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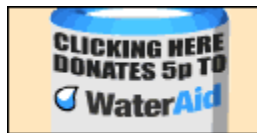
Everlasting impressions

Jane Stevenson tracks down BookSleuth, ABE's web service that enables readers to trace dimly - but fondly - remembered books from childhood

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One of my earliest clear memories relates to a book. A big fat one, with a picture of a fish on the spine, which because of its size was on a bottom shelf and nicely within the reach of someone of three-and-a-bit. When I hauled it out of its place and sat with it on the floor, it turned out to have more pictures of fish inside. But as I was pottering through from picture to picture, ignoring the text, I turned a page and found a yawning, terrible mouth, so horrible that it seemed to zoom out of the page like a pop-up. There were several rows of needle-like teeth, and one dreadful, cold eye, with suggestions of a long, dark body behind. The core of the memory for me is the fishy eye, and the electric jolt of fear and disgust. I might have forgotten but, perhaps three years later, on a family holiday, I was traipsing round the fishmarket in Chioggia behind my parents, and saw a monkfish on a slab with its huge pale jaws propped open; at my then height of four foot something, it was at eye-level, and I saw my old nightmare again, grey-black and slimy, fixing it in my mind for ever.

But though the fish episode taught me that books could contain unpleasant surprises, I grew up as a shortsighted, dreamy child who went to the public library every week. And when I was about eight or nine, there was a book I particularly loved, partly because it was about Kew Gardens, which was quite nearby, so I had been there. In the story, Kew was a gateway to a beguiling parallel world, something which I would have loved to believe. The book was bound in pale orange cloth, getting a little saggy and faded along the spine as I read it again and again until I knew bits of it off by heart. Then one Saturday, it wasn't there any more, probably because I'd personally read the thing to death. In my teens, I often went to Kew alone, and every time I went into the small hothouse for tropical water plants which stands just beside Paxton's Palm House, I remembered a line, "an Iagnet is a water plant, a ticking, tocking, clocking plant", and a name. Harragong.

In both cases, the book itself as a physical object is strongly

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part of the memory; the weight of the fish-book, too heavy for me to lift easily, and its thick, rather soft pages, and the fading orange cloth of the Kew book. In the first incident, the fish linked through to a later experience, and in the second, the story was physically embodied in a place I actually knew, so my reading, or experience, of these books was emphatically mine, and in the first case, not even remotely associable with the author's intentions. Both of them certainly have to be added to the collection of my personal experience that was formative, but the books themselves were lost to my adult self because I didn't remember their names. I had no great desire to revisit the fish book, but for years, I habitually browsed the children's books sections of secondhand bookshops in the hopes that if I saw them, I would recognise the Kew book, and others that had stayed in my mind just as quirkily; the one with Skyboy and Littleflame, the one with the whirling shapes in it, the one with the flying weathercock.

The web is now everybody's friend in any kind of quest, but even Google isn't likely to be much help if all you can remember is about a book is that it has in it someone called Harragong. However, one of the things the web was absolutely made for is selling second-hand books. A lot of dot.coms came to grief in the 1990s through failing to recognise the elementary fact that most people like to shop, and would really very much rather potter and browse in the flesh than via a modem, but some conspicuous web success stories derive from the counter-perception that on the one hand, there are people selling things almost nobody wants, and on the other, there is a world full of almost nobodies. The web's awesome capacity to bring together thousands of potential buyers with thousands of sellers at each separate transaction allows them to be effectively matched up. Ebay has become gigantically successful precisely because the owner of a junk-shop in Bolton who happens to have a 1971 "Tressy" doll can now sell it through Ebay to the lady in Sausalito whose heart's desire it is. Similarly with second-hand books: a dealer in Falmouth who had a copy of The Rout of the Ollafubs might wait long enough before I happened to come by and recognise it as the book with Skyboy and Littleflame in it which I had loved in the late 1960s, but now, he puts it in the Advanced Book Exchange. Much though I enjoy browsing second-hand bookshops, the ability to look through 40 million books simultaneously for what I want is a serious consideration: so like most book-oholics, I do both.

Moreover, ABE has recently addressed itself to the basic problem represented by my anecdotes, that some of the books you care most about are ones which you can't identify, by starting a service called [BookSleuth](#) which draws on another aspect of net culture, the willingness of people to get involved and help one another. People post descriptions of books they are trying to find, in the hopes that someone out there will share the memory, and quite often they do. These are typical: "I'm trying to find a favourite picture book for my partner, who remembers reading it as a young child in the early 1970s. All he recalls is a picture of a fox inflating a tyre, and then the tyre bursts" . . . "The author's name would be in the second half of the alphabet, the cover might have been bright yellow (though I'm not entirely sure) and I think the title had the word 'star' in

it" ... "Years ago (probably 1974-75) my fifth-grade teacher read a book to my class and, although I remember a small part of the story, I have not been able to recall the book's title. If I remember correctly, this was a hardcover with a blue dust jacket which had some green on the front." ... "Perhaps I'm confusing two different books but they blend into one for me. Tall strange narrow buildings. Built of wood? Big fluffy beds with piles of comforters. Seems like it was some Scandanavian country. Anyone out there have an idea?" ... "All I remember about the story I'm looking for is the first line, 'He came out of the ground hating'."

