

READING, WRITING, SHELVING

BY STAN PERSKY

Three books about the literary basics.

Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night* (Knopf Canada, 2006)

John Sutherland, *How to Read a Novel* (St. Martin's, 2006)

Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer* (HarperCollins, 2006)

Here are three recent books about the literary basics: writing, reading, and shelving. But before saying a word about them, let me dispense with the verdict: John Sutherland's *How to Read a Novel* and Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer* are mildly entertaining, more or less harmless bits of fluff, ideal for winter beach reading (but you don't go to the beach in winter? Exactly.), while Alberto Manguel's *The Library at Night* is a real book, masterfully written, and is actually about something.

Sutherland, who is Emeritus Lord Northcliffe Professor of Modern English Literature at University College London (now there's a mouthful!), well-known literary reviewer, and highly enough regarded as a tastemaker to have served as chair of the 2005 Man Booker Prize committee, begins his "user's guide" by noting that, like objects of sexual desire, there are "so many novels, so little time."

Confronted by his literally voluminous task—apparently more than 10,000 novels a year are published—Sutherland, far from being depressed by the thought of such a glut, advises that "there is no point in lamenting the book world that history has landed us with, a world in which millions of books are dumped in the market place at once." Of course the thought may occur to the perspicacious reader that given "so little time," one way to winnow the heap is to forego the tepid pleasure of reading the sort of book, such as Sutherland's, that proposes to guide us through the forests sacrificed for the book-industry's seasonal production. I mean, why not just plunge into Stendhal's *Red and the Black*, which you've always been meaning to get around to?

In any case, Sutherland's book is a charming hodgepodge of literary tidbits, gossip and factoids, enlivened by the author's engaging wit and good

cheer. Of course, it isn't about "how to read a novel" at all really. Fact is, Sutherland doesn't have much to say about novels other than that one should read them for enjoyment, that anyone's evaluation of what they enjoy is of equal value to anyone else's idea of what they like, and that novels are occasionally good providers of information (I think he mentions Arthur Hailey's *Airport* in this regard).

All of that is a long way from, say, Richard Rorty's remarks in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (2007) about critic Harold Bloom's *How to Read and Why* (2000): "The point of reading a great many books is to become aware of a great number of alternative purposes, and the point of that is to become an autonomous self... It is the distinctive trait of the intellectual." Most people, Rorty (and Bloom) note, are not intellectuals, and if they read books, "it is not because they seek redemption but... because they wish to be entertained or distracted... They do not read books to find out what purposes to have. The intellectuals do."

Such matters are far from what's on Sutherland's mind. Unsurprisingly then, the most interesting part of Sutherland's book is his gossipy, but scattered, account of chairing the Booker Prize committee that controversially awarded the cheque and all else to John Banville's *The Sea*. Sutherland's judges thus bypassed Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George* and various other highly touted books of the season, and most controversially of all, left off the short list Ian McEwan's widely praised age-of-terrorism novel, *Saturday*, a book rapturously reviewed by all and sundry except for one utterly damning, quite important appraisal by, of all people, John Banville. It was Banville's condemnation, reputedly, that knocked McEwan out of the race. Actually, I would have been perfectly willing to read a full juicy account of the Booker affair, but Sutherland only provides bits and pieces of the story.

Like Sutherland, novelist Francine Prose is a competent and genial practitioner of the literary arts, and her *Reading Like a Writer* is a similar newspaper-wrapping of fish and chips. As suggested by her sub-title, *A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them* (wow, there's another mouthful), Prose's self-help reader, like Sutherland's, trades on the recently revived phenomenon of book clubs or readers' groups. Both

volumes seem at least partially conceived as the sort of book that members of a reading club might take up, perhaps to get a firmer grip on how to go about sustaining such a group, or to get some ideas of what might be worthwhile to read. In fact, that's how I came to read her book. One of the members of our reading group suggested it as a stimulus to further readings.

Well, it's not very stimulating. It consists of old-fashioned "close readings" of words, sentences, dialogue, characters, plot and whatnot of bits of dozens of other books. Some of the samplings run on for 10 pages or more, and you find yourself, if interested in the excerpt, wondering if it wouldn't be a better idea to just proceed directly to the work being quoted rather than reading a pep-talk about being attentive. Speaking as a writer myself, little of this has much to do with "how I read as a writer."

