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Reading Beyond Our Comfort Zones

Melissa Moore
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What ‘cha Eatin’?

When I was growing up, it seemed inevitable that the telephone would ring just as we all sat down to dinner. Since caller ID had yet to be invented, and my dad was a doctor, we always had to answer it. More often than not, it was my grandmother, whose first words would be, “Are ya eatin’ yet? What ‘cha eatin’?”

I’m predictable.

When I go to a restaurant, I always order the same thing. At the theater, I always choose the same type of movies. When I go in a bookstore, I always head in the same direction: first, new paperbacks (because the heft of a hardback makes reading in bed awkward); then the sale tables and mysteries; followed by adult fiction, occasionally history, then finally, the children’s department.

When I read reviews, or look at advertisements, I focus on the types of books — fantasy, historical fiction, contemporary literature, mystery — I already enjoy. I have favorite authors, like Kristin Heitzmann, J.K. Rowling, and Donna Jo Napoli, and I always look forward eagerly to their next publication.

But reading only what you like can be kind of like the Atkins’ Diet: steak and salad are great, but I couldn’t eat them every day. (Couldn’t afford it either, but that’s another story.) Don’t nutritionists say you should eat from a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, proteins, and grains in order to get all the nutrients you need to ensure good health? Well, I’m not a nutritionist, and I don’t play one on TV. But I am a librarian, which makes me (in a way) a genre-nutritionist, maybe even an idea-nutritionist. (Bear with me.) And I have become convinced over the last few years that we need to be reading beyond our comfort zones. So what ‘cha eatin’?

Why We Need Variety in Our Diet

Each summer, I teach a graduate class called Young Adult Literature. Instead of using a textbook, we read books written for middle and high school students from as many as thirteen different genres. On the first day of class, when individual titles are assigned, I always get groans (“I hate sports books,” or “I never understand fantasy,” or “Why would anyone want to read historical fiction? It’s all so dry and dull”). When I get the student evaluations back after the class is over, I always get thank-you’s for requiring students to read outside of their comfort zones. Sometimes they discover a new writer or a genre that they like, sometimes they simply gain an appreciation for that type of writing. But most come to realize that they have made assumptions about certain genres (even romance) that aren’t always borne out by reality.

When I am on a diet and get to craving a Milky Way, eating a Slim-Fast bar just doesn’t get it. I end up feeling slighted and usually eat the Milky Way by the end of the day anyway. Nutritionists would tell me that I am better off eating a piece of fruit or going for a walk, rather than trying to use an inferior substitute. In other words, treating my senses to a different experience will be more rewarding than trying to deceive them.

It seemed to take forever for Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (book 5 in the series) to be published. (In reality, it was nearly 3 years.) During that time, Potter fans who visited bookstores or Amazon.com were continually told “What to read while you’re waiting on HP #5.” All the books (like the Series of Unfortunate Events and the Artemis Fowl books) were not imitations of Rowling’s masterpieces but rather other fantasies for middle school readers. A lot of readers tend to do this — while waiting on the new John Grisham, they will settle for an inferior mystery. But the genre-nutritionist in me is proposing something radical — go in a totally different direction. Read beyond your boundaries.

How to Know Where to Eat

When my family grows tired of the same ten meals being rotated, they begin to grumble, and

continued on page 53
eventually they murmur loud enough that I cannot ignore them any longer. I watch Food TV; or browse through one of my cookbooks; or visit Pillsbury.com; or ask my mother what she’s fixed lately. I end up with great ideas and recipes, and even occasionally discover a new family favorite.

Reading works the same way. We have to look beyond what we know to see what else is out there. Here are a few ideas:

