

# READING IN SEASON: HOW THE YEARLY CYCLE AFFECTS YOUR CHOICE OF BOOKS

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**H**ERE'S CASH. Go to any bookshop and buy whatever you like. Here are borrower cards from every library in your region. Visit any branch and browse until you find an assortment of books that you truly want to read. Choose nothing useful or related to your profession. Choose only those books that you will read for pure pleasure, on the beach or by the fire or in the most comfortable of beds. Don't concern yourself with the opinions of critics, experts, or family members who claim to know what's best for you. Be clear about your heart's desire. Be firm. Be selfish.

What books will you take from the shelves? Enter the publishers' statisticians, who provide an inventory of "factors influencing personal choice": your age, level of education, income, entertainment preferences, childhood influences, and hat size. Behold an array of formulae, charts, graphs, PowerPoint presentations and heavily footnoted guesstimates. Conclusion: there is a strong likelihood that the first book that you will select is...an Ambler thriller. Or a biography of Zeppo Marx. Or perhaps *The Collected Sonnets of Donald Rumsfeld*. The possibilities are infinite. The statisticians, however, are probably incorrect. Their analytical model is flawed, owing to a serious omission. They failed to look out the window.

Despite their calculations, they didn't consider a factor that farmers, sailors and lovers have depended on for millennia: what the natty fellow on the Weather Channel calls the Seasonal Effect.

Each season inspires us to dress in particular styles, eat different foods, travel or stay home, seek love or remain chaste, exercise vigorously in the sunshine or hibernate in front of televised hockey. As many booksellers and librarians have observed, seasonal change leads to a shift in our leisure reading patterns. We may study technical texts and computer manuals year-round: such are the demands of our jobs. But what we read for entertainment varies as the leaves clog our drains or the buds sprout in our gardens. When summer gives us long days and more free time—or a greater determination to avoid work—we carry certain kinds of novels and biographies to the cottage and campground, and leave behind others more appropriate to the fall or winter. Each reader's seasonal selection pattern is unique. It's unlikely that two readers will exhibit exactly the same pattern, although they might read a number of the same books at the same time of year.

For example, last fall you read the latest horror—or horror novel—by Stephen King. So did everybody else. Perhaps you read the latest surprise bestseller as well: a history of time, or a treatise on better punctuation, or the adventures of a veterinary orthodontist. You might have dipped into the latest fashionable cookbook and devoured the memoirs of various starlets, politicians and hacks. You might have opened a daunting antique such as Richardson's *Clarissa*, and closed it quickly. So far everyone's with you.

But then you allow the season to dominate your reading selection. As you have done every October for decades, you read the ghost stories of M.R. James, Hogg's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and the most gruesome true crime title you can find, something with a pathology report in every chapter and lots of black-and-white mortuary photos.

Finally, for reasons that only you can describe or confess to, you re-read all of Beatrix Potter. When the fall colours start to attract tourists, you can't resist Peter Rabbit and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle. This is, in fact, your deepest secret, something that you as one of North America's most powerful bankers or software developers or plasma physicists are loath to admit to your colleagues and friends. As your children start designing their Halloween costumes, you can't deny yourself another long session with the well-dressed and well-fed animals whose adventures Mrs. Potter described a century ago. It might be nothing more than that hint of fall in the air, that mixture of mustiness and burning leaves, that drives you to open that secret shelf in your study, and there they sit, all 23 slender Potter volumes. For you, fall wouldn't be complete without them.

Your winter reading consists of books that you receive for Christmas, or that people pass on to you for holiday consumption. The pile on your bedside table contains a mixture of blessings and embarrassments. Here's the latest effort by Britain's brightest novelist, another cookbook by a TV chef, and a coffee table folio on gardening in Nunavut. But what you really want is Victorian fiction. Snowbound and stuffed with rich food, you look for that dog-eared Penguin edition of *The Old Curiosity Shop* or *Little Dorritt*. You're no longer keen on Dickens's Christmas books, having read them during numerous Decembers past; but his fatter novels beckon at this time of year. Possibly the darkness of Dickensian settings matches that which prevails during winter nights. Perhaps your family celebrations attract a plethora of odd persons—mostly in-laws—

who remind you of Dickens' more extraordinary characters.

You might pick up other nineteenth century titles. Hawthorne's tales, Poe's short stories, and the works of the young Henry James are obvious choices; anything by the unjustly neglected William Dean Howells might be suitable to the season as well. Such classics deserve your full attention, but school's out, and no one will chastise you for dozing off while you struggle with a particularly convoluted patch of Jamesian syntax. Books from this era are like heavy blankets, in that they keep out the cold and allow you to relax. Under these circumstances, it's no surprise that you drift off every now and then. As long as your dreams are free from Quilp and the Red Death, you can rest easy.

Inevitably the weight of those fictional blankets begins to oppress you, and you need something light. In spring, publishers produce books that inspire us to shake off our winter lethargy and become active. Booksellers offer volumes on household improvement, exercise manuals that show you how to shrink all or part of yourself, and over-priced softcovers concerning the best ways to deal with teenagers, pets, elderly parents or ill-natured colleagues. As soon as you've had your fill of such things, you return to what you really want at this time of year: travel literature.

