

Michael Milburn

Recommended Reading

Recently, a friend loaned me a book. How this offering came about, the response that it elicited, and its aftereffects are the subject of the following inquiry. It begins at the private middle school where I teach English, and where twice a week I monitor the playground at morning recess—backstopping errant soccer balls, mediating quarrels, sending casualties to the nurse with skinned elbows or squashed fingers. My colleague Robert stands nearby, overseeing his fifth graders in a fierce game of foursquare. When the foursquare is going smoothly and my own station is tranquil, we sidle over to each other to talk about books.

A few months ago, I mentioned Philip Roth, a novelist so prolific that almost everyone likes something he's written. When Robert complained about the verbosity of a recent Roth novel, I recommended the early books *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint* as examples of this author at his most concise. Robert loved those two and must have wanted to reciprocate with a recommendation of his own. The next time he saw me he bounded across the field and asked if I had read anything by Paul Auster.

I hadn't—the little I knew about Auster from reviews or profiles led me to think of him as an arty poser and his work as a post-modernist bore. I'm not above dismissing writers on such superficial grounds—there's so much to read that I welcome any reason

to winnow the list. I figure that if a writer or book is worth investigating I'll sense it from my regular scouring of reviews or the occasional recommendations of friends. When I mentioned my qualms to Robert, he confirmed that some of Auster's writing was pretentious, but listed a few novels that he genuinely liked—would I like to try one? Thinking this a good chance to sample a writer that many readers revere, and that the book would provide interesting fodder for our recess talks, I said yes. The next day Robert left a copy of Auster's novel *The Book of Illusions* in my school mailbox.

I receive these kinds of loans frequently enough that I'm curious about what motivates them, and about why people recommend or lend books in general. Do they hope to participate vicariously in the recipient's (presumably) enjoyable reading, prolonging their own pleasure in the book? Did they love talking about books so much during their high school and college years that they want to continue these discussions as adults? Or do they see themselves as proselytizers, persuading others to love what they love? As an English teacher who occasionally manages to introduce students to books that transform them from indifferent readers into enthusiastic ones, I can attest that there is no greater thrill.

Of course, all of these scenarios depend upon the success of the recommendation. One of my most memorable book loans was to a young college student whose interest in reading had, I believed, been extinguished by his onerous high school English curriculum. Every time I saw him, Jack had stalled ten pages into a classic such as *Walden* or *Moby Dick* as his American Literature class's weekly reading assignments marched inexorably forward. The image of this bright and curious sixteen-year-old sitting down each night to a thirty page bite of *Walden* made me want to ask his teacher if she

couldn't first nurture a love of reading and let the boy's college professors challenge him with classics.

After Jack's high school graduation, as he embarked on his first summer in four years without an intimidating list of books to complete for school, I handed him a novel that I felt certain would cure his malaise, Tom Perotta's *Joe College*. The book, about a working class kid from New Jersey struggling to fit in at Yale, is both intelligent and entertaining, a combination of qualities that Jack may have found in short supply on his ambitious American Lit. syllabus. Though he grimaced slightly at this new reading obligation, I felt confident that he would soon be begging me for the rest of my Perotta favorites.

I tried not to grimace when Robert offered me *The Book of Illusions*. It wasn't that I didn't want to read it, but I already had several books lined up, and even though Robert had told me to keep the novel for as long as I liked, I knew that he wanted to hear my opinion of it. As often happens, though, my queue of books dwindled rapidly when several did not spark my interest during the requisite first fifty pages. So within a week of receiving the Auster I was lying down with it on my living room sofa, hoping as I always do that it would draw me in from the first paragraph and continue to charm, entertain and move me through the last.

I was confident that *Joe College* would have this effect on Jack, absorbing him in a way that *Walden* had not on his forced first encounter. But my real reward would be if the book cured his indifference to reading. When it comes to book loans, I'm a proselytizer, and the prospects for converting Jack looked good. According to his first report, he started the book early in his summer vacation and cruised fifty pages into it in

his first reading session. I had the same success with *The Book of Illusions*, which is about a scholar's investigation into the life and disappearance of a silent film comedian. By page fifty, I too was celebrating my discovery of a new favorite writer. When I mentioned this to Robert at recess the next day, he was delighted, though he cautiously asked me what page I was on and said he'd love to talk about the book when I finished.