Most of *Reading Like a Writer* feels like a committee project in which Prose and some close friends patch together favourite passages and provide commentary. However, there's one telling, stunning exception to this plodding exposition. It occurs late in the book. Prose tells a story about her experience of trying to teach creative writing at some god-forsaken post-secondary institution in the eastern U.S. After recounting her bumbling and comic efforts in the classroom, she describes the cheerless ride home on a commuter train where she reads a volume of Anton Chekhov's short stories. Suddenly, Francine Prose and her prose come alive. We're reading a real piece of splendid writing in which we learn something about Chekhov, something about Prose, and something about reading and writing. It's all too brief, and probably not worth the price of admission, but it at least gives us some spark of an idea of what the whole business of reading and writing is about.

And now for something completely... deeper.

At night, Alberto Manguel tells us in his booklength meditation on the nature of libraries, memory, and perhaps much more, "when the library lamps are lit, the outside world disappears and nothing but this space of books remains in existence... In the dark, with the windows lit and the rows of books glittering, the library is a closed space, a universe of self-serving rules that pretend to replace or translate those of the shapeless universe beyond."

The library in question is located in a tiny French village south of the Loire River. It was built by and belongs to Manguel, a well-known, multi-lingual anthologist, critic, biographer, and novelist, to house some 30,000 volumes he has collected during a peripatetic literary lifetime. *The Library at Night* begins with Manguel's autobiographical account of how this idiosyncratic building project, almost a classic "folly," took shape out of the stone-wall ruins of a 15th century barn, adjacent to a presbytery, or priest's house, where Manguel now lives.

Although officially a Canadian, Manguel was born an Argentinian, partially raised in Israel (where one of his parents was in the diplomatic corps), and schooled in Buenos Aires, where the teenager became an acolyte of the great Jorge Luis Borges, about whom Manguel would later write extensively and perceptively. In truth, the well-travelled Manguel is not so much a burger of a nation-state as a full-fledged citizen of the Republic of Letters.

His autobiographical tale is only the first of dozens of stories Manguel tells about libraries, stories that range from the vast, almost mythical, destroyed library of Alexandria, Egypt, one of the real wonders of the Ancient World, to the 8-book children's library in Block 31 of the Birkenau concentration camp during World War II, a library whose readers were all exterminated.

His often magical, always literally bookish tales include the "Biblioburro" program in rural Colombia, where donkeys haul bookbags up to remote mountain villages. The only book the scrupulous peasant library borrowers didn't want to return, reports Manguel, was Homer's *Iliad*. As the librarian, who eventually made a gift of the book to them, told Manguel, the villagers "explained that Homer's story exactly reflected their own: it told of a wartorn country in which mad gods wilfully decide the fate of humans who never know exactly what the fighting is about, or when they will be killed."

Much the same could be said of what Manguel tells us about the looting of the National Library of Baghdad in 2003, a grim account of how "sometimes a library is wilfully allowed to vanish." While a conquering Anglo-American army stood by, "in a few hours, much of the earliest recor-

ded history of humankind was lost to oblivion,” including the 6,000-year-old first surviving examples of writing.

Manguel’s stories are told with appropriate gravitas, but also always with a genuine lightness of touch which other writers strive for, often only to fail to transcend the trivial. At one end of sophistication, there’s a rapturous description of the Laurentian Library built by Michelangelo at the San Lorenzo Monastery in Italy. At the other end, there are the oasis towns in the desert of Adrar in central Mauritania, obligatory stopping points on the route to Mecca, which still “house dozens of age-old libraries whose very existence is due to the whims of passing caravans laden with spices, pilgrims, salt and books.”