You've spent too much time at home lately, or on the road to places that you know too well. The red-eye flight to Toronto for a conference or to Des Moines for a meeting with your company's regional vice president hardly qualifies as true travel, or travel as a form of adventure. What you want are the classics of the genre, which you can reread regularly without their going stale: Eric Newby's *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, Gavin Young's *Slow Boats to China* and Robert Byron's *The Road to Oxiana*.

And where is your copy of Fitzroy Maclean's *Eastern Approaches*? You've intended to reread it for years, but you can't find it. That's because you've loaned it to a friend. Actually you've lost several copies this way. Maclean's book is one of the most exciting ever written, and generous soul that you are, you're inclined to share that excitement. Unfortunately your friends are not as scrupulous as you about returning books, and since they agree with you about Maclean, they pass on your copies of *Eastern Approaches* to other friends. Come to think of it, didn't you borrow the first copy of *Eastern Approaches* that you read from your brother-in-law? You didn't return it to him, did you? Perhaps that's why

he's so odd and out-of-sorts when you see him at Christmas.

Of course you can rely on the public library for a copy, or can you? Maclean's work seems to go missing more often than other travel books; either that, or it circulates so often that it falls to bits, and the librarians can't replace it quickly enough. In spring, the travel section of most libraries takes a beating through heavy use. If you can't find *Eastern Approaches*, you might still be able to borrow something by Paul William Roberts, whose adventures in Egypt, Iraq and India are as entertaining as they are polemical and informative. You might also find the latest Jonathan Raban, whose novels are as much about travel as those of his titles that you'll find on the shelf near *Maclean's* and *Newby's*.

Of course there are numerous other travel books to brighten your springtime reading, and many are by British authors. Why? Because among other things the British Empire gave rise to social anthropology, of which travel literature is an offspring. (Snobbish anthropologists regard it as a bastard child, possibly owing to jealousy. Newby, Byron and their kind write good prose, whereas most academic anthropologists simply don't!)

Spring gives way to summer, and your reading pattern makes another adjustment. Now the publishers provide you with the light, bright and trite—beach reading at its best, or worst. Here are the latest thrillers and mysteries, books about conspiracies, magical codes, and the Holy Grail, which is buried under the Starbuck's near King's Cross Station in London. Here are scandalous paperback biographies of financiers, crooners, and American presidents, all of whom deny everything and swear that they're innocent. Who cares? There's no presumption of innocence at the beach or on the front deck at the cottage. You want to believe that that man or woman was a crook, liar, or fool, and now you can enjoy the dirt in print. Summer is a time for exposés, whether they're accurate or not.

But a balanced reading diet demands more than junk journalism. By mid-July you start to feel guilty about the superficiality of your current tastes, and you look around for something deeper and more demanding. That's when you delve into a history of opera, or a study of early Christian art, or the architecture of ancient Memphis. Many people read Plato and Aristotle seriously for the first time during their summer holidays; others try to come to grips with modern thinkers. But hot weather is not conducive to mental clarity, and often readers find themselves daydreaming



over Wittgenstein or snoring over Rorty. Still, you're proud of your attempts to understand them, even though you'll forget everything they wrote by the time the leaves start changing colour and the schools reopen for another academic year.

And then it's fall again, and you finish another Stephen King title so that you can return to M.R. James, or Hogg, or the new biography of Jack the Ripper. The cycle repeats itself, whether you realize it or not. You might have divided your books into warm and cold weather reading, or books that you read on the plane versus those that you carry in your briefcase to consume over lunch in the office cafeteria. You might have certain titles that you reserve for bedtime, although you'll have to admit that you never seem to finish most of them. They can sit by your bed for years. Eventually they disappear beneath layers of half-read magazines and newspapers, a photo of your son's baseball team, a digital clock that stopped working in 1987, and an empty Kleenex box left over from your last cold. You might dig those books out in a decade or so, and feel delighted to see them again, but unless they're appropriate to your seasonal cycle, it's unlikely that you'll ever finish them.

Why do the seasons affect our reading? In part, because we need them to do so. We couldn't survive without regular patterns in our lives. The signal characteristic of these patterns is repetition. The most basic form of repetition is your heartbeat, which you take for granted until it becomes irregular or threatens to stop altogether. Examples of other essential repetitions include paycheques, meals, certain holidays and family traditions. Lose these, and your life can be seriously disrupted. A major part of your memory—or your ability to remember events—depends on repetition. And since your memory is the foundation of your personal identity, you can assume that your existence as an individual depends on patterns, one of the most important of which is seasonal.

Thus it is no surprise that the seasons affect our reading preferences, or that their influence is so strong. The cash and library cards on offer give you a small amount of freedom, although the books that you select are partially predetermined. Fortunately that's unlikely to spoil the pleasure that you derive from an author who's not only a regular visitor from the shelves, but also an old friend.

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