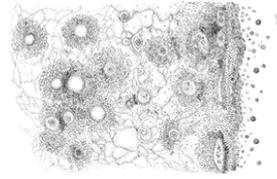




Prick of the Spindle



Guest artist: Regina Valluzzi. Graphic shown above right: 'Entropic Reputation'

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Enough

By Michael Milburn

This used to be a common experience for me, slogging through a long nonfiction book, re-reading paragraphs when my attention strayed, counting the remaining pages and celebrating when I was a quarter, then half, then three quarters done. I would set myself goals of finishing a section or chapter before breaking for a snack or going to sleep. Approaching the last page, I would vow to pick something lighter next time, a respite before my next dose of unscintillating prose. Not that anyone forced me to read boring books—their subject matter or my desire for self-improvement lured me in. Once I started, I couldn't muster a convincing reason not to keep going; mere tediousness didn't qualify. The books weren't bad; they just generated more impatience than pleasure.

One day, in the middle of a novel so engrossing that I kept reading it while walking up and down the stairs in my house, I decided that to settle for less was unacceptable. From that moment on I resolved to stop subjecting myself to the educational slog, which wasn't even educational because I forget dull prose as soon as I read it. I had just turned fifty and concluded that it wasn't worth being voluntarily bored

any more. If this stunted my intellect, so be it. The decision was such a relief that I wondered why it had taken me so long. Suddenly, one entertaining book after another beckoned ahead of me, brightening my path through middle and old age. The minute I found myself re-reading a paragraph or counting pages I would abandon the effort and start something new. Heeding Philip Larkin's complaint (directed at the poetry critics of his time) that "the reader has been bullied into giving up the consumer's power to say 'I don't like this, bring me something different,'" I was ready to fight back.

I didn't confine my policy to books, either. DVDs had ten minutes to draw me in before being ejected like a drunken houseguest. No more films that took thirty minutes to establish their plots or differentiate their lookalike characters. If I could be diverted by a Denzel Washington action movie for ninety minutes, why would I watch anything else? People received the same unspoken ultimatum. Loquacious colleagues who had once cornered me for one-sided conversations in the staff room were allotted no more than a brisk exchange of small talk. Why wasn't this the best quality-of-life improvement strategy ever? Why didn't everyone, insofar as they could, refuse to be bored?

At first I worried that my plan would confine me to superficial art, eliminating subtlety and complexity. Then I decided to accept dullness as a reliable sign of mediocrity. If I open a novel and begin to daydream, aren't I justified in abandoning it, regardless of its reputation? What about all the classics I have forced myself through based on their reputations alone? Such masochism may be defensible for a student pursuing a degree, but not for an adult hoping to avoid what one psychologist called "fidgeting until I die." Our student years condition us to tolerate and even glorify boredom, like marathoners who exult in pain

for twenty-six miles, then look forward to subjecting themselves to the same misery again.

According to the critic Susan Sontag, great art has to be boring:

People say “it’s boring”—as if that were a final standard of appeal, and no work of art had the right to bore us. But most of the interesting art of our time is boring. Jasper Johns is boring. Beckett is boring, Robbe-Grillet is boring. Etc. Etc. We should not expect art to entertain or divert anymore. At least, not high art.

As a student, I agreed with this view, approving of boring art because doing so made me feel smart and serious. I don’t regret that vanity, which motivated me to sit through certain masterpieces of literature, music, and cinema that might not have held my interest otherwise. Today, Sontag’s theory just depresses me, as does the image of anyone sitting in front of a painting, book, or film, finding it boring, and telling herself that art has to be this way.

I admit that some sublimity stuck to me after I suffered through the technical chapters of *Moby Dick*, and that a glacial documentary about the building of a dam in rural China exposed me to a culture I wouldn’t have known about if I only watched Denzel. But I would neither recommend those endurance tests nor choose to repeat them. By renouncing boredom I hope to give up my intellectual pretensions. I am done with salutary but excruciating experiences where, in order to reap some benefit from a book, movie, or garrulous dinner partner, I sit there page after page, minute after minute, anecdote after anecdote, being bored.

In college I took a course in intellectual history with a professor renowned for his captivating lectures. Three days a week I settled into my seat, opened my notebook, uncapped my pen, and spaced out

through most of the ensuing fifty minutes, leaving only a gallery of doodles under the neatly printed date. From the one- or two-minute intervals when my attention returned to the teacher's voice, I recognized that he was covering the Aristotle to Freud spectrum with pith, wit, and verve, but I couldn't concentrate. The fault wasn't with him or his subject matter, which I was and still am fascinated by. I just find it hard to listen when I am being lectured to, whether by a skilled orator or a blabbermouth in the adjoining airplane seat.

