

FAVORITE BOOKS OF 2007

The more I try to understand the method behind my reading madness, the more I'm convinced that Chance is the name of my Buchhändler. Chance is a strict, tight-lipped, eclectic connoisseur. Chance selects my books for me, Chance places them on the shelves, Chance decides in which order they will be read, Chance decrees which will be remembered and which forgotten. Attentive to every detail, Chance is not only responsible for the books in my library but also of those that accompany me on the train, in the toilet, at dinner, in bed. All I have to say is "Tischlein, deck dich!" and, lo and behold, my bedside table (if it is bedtime) is piled with books to read before falling asleep. Now, Chance will choose for me eight books from my present reading batch.

I've just finished a delightfully playful and intelligent novel by Véronique Beucler, of whom I had not read anything before: *La Berlue* (the expression "*avoir la berlue*" means "to hallucinate" or, more commonly, "to have hopes.") *La Berlue* (published by Albin Michel, 2007) is about visions and hopes in literature, and about the power, which Borges explored in "Pierre Menard, author of Don Quixote," granted to a book through its attribution to a certain author. In *La Berlue*, an unsuccessful writer discovers that a novel she had written (and which the publisher refused) has appeared under the name of another author, a certain Mérand. Angry but unable to do anything about it, the writer sends in a second manuscript: the same thing happens. Revenge then becomes her goal: she writes a third book, but this time pretends to be Mérand's agent, demanding that it should be published under a pseudonymous name -- her own. The new novel is an immense success, beginning a splendid game of inventions, plagiarisms and usurpations that would have delighted Borges, aware of the homage paid by Mérand to his own Menard. One further proof of Chance's power: *La Berlue* begins with a quotation by Pascal Quignard which I underlined in his book years ago: "It is said that a web, according to its size, shape, strength, snares, beauty, weaves at any given moment the spider it requires."

A country is not its politics, and it is easy to forget that, beyond the often ignominious pack that holds political power, are a people laboriously preserving its literature and culture. The Iranian novelist Iraj Pezeshkzad, now in his late seventies, lives in exile in Paris. He is the author of an undisputed masterpiece, *My Uncle Napoleon*, which I read in a superb English translation by Dick Davies (published by Random House/Modern Library). *My Uncle Napoleon* is the story of an obsession: of a man so unsuccessful in real life that he believes there is a British plot afoot to cause his downfall. In her preface to the English edition, Azar Nafisi (author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*) explains that Pezeshkzad found inspiration for the novel in a notion rife among the adults of his childhood: that every Iranian politician was a "British lackey", even claiming that Hitler was a British stooge and that the bombing of London had been planned by the British Secret Service. *My Uncle Napoleon* is not merely a satire: it is a vast portrait of a society seen through the interaction between three separate households (the protagonist's, his sister's and that of his younger brother) -- a society far richer and more complex than the absurd gestures of a few fanatics incline us to believe.

Though I no longer live in Canada, Chance makes sure that Canadian literature is never far from my reach. A hopeful editor has sent me the bound proofs of a delightful new novel, *Shining at the Bottom of the Sea* (Viking/Canada) by a young author, Stephen Marche, whose first book, *Raymond and Hannah*, I haven't read; but on the strength of this one, I certainly will. Inventing places is a literary occupation; many years ago, with Gianni Guadalupi, I compiled a dictionary of over 2,000 of such places. Marche goes further: he not only invents a place (the island of Sanjania) but also its entire history and culture, offering us an anthology of apocryphal texts from early nineteenth-century pamphlets to the literature of the "Sanjanian diaspora." Extracts of novels, essays, poems, reviews of books, interviews and scholarly papers build up a convincing portrait of this new country, halfway between the satirical geography of Jonathan Swift and the futuristic fantasies of Doris Lessing.