A story is told in Ouadane, one such oasis city, of a silent 15th century beggar who settled into one of the libraries and only seemed to care for “spending long hours among the books of Ouadane, reading in complete silence.” After months of such mysterious behaviour, the local imam reminded the reader that “it is written that he who keeps knowledge to himself shall not be made welcome in the Kingdom of Heaven. Each reader is but one chapter in the life of a book, and unless he passes his knowledge on to others, it is as if he condemned the book to be buried alive.” At which point, Manguel tells us, “the man opened his mouth and gave a lengthy and marvellous commentary on the sacred text he happened to have before him. The imam realized that his visitor was a certain celebrated scholar who, despairing of the deafness of the world, had promised to hold his tongue until he came to a place where learning was truly honoured.”

Manguel’s personal library, both during the day and at night, intermittently re-appears throughout the book, as he considers various aspects of the library: as myth, as order, as mind, as survival, and so on. The autobiographical foundation of his book immediately lets us know that this will not be a “tidy succession of dates and names,” and that Manguel’s intention is not “to compile another history of libraries nor to add another tome to the alarmingly extensive collection of bibliotechnology, but merely to give an account of my astonishment.”

Beneath the astonishment conveyed in this brilliantly-conceived, elegantly-written, elegiac and celebratory meditation, there's something philosophically deeper. The very big question that Alberto Manguel poses at the outset of *The Library at Night* sets the tone for the intellectual quest-story that follows. The question is about the meaning of the dynamic relationship between chaos and order that we find everywhere, from the greatest magnitudes—"the starry heavens," as the philosopher Immanuel Kant called them—to the smallest particulars of our lives.

"Outside theology and fantastic literature," Manguel says, "few can doubt that the main features of our universe are its dearth of meaning and lack of discernible purpose." That is, unless you believe in God or Middle-Earth and Mordor, neither the universe nor the evolutionary process propose an answer to the riddle of human life. "And yet, with bewildering optimism, we continue to assemble whatever scraps of information we can gather in scrolls and books and computer chips, on shelf after library shelf, whether material, virtual or otherwise, pathetically intent on lending the world a semblance of sense and order, while knowing perfectly well that, however much we'd like to believe the contrary, our pursuits are sadly doomed to failure. Why then do we do it?"

The Library at Night is the fourth in a decade-long series of books which Manguel began in 1996 with his best-selling *A History of Reading*, followed by *Reading Pictures* (2000) and *A Reading Diary* (2004). It is an invaluable serial contemplation of the practices and institutions of civilization itself, a structure of life that seems as much in peril today as at any previous time. Unsurprisingly, the latest installment in the series is tinged with Manguel's sense that he might be writing an elegy.

If there are always two kinds of people in the world, in this instance they are readers and non-readers. "Libraries are not, never will be, used by everyone," Manguel notes. "In Mesopotamia as in Greece, in Buenos Aires as in Toronto, readers and non-readers have existed side by side, and the non-readers have always constituted the majority... the number of those for whom reading books is of the essence is very small. What varies is not the proportions of these two groups of humanity but the way in which different socie-

ties regard the book and the art of reading.” The news these days is not so good.

“Our society,” he says, “accepts the book as a given, but the act of reading—once considered useful and important, as well as potentially dangerous and subversive—is now condescendingly accepted as a pastime, a slow pastime that lacks efficiency and does not contribute to the common good... In our society, reading is nothing but an ancillary act, and the great repository of our memory and experience, the library, is considered less a living entity than an inconvenient storage room.” The shelves gather dust.

As for the promise of that universal cyberlibrary, the Internet or Web, which “occupies no time except the nightmare of a constant present,” Manguel recognizes that it’s simply an instrument, but has his doubts about its uses. It stresses “velocity over reflection and brevity over complexity.” It prefers “snippets of news and bytes of facts over lengthy discussions.” Worse, it dilutes “informed opinion with reams of inane babble, ineffectual advice, inaccurate facts and trivial information, made attractive with brand names and manipulated statistics.”

Of course, the fault lies not in our instruments or the stars. “We alone, and not our technologies, are responsible for our losses, and we alone are to blame when we deliberately choose oblivion over recollection,” Manguel says, adding, “We are, however, adroit at making excuses and dreaming up reasons for our poor choices.”

One of the better choices of this or any other publishing season that readers can make is Manguel’s wondrous *Library at Night*, a glowing patch of civility in the dark chaos around us.