BookSleuth is deeply seductive: I have posted requests on it, and been rewarded by the kindness of strangers (my orange book about Kew, if anyone wants to know, is Keith Claire's *The Tree Wakers* , and the other is *Game Fishes of the World*), and I have, in turn, identified books for other people. What is most striking to me, reading these descriptions, is how like my own childhood memories they are. What has stuck in the writer's mind is sometimes a single line, a picture, or the physical appearance of the book itself, not any of the features which might have seemed important to parents, teachers, authors, publishers, or psychologists. One aspect of the book which comes through very strongly from these wistful postings is children's intense awareness of a book as a physical object, to the extent that its size and shape are sometimes remembered when its plot and author are forgotten.

Writing about children and books tends to focus on books that are beautifully written or illustrated, or which, from the viewpoint of analytic adults, offer satisfying symbolic renditions of difficulties that have to be negotiated in the process of growing up, all of which implies that the child's response to a book is either practical or aesthetic. What BookSleuth teaches is that none of the above need apply for a book to be important.

"The book I loved best in my childhood was lost in the second world war bombing of London. It was a children's annual from either 1933 or 1934, put out by one of the newspapers, not named after a character. Some of the stories: *Serafina the Perfect Sausage*; *Prunella the Prune* ... *The Family Motor-Car* ('and just as we passed the municipal bank, The bottom fell out with a terrible clank')." Seventy years ago, some hack production intended to live for a year became so much a part of a person's life that in considerable old age, she (it has to be a girl's book) is still thinking about it once in a while and snatches of doggerel verse are still with her. Conventional piety associates this kind of lifelong memory with "great literature" or at least the pos session of a significant message, but the interactions between authors and readers are more complex than that. The book was, from what is remembered, a safe, pastel-coloured part of a pre-war childhood, and it was lost in the Blitz. Perhaps that matters too.

What BookSleuth reveals is the building-bricks of poetry or real life; the books that have been taken into the self, absorbed and transformed - the readers know they are important to them, but very often, cannot remember why. Readers who post requests

for books they read as adolescents or adults, unsurprisingly, tend to be far clearer on plot and/or what the book is about, but memories from childhood are far more inchoate and personal. They suggest that we know even less than we think about what happens when we give books to children; that something that is remembered for a lifetime may be, in any adult's eyes, messageless, contentless, forgettable trash. One reader who has been looking for a book for more than 30 years, explains, "my mother hated it - probably a combination of literary criticism (it was anything but a great book), and over-exposure (I demanded it night after night!) - and eventually threw it away."

Much of the psychological explanation of what children do with books focuses on the message -- for instance, that Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* is about "dealing with anger" - but none of the BookSleuth postings to do with childhood memories actually focuses on a message at all, any more than on plot. What personal epiphanies might be represented by a fox inflating a tyre or Prunella the Prune? Perhaps even Anna in Bristol's boyfriend and the reticent, elderly poster of "My Lost Book" don't know.

Normally it is writers, journalists and academics who get to tell us what they think about books, and help parents and children to choose and discriminate. But BookSleuth is about ordinary readers. It is as authentically and genuinely random a collection of people as one could hope to find; not experts, nor necessarily lovers of books. All they have in common is the habit of using a computer to solve their problems, which is by no means rare now. They aren't all even very literate, and since some of the posted solutions suggest that the original inquirers must have been quite passive about trying alternative spellings and variants, they certainly aren't all effective literary problem-solvers. They're only people who have a dreamlike memory of something personally important, who have chemically bonded with a particular moment in a particular book in such a way that the act of reading has become part of themselves.

Looking at writers' work with hindsight, biographers and critics identify formative reading alongside formative experience. CS Lewis recalls such a moment in his own childhood reading in *Surprised by Joy*: "I had become fond of Longfellow's 'Saga of King Olaf': fond of it in a casual, shallow way for its story and its vigorous rhythms. But then, and quite different from such pleasures, and like a voice from far more distant regions, there came a moment when I idly turned the pages of the book and found the unrhymed translation of 'Tegner's Drapa' and read

I heard a voice that cried

Balder the beautiful

Is dead, is dead -

I knew nothing about Balder; but instantly I was uplifted into huge regions of northern sky, I desired with sickening intensity something never to be described (except that it is cold,

spacious, severe, pale, and remote) and then, as in the other examples, found myself at the very same moment already falling out of that desire and wishing I were back in it." Similarly, there are almost certainly reasons why bridal dresses and overgrown roses compulsively recur in the novels of Angela Carter.

But though being surprised and changed by books may result in Narnia or in Carter's fanged, voluptuous roses, the process is far more democratic than that. BookSleuth suggests that the creation of these entirely personal touchstones are profoundly characteristic of the way children are moved by books, whether or not they grow up to be writers - not necessarily whole books, or plots, but particular illustrations that shape the later adult's basic perceptions of horror or enchantment, sentences or scenarios, which invisibly inform the responses of their adult life. The excitement of some kind soul turning something up for you in "Recently Solved", and on that basis, finding a copy of *The Tree Wakers*, is that of the rediscovery of a forgotten fragment of your self. The fascination of reading BookSleuth itself is voyeuristic, the sense that you are taking a walk inside other people's heads.

Jane Stevenson's new novel, *The Empress of the Last Days*, is published next month by Jonathan Cape

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