoos were still very much just entertainment and didn't treat animals well, started compiling his own list of endangered species way before the IUCN even existed, trained possibly hundreds of people in habitat conservation at his zoo. He writes beautifully, wonderfully evocative of animals and landscapes, also absolutely hilarious, especially about humans, whom he doesn't like that much (hypocrites, unlike other animals), but spends a lot of time with. The earlier autobiographical stuff on his childhood (*My Family and Other Animals, Birds, Beasts, and Relatives*) is simply funny and beautiful; some of the other books are funny but also depressing because there's so much about the plight of animals in them. He was very forward-looking about animals, but a man of his time in many other respects, so be warned about that.

**Crazy Rich Asians!** Yes, I enjoyed the movie; but the book and two sequels are so much better! **Kevin Kwan** is quite, quite wicked. I don't recognise most of the fancy names of haute couture, interior design, vintage car models, art, and fancy private schools; but I don't think that diminishes the enjoyment at all. Poor super-rich people. But don't bother with *Sex and Vanity*; *Lies and Weddings* is good.

Far away from this—Kwan is so contemporary I don't understand half the references to social media-ish things—is **Rosalind Laker**, who writes sometimes very complicatedly plotted intergenerational and somewhat breathless historical novels, female-centred (but with a sometimes jarringly male gaze). *To Dance with Kings* (five generations of women in France, from a peasant near Versailles while it was being built, to a lady-in-waiting to Marie Antoinette), *Circle of Pearls* (intergenerational drama about the women of a Royalist family, from the Civil War to the Great

Fire), and *The Golden Tulip* (three daughters of a fictional Dutch painter a little younger than Rembrandt, all of whom paint) are my favourites.

I also read contemporary romance; my favourite is **Beth O'Leary**, and I probably like *The Flatsshare* most of all: male palliative care nurse who works night shifts shares flat with editor of books on handicrafts and they communicate through post-it notes (mainly). Also great, and very funny, albeit with tragedy in the recent past: *The Switch*, in which hard-working ambitious London lawyer switches her life with lifelong housewife grandmother in a Yorkshire village; both find the dream man. No sex (unlike some other contemporary—and historical—romance), nice prose, cheesy and light.

Even more cheesy, albeit in less nice prose, with a lot more cliché (and sex) and tragedy always: **Abby Jimenez**. They're all really formulaic, down to the guy almost always either being or looking like a lumberjack from Minnesota, there's always some sort of really bad tragic thing (e.g. rare illness means someone has lost family members young and is going to die soon), but a comforting overcoming of it is obviously part of the deal. The very sameness of them (aided by the fact that characters from each novel are woven into the others) makes them comforting; and there are always dogs, sometimes lots of them. More edgy: **Emily Henry**, and her Canadian counterpart (just as good, I think), **Carley Fortune**. The writing is more tense, the plots are more tense, and not just because of a will-they/won't-they suspense, the characters are more tense about something or other. These have more of a sense of reaching for literary quality. *Funny Story* (Henry) is probably my favourite: who wouldn't fall for a protagonist who is a children's librarian who does Story Time for the kids and does all the voices in the books? I must admit, though: I reached for Jimenez to re-read faster than Henry or Fortune.

Very different: **Lauren Ho**, who's two novels are also very different from each other. *Last Tang Standing* is a *Crazy Rich Asian* type thing, ultra-rich Singapore people scheming to get their children married; there's a twist that's rather surprising at the end and very much not in keeping with the stereotype. *Lucie Yi Is Not a Romantic* is even more different from what one might expect: the title character, wanting a child but not finding the right man to fall in love with, opts for a co-parenting relationship, with surprising results. There's an underlying seriousness here that also makes it a change from most contemporary romance I've read; but it's done with a light touch.