- Bestseller Lists. Get into the habit of looking at the New York Times bestseller list each week. There are great columns in USA Today as well featuring books.
- Use the Web. Look at the bestsellers on the websites for booksellers like Barnes & Noble or Books-A-Million. They also feature forthcoming titles and new releases. Typically, these webpages include excerpts from reviews done in the big journals along with the synopsis, so you can see what the book’s about and what others think of it.
- Go Shopping. Spend an hour each month browsing the library or a local bookstore; if that’s asking too much, look at what the grocery store has for sale on their shelves. Their books are conveniently located near the soft drinks and chips (two essential components to reading, right?)
- Go to School! Take a literature course which will stretch you, or join a reading group. That way, someone else is choosing what you should read, and you will be exposed to poetry and stories that you wouldn’t select on your own but come to appreciate through the class. This spring, I am teaching a graduate course for the Education department on multicultural literature for children. The students will be reading books from cultures other than their own. This kind of broadening experience is invaluable to educators, parents, and just plain citizens, not to mention their children.
- Go to Virtual School! If actually attending a class or group is not an option for you, consider joining an online reading group, like the ones offered through Barnes & Noble University (I will be reading Uncle Tom’s Cabin with them next month).
- Check out the TV. Who’s on Oprah this month? Even without her book club, she is still influencing what people read by frequently having authors on her program. News programs also frequently feature books or authors that have made an impact. Even C-SPAN2 has BookTV, with 48 hours every weekend of non-fiction titles and their authors.
- Book Magazine. This is personally my favorite place to get ideas. It features authors, lots of book reviews and behind-the-scenes stuff, and even has pieces on locales connected with literature. Unfortunately, publication is currently suspended—I hope it’s reinstated soon!
- Reading Partnerships. Get involved in a reading partnership. In the November ’03 issue of The Compass, I talked about the partnerships and why you should be in one. At the time, I was in three. I am now in six, reading in areas as diverse as politics and faith, children’s literature, and the spiritual disciplines.
- Talk to other readers. I had one of our strongest Humanities students come to me before Christmas and ask me what she should read for fun over the Christmas holidays. During 2003, I read 98 books, so I was able to send her away with three very different kinds of books which I could recommend.

The Health Benefits from a Varied Diet

As Christians, we need to read from viewpoints different than our own. We should read the latest secular parenting book, to see what our co-workers and family members are being told is true. Perhaps there is truth in that book, perhaps not, but as believers we have a responsibility to distinguish between truth and lies, to be proponents of wisdom to those around us. The same holds true with the latest bestsellers on political issues, the environment, and education, as well as fiction titles. When we are willing to push our borders, what will we gain?

- Compassion. Two of the most powerful books I have read in the last 12 months have given me fresh compassion for those who suffer in unusual ways. Shattered Glass is the powerful autobiography of Kathy Wingo (my next-door neighbor!) who suffered physical, mental, and sexual abuse at the hands of her stepfather and first husband for years yet found Christ. Stuck in Neutral by Terry

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Trueman is the first person narrative of Shawn, a young man with cerebral palsy. Shawn obviously cannot talk, but Trueman's story lets the reader see inside the damaged body a person similar to ourselves. I plan to read this year The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time, the first-person narrative of an autistic 15-year-old blamed for the death of his neighbor's dog. Each of these stories sheds light on experiences not my own but that foster compassion in my heart for others.

- Understanding of Complex Ethical Issues. All too frequently, a news story will surface of violent or criminal behavior and we quickly rush to judgment. Stories which examine the complexities of ethical issues challenge us to look at all sides of the issue. On a simplistic level, The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by Jon Scieszka does this, when we read to our children Alexander T. Wolf's side of the story and how he's been framed. To go deeper, look no further than Inside Out by Terry Trueman, which relates Zach's experience as a hostage in the hold-up of a coffee shop. Good versus evil is made more complex when the motivations of "Frosty" and "Stormy" are made clear. Zach is also schizophrenic and borderline-suicidal.

Reading stories that are uncomfortable help us to be deliberate in our responses to complex ethical issues.

- Confirmation of Our Own Beliefs. While reading an article or book in line with your belief-system will confirm your own convictions, reading something on "the other side of the issue" can have the same result. Reading Rush Limbaugh might confirm your Republican convictions, or it might make you a Democrat. But as a U.S. citizen, it is important to know the thoughts and priorities of a man who has the ear of millions. Reading one of Ayn Rand's philosophical novels may cause you to reject Objectivistic thinking and confirm your Christian worldview.

- An Open Door with Unbelievers. It is crucial that believers be knowledgeable and address current issues from a biblical worldview. Reading the current secular novels or nonfiction gives you a common ground from which to begin addressing issues of truth. If all we ever read is Christian fiction and devotional material, we are missing a prime opportunity to engage our culture for the cause of Christ.

So push your boundaries. Expand your borders. Eat at another person's table for a while. It will change you. It may even change your world. ☺

Librarians' Lament

Our agenda is hidden from all but a few.
Not one soul in a hundred has more than a clue.
Not the man of the world or the sweet ingénue
Has the foggiest notion of quite what we do.

They have hardly a clue, but they think that they do.
They imagine it's simple, a mere two plus two.
 "What's to know? It's a building with books," is their view.
 "You just buy some more books, and you check out a few."

They all think that we sit and enjoy all the books -
That some magical elves, whom we guide by our looks,
Do the work while we tranquilly sit and just read
All the novels yet somehow sublimely succeed.

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