What irks me about that experience isn't that I learned nothing from the professor, but my assumption that being bored was a sacrifice I had to make in order to conquer ambitious subjects. As with all the lecture courses that I doodled through, I earned a passing grade by doing the reading and preparing for the exam. But I never acknowledged the worthlessness of the class period by skipping the lectures or withdrawing from the course. Fifty minutes a day three times a week for sixteen weeks—forty hours of my life, wasted.

In the preceding examples I am being bored by other people—writers, talkers, moviemakers, colleagues; I am responsible for my boredom only in the sense that I permit it to continue. I'm rarely bored when alone because there's always something I want to be doing—namely reading or writing. Unlike an acquaintance of mine who dislikes being alone so much that he lines up get-togethers with his friends whenever his wife goes out of town, I don't need company in order to be entertained. Does this mean that I am rich in, and my married acquaintance lacks, inner resources? I doubt it. Deprived of my books, I'd be as desperate for distraction as he is.

In fact, the small number of activities that I find stimulating could indicate an impoverished inner life. Not only does socializing bore me, but so do, in descending order of dullness, birdwatching, gardening,

cooking, dog walking, sports watching, and home repair. These are all, to those who enjoy them, absorbing pursuits. The only pursuits that absorb me are reading, writing, and watching movies. Would my life be more interesting if I joined fellow birdwatchers in prowling through the park, or created multi-course meals for appreciative friends and family? Not being bored by my existing interests, I can't say how it would feel to be less so.

I trace my introduction to boredom to school, and believe that if kids weren't exposed to such brutal doses of tedium in the name of education, they would be less tolerant of the feeling as adults. I can't remember a single class in middle school, high school, or college in which I didn't alternately watch and force myself not to watch the wall clock click its way through the period. I attribute my multi-tasking hyperactivity as a high school English teacher to the deadening effect that classtime had on my attention as a student. I never had the kind of teacher I aspire to be, whose classes students look forward to and say when the bell rings, "That went by fast."

Students are boredom's most captive victims, in thrall to monotonous voices, bland personalities, regurgitated facts, and lazy lesson plans. What can they do in protest? In my first year of teaching one of my students showed me an essay she had written for a summer school application. She wrote that she had always loved school, but that one boring teacher that year had made her dread going to class. I had heard that complaint before about that teacher, a kind, dedicated woman (qualities that the girl confirmed when reminded of them). I wondered if the teacher could be blamed—for delivering forty minute lectures to adolescents, for not noticing their glazed expressions, for lacking the energy or creativity to make her subject fun. Or was she simply in the wrong job, more suited to teaching graduate students or working in a

office?

After being stultified by a class or book in school, we're loath to repeat the experience. Most teenagers' dread of literary boredom is palpable—the first thing some of my students do when I hand out a new book is to check the size of the print and the number of pages. I empathize, having carried that behavior into adulthood. Opening a book, starting a movie, or sitting down next to someone on a plane, I feel more anticipation of a boring experience than a stimulating one. Until recently, this was exacerbated by my knowledge that I would tolerate boredom in the name of self-improvement. I allowed books too many pages, movies too many minutes, and seatmates too many words in the puritanical belief that my pain would translate into erudition or useful experience.

I'd be remiss if I did not ask whether I'm a boring person myself. In a recent *New York Times* "Social Qs" column, the following advice mortified me. To a woman worried about her mate's loquacity at parties, the advisor replied, "Better a fiancé who is in touch with his feelings than the 'strong, silent type,' who makes for a boring dinner companion." That's me! I'm a big guy who doesn't say much in company. I'm happy to converse with my neighbor and ask questions to avert uncomfortable silence, but when it comes to witty repartee, look for me on the sidelines. Granted, reserved types add nothing to a party and enough of us can turn one into a wake, but as long as my thoughts and observations interest me, so what if I'm boring to others?

No doubt this sounds selfish, but I question whether my dullness is a result of my not having much to say or of the other guests needing to be entertained. I can amuse myself all evening watching and listening to people, and the quiet ones tend to intrigue me more than the monologists. I no more need life injected into my party-going than I

need to rustle up company when my girlfriend's out of town. So maybe our mistake is in blaming boredom on anyone or anything other than our own indifference to what is set in front of us. The affliction should clear up nicely if we just follow our interests, which is to say, refuse to be bored.

Michael Milburn teaches high school English in New Haven, CT. His nonfiction has been published in *New England Review*, *South Carolina Review*, and *R.E.A.L.* His new book of poems, *Carpe Something*, will appear this spring.