I agreed; after all, I had accepted the loan in part as a means of enlivening our recess meetings. As a rule, I have little appetite for adult book talk. I don't mind a simple exchange of opinions, or asking or answering questions, but I cringe at the idea of participating in a reading group (Robert belongs to two). Maybe it's because I'm an English teacher and spend so much time moderating class discussions, but whenever grown-ups start talking to me about themes or character development, I shrug, claiming not to remember the book well enough to answer.

This attitude kept me from prodding Jack to discuss *Joe College*, which would have failed in any case because his progress seemed to have halted. I saw him often that summer, always with the book nearby, but he appeared to be neither reading nor finished. My conversion hopes dwindling, I tried to imagine where he had bogged down, though in my recollection the book's pace never slackened. Between the protagonist's attempts to juggle love interests at home and at school, and his adventures while protecting his ailing father's lunch cart business from sabotage by the mob, I couldn't figure out where a young reader like Jack would lose interest.

I can, however, pinpoint the beginning of my disenchantment with *The Book of Illusions*; it occurred in a sentence on page 116 describing the protagonist's decision to have sex with a woman he has just met—improbable, I thought, since he had just lost his

wife and son in a car accident. I kept reading (mainly out of courtesy to Robert), but my respect for both character and book never recovered. I often reject books for such specific reasons—I quit on one recent loaner when a few lines of dialogue struck me as so contrived that they destroyed all semblance of realism and exposed the speakers as the two-dimensional creations of an inept novelist.

My opinion of *The Book of Illusions* deteriorated further at the second movie description. Auster devotes two chapters, one near the beginning of the book and one near the end, to recounting the comedian's silent movies. I dread sections like this—movie summaries, dream narratives, flashbacks—where the plot pauses while the author provides necessary (in his or her mind) exposition or description; I always page ahead to see when the action is going to resume. Elmore Leonard calls such passages “hooptedoodle,” violations of one of his ten rules of writing: “Try to leave out the part that readers tend to skip.” Auster's versions of hooptedoodle contain some important information, but they're still extended summaries of movies that the reader has not seen, and as such they get very boring very fast.

Those, then, were my reservations about *The Book of Illusions*. Before I could report them to Robert, however, I spilled coffee on his copy, staining the outer edges of its pages. At first, I reasoned that he had already read the book and could simply return it to his shelf, spine out and stain in. I'm indifferent to books once I've read them, and even feel a welcome lightening when my loans aren't returned. But some people take pride in their home libraries and expect borrowers to return books unsullied. The way Robert had spoken of *The Book of Illusions* suggested that it was a prized possession that he would want to loan out again, so it would be rude of me not to replace his stained copy with a

new one.

It had been so long since Jack had mentioned *Joe College* that I wondered if he'd decided to start his own library with my copy. For months after lending him the book, I awaited his ecstatic account of literary enlightenment followed by a plea for more recommendations, to which I would respond by supplying him with all the novels, biographies, and histories that had exalted me as a young man. But he didn't bring up *Joe College* until a year after I loaned it to him, apologizing that he had never finished it, though he had liked what he had read. He also confessed that during that time he had sampled no other books than those required for his college courses.

I concluded that Jack was simply a non-reader, as immune to the pleasures of this activity as I am to those of cooking or knitting. My best shot at conversion had failed. I said a silent apology to his high school teachers for having blamed his resistance on them. My affection for *Joe College* hadn't diminished, but in the future I would be less certain of its universal appeal. I wondered if my coolness toward *The Book of Illusions* would make Robert revise his opinion of it, and if this was what he sought—a challenge to his taste. That strikes me as a healthy reason to loan books, join a book group, even to teach. I like hearing dissenting views on books that I admire, unless they seem ignorant or wrongheaded, in which case it's my opinion of the reader that suffers.