Adolfo Bioy Casares met Jorge Luis Borges in the house of Victoria Ocampo in Buenos Aires, in 1931. Sixteen years later, Bioy began to keep a journal in which he faithfully recorded their meetings and conversations. Borges died in 1986, Bioy in 1999. Now, Bioy's literary executor, Daniel Martino, who had previously published extracts of Bioy journal, has brought out 1664 tightly-printed pages collecting Bioy's chronicle of the two men's friendship, under the plain title *Borges* (published by Destino). It is an enlightening, moving testimonial to one of the most important literary relationships of the twentieth century. It is a paradox that a literary correspondance, however brilliant, reads like a counterpoint of monologues; a diary at its best, though in a single voice, manages instead to convey the mood of an intimate duet. Bioy's entries bring to life their collaboration: reading together, talking together, writing together. The journal faithfully chronicles their private lives (marital problems, illnesses), their literary likes and dislikes (which change with exemplary honesty throughout the years), the secrets of their writing partnership (creating a third author that has the traits of neither of them), their particular humour. The book filled me with memories of those two much-loved and admired men whom I met so long ago, in my adolescence and, once again, thanks to Chance.

Two collections of poetry, both by Canadian writers: Margaret Atwood's *The Door* (published by McClelland & Stewart), like her previous collection, *Morning in the Burned House*, is one of the best books by one of the best poets writing in English, written in a sparse, elegiac tone that combines illuminating intelligence with caustic humour, and wisdom that (forgive the commonplace) for once truly comes with age. Lorna Crozier's *The Blue Hour of the Day* (McClelland & Stewart), is a selection from eight of her previous volumes; rather than an anthology, it reads like a long autobiographical poem of astonishing coherence and beauty, and so powerful that, after I'd closed the book, I found that I'd unwittingly learnt several of the lines by heart.

Tasmon (Steidl) by Thorsten Palzhoff (one of the young writers chosen to tour the international Hay Festivals of 2007) is an exquisitely crafted triptych on the theme of false identities and historical ambiguities. As a consequence of the policy among the larger English-language publishers to put profit before quality, a number of first-rate writers are being kicked out of their habitual homes; several remain unpublished in the original and can only be read in translation. This is the case of the superb Persian novelist Bahiyyih Nakhjavani, whose book *The Woman Who Read Too Much* (*Actes Sud*) I read in French translation because Bloomsbury (publisher of her first books) rejected her new work. Rich and subtle, *The Woman Who Read Too Much* is a magnificent historical novel about the woman poet and scholar Tahirih Qurratu'l-Ayn who, in the nineteenth century, defied the political and religious powers at the court of the Shah.

From the meagre offerings of English translations of great European writers, two Hungarians and two Spanish. Antal Zerb, who died in 1945 in a forced labour camp, was a witty and erudite novelist. *The Pendragon Legend*, a gothic fantasy, and *Oliver VII*, a political comedy, have both been published in translations by Len Rix (Pushkin Press). Sandor Marai committed suicide in 1989, his genius unrecognized. Now, publishers are slowly bringing out his essential books. *The Rebels* (translated into English by George Szirtes, published by Knopf and Picador) a coming-of-age fable set among Mitteleuropa's youth during World War One, amply confirms Marai's belated fame. From Spain, Carmen Laforet's *Nada*, translated by Edith Grossman, published by Harvill Secker. Written when the author was twenty-three, barely five years after the end of the Civil War, this great classic gives a searing inward picture of the spiritual and material devastation brought on by Franco. Enrique Vila-Matas's eye is turned outward, towards the universal library. His most famous book is *Bartleby & Co.*, about writers who don't write; his new one, *Montano* (translated by Jonathan Dunne, published by Harvill Secker) is about a man who has read too much. Vila-Matas is essential reading for anyone interested in the workings of literature.

Two essayists whose work I treasure: Robert Bringhurst's scalpel-sharp collection, *Everywhere Being Is Danced: Twenty Pieces of Thinking* (Gasperau Press), careful reflections on language, literature and truth; "The Origin of Mind" alone deserves the stature of a classic. And Stan Persky's *Topic Sentence: A Writer's Education* (New Star Books), a sampler of writings by one of Canada's keenest, most intelligent thinkers. Other essayists pontificate; Persky has something of Socrates about him, bringing the reader into his thought processes and meditations, teaching us to feel and reason.