I didn't think less of Jack for abandoning *Joe College*, though if the book had inspired him to love reading, our regard for each other would probably have improved. I notice this in my classes—no sooner do I assign a popular book such as *This Boy's Life* or *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* than my popularity increases, which in turn makes me feel more favorably disposed toward the students. With that in mind, I

hoped that Robert, who had seemed so pleased by my initial enthusiasm for *The Book of Illusions*, wouldn't be disappointed in me for qualifying my opinion. I considered feigning approval, but that would violate both of our motives for the transaction. Besides, he might then propose another loan, probably another Auster, in which case I'd never get to the new pile of promising books that had risen beside my bed.

Before delivering my verdict, however, I had to replace Robert's coffee stained copy, which I would then own. For most people, the addition of a book to their library, especially a book that they have completed, is cause for pride, since personal libraries tend to be judged both by their size and by the number of volumes in them that their owner has read. But I've never cared about possessing books; in fact, I devote considerable ingenuity to not acquiring them, and am happy to divest myself of those that I have completed or abandoned. Maybe this is because I've moved so often, packing, lugging and reshelving books that sit untouched until the next move, or because I have always lived close to good public or university libraries, and my pride of accomplishment comes from returning books when I finish them.

I like borrowing books from libraries because the return date, while occasionally stressful, keeps me from dawdling or letting them sit unread, which often happens with books that I own. My sister, on the other hand, loves purchasing and possessing books, and is happy to stockpile hers, serenely assuming that she will eventually get to everything on her shelves. The sight of all those unread books would make me anxious. I'm already haunted by not having enough time to read, by not reading fast enough, and by having too many books that I either want to read or to have read; I don't need those titles reproaching me every time I walk through my den.

In an interview with the writer Elizabeth Hardwick conducted in her Manhattan apartment, the interviewer commented on the size of Hardwick's library, which she had accumulated with her husband, the poet Robert Lowell. Hardwick, in her seventies at the time, joked that her guest was welcome to all of the books he could cart away. Her comment reminded me that no matter how impressive a library is, its true glory lies in the reading that it represents. Unlike some custodians of large personal libraries, Hardwick and Lowell had probably read most of their books, and it was the presence of those books in their minds that mattered. Of course, there is some literature that one always wants ready at hand, but as Hardwick implied, after one puts a book on a shelf there is little left to do but have people admire it and ultimately give it away.

When the new copy of *The Book of Illusions* arrived from Amazon, I put it in my briefcase to give to Robert, and put the stained copy on my shelf. The next time I move it will go to a used bookstore. As it turned out, my de-briefing of Robert was quick and insignificant. It took place at recess on a frigid day, too cold to stand around chatting. I told him my problem with the sex scene and movie synopses, adding that I had liked the rest of the book and saw its flaws as isolated rather than pervasive. He nodded and said, "I'm just glad you didn't hate it." As he walked away, I decided that for some people a loan is just a loan, a way of benignly disseminating their enthusiasm for literature.

In the end, I appreciated Robert's gesture, and if he proposes another book, I'll accept on the chance that it will be something transformative. Not that I'm inviting recommendations. So much of my pleasure in books comes from feeling my way toward them—reading reviews, blurbs, first pages, deciding whether and how much time I want to commit to a length, genre, or style. I love this literary foreplay, which book loans

preclude, replacing it with obligation. In this way they're like English classes, whose prescribed titles almost ruined reading for me as a student and made me sensitive to Jack's struggles. That said, many of the books that established me as a devout reader were loans of a sort, pressed upon me by siblings, parents, even teachers. These taught me my taste and how to apply it when auditioning books on my own. Offerings like Robert's continue that education. Perhaps even my loan to Jack will bear fruit some day.

Recently, another friend complained about a loan he had received. He was preparing to leave for vacation when a colleague dropped a thick biography on his desk, saying, "Let me know what you think." The book threatened to consume his entire holiday, which he had looked forward to spending on lighter fare. I cringed at his predicament, and shared with him some excuses I keep ready to ward off ominous book loans. Unfortunately, this meant that I couldn't use any of these excuses when he phoned two weeks later, gushing about the book and urging me to read it. His transformation from grudging recipient to eager recommender confirmed my theory that with book loans, it's often better to give than to receive; one has less to lose with the risky part of the transaction, the reading, out of the way.