
Alberto Manguel is a prominent editor, anthologist, novelist, translator, and bibliophile, with an international reputation based, not least, on his wide-ranging literary interests and his output in several languages. He was born in Buenos Aires, although he has been a Canadian citizen since the mid-1980s. His edited works include *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (1980), *Black Water: The Anthology of Fantastic Literature* (1983), *The Oxford Book of Canadian Ghost Stories* (1990), *Canadian Mystery Stories* (1991), *The Gates of Paradise: The Anthology of Erotic Fiction* (1993), and *Meanwhile in Another Part of the Forest: Gay Stories from Alice Munro to Yukio Mishima* (1994). *A History of Reading* is perhaps his most ambitious work to date, or so it seems if we go by the title. But it is a misleading title: *A History of MY Reading; A History of Reading and Readers That Interest Me; Alberto Manguel: A Life in Books* — all these would more accurately convey what this book is about, because, wide-ranging as his scope is, it is in the end autobiographical.

It's a clever book, sometimes perhaps a little too self-consciously clever. The first section, and thus the first page of the text, is labelled 'The Last Page.' It begins with a list of eighteen readers — Aristotle, Virgil, Dickens, and so on. Manguel's descriptions are neat: the eighteen accompanying illustrations, while sufficient to show his point, are far from attractively presented. Indeed, again and again in this book, I was struck by its ugliness. There are dozens of illustrations, all interesting and relevant, but poorly reproduced, literally grey and dull. It seems to me that what might have been a lavish celebration of the book in history has been reduced to something pinched and mean. I wanted this to be a beautiful book and yet it wasn't one which gave me any pleasure to buy. Already in the bookstore I was disappointed by it.

But what took me beyond 'The Last Page' was Manguel himself. That list of eighteen readers isn't just a list. Manguel identifies their reading experience with his own: 'I am not alone.' He tells us how he learnt to read. Probably we all remember that moment. The first word I read was BOVRIL, on a neon sign, illuminated from left to right: B, BO, BOV, BOVR, BOVRI, BOVRIL. Years later at teacher's college I learnt that this is an accepted method of teaching reading. Manguel went another route and with a more conventional text: 'The boy runs.' His text, he says, soon grew thin: BOVRIL still brings a lump to my throat. In his ramble
through his early reading experiences he reflects on the autobiographical nature of other writers' works for him as a reader, finding traces of his own life in them. As I read the book I realized that what Manguel was saying applied to me. He reminded me that I too had learnt to read with the dubious Noddy, progressing through the Secret Seven to The Famous Five. He reminded me of the seductive nature of book covers. He was indiscriminating about the text if the cover was attractive: I still have a book, *Marigold and Dandelion*, which I treasured for its embossed green cover from the age of four but didn't read until I was twenty-five, long anticipating the inevitable disappointment.

Much of the book retains this autobiographical slant, and yet, as Manguel is at pains to illustrate, the reader constantly looks for points with which to identify in any book. Manguel invites this. I constantly found myself if not agreeing with his description of his approach to a particular work from his past, then at least substituting my own almost parallel experience for his. This is part of the success of the book. It's one which draws you into it, however hard you may have hoped to resist. Yes, he's making generalizations. Yes, he's offering us details of his own experience. But, yes, both levels work. As he himself says in a slightly different context, 'I find myself in dialogue with him, arguing this or that point.' It's a book which makes you think not so much about Manguel's own reading as about your own; a book where lists he compiles trigger mental lists of your own. It's an intelligent book, full of neat turns of phrase, quotations you want to remember. He quotes the Argentinean writer Ezequiel Martinez Estrada: 'There are those who, while reading a book, recall, compare, conjure up emotions from other, previous readings. . . . This is one of the most delicate forms of adultery.' His own reading aloud to then blind poet, Jorge Luis Borges, made Manguel realize that 'Borges disbelieved in systematic bibliographics and encouraged such adulterous reading.'

Manguel moves from his history as a reader to the second section, 'Acts of Reading,' the history of the act of reading. He takes us on a tour of the senses, memory, perception, neurolinguistics — the relationship between brain and language — with theories ranging from Aristotle to Leonardo Da Vinci, from Syrian pictographic tablets to photographs of brains. But how can anyone know, retain, understand all this? What are Manguel's sources? Where has he investigated? Just how scholarly is this book? The endnotes are extensive. The research is wide-ranging. He's at his best when he describes materials and places familiar to him personally: sitting in a bar across the street from Sant'Ambrogio in Milan contemplating silent reading, reading without moving your lips. The passages where he summarizes theories of perception are less convincing. You get the feeling that he's good at recording personal experience and relating it to theory, but less good at researching from scratch. Perhaps, in the end, that's what makes this a popular book, a book I'll talk to my graduate students about but not insist that they read. There's token recognition of the electronic age: a small photograph of a Shakespeare CD-ROM, a note about the fallibility of the computer memory. Reading is in the process of being revolutionized by the electronic media. The timing of Manguel's book is perfect for a discussion of the state of the art. He all but ignores its existence. It's a relief to return to descriptions of his youth in Buenos Aires,
reading notebooks, metal-nibbed pens and porcelain ink pots, in the chapter
'Learning to Read.' Then we're immediately back in a fourteenth-century Latin
school, the ritualized passage of learning to read through the ages, mothers teach-
ing their children to read, phonetic systems, the birch rod for the recalcitrant. He
looks at different ways of reading the same text, Dante and Kafka on allegory,
ways of reading the Bible. We're taken on a quick tour of Kafka's library and a
potted account of his reading philosophy, Kafka as reader. And then we're back
to Milan in 1978, where Manguel was working as an editor, and a chapter on
'Picture Reading,' illustrated books, the graven images forbidden by the second
commandment, Christ the lamb of God realistically portrayed as a fat sheep in
the Ghent Altarpiece, Biblical iconography, early books of images, the Biblia
Pauperum. But just as you're feeling comfortable in the fourteenth century, he
whisks you to Marshall McLuhan and thence to the epiphany of the Absolut
Vodka advertisement. I thought we'd done reading aloud, but the next chapter is
'Being Read to': subtle difference. Now we're in Cuba, combatting illiteracy, lis-
tening to texts while we work, and then back to eleventh century street enter-
tainers and twelfth-century Cistercian monasteries.

The formula of the chapters is beginning to pall, unrelieved by those grey illus-
trations: reading in bed, on the train, form versus content, codex versus scroll,
furniture adapted to reading, the reading-wheel, and then back to 1440 and Gutten-
berg. Now we're in the world of speed, uniformity and cheapness, the growth of
private libraries, the intellectual rather than the monies aristocracy, and so to 6d
paperbacks. As an indication of the inadequacy of the illustrations, look no fur-
ther than the photograph of the first ten Penguins published. With the naked eye
I could recognize ten books: with a magnifying glass and a memory of what they
were I could pick out the ten authors and titles, though not the small, blurred
print. What is in the adjacent book of fifteenth-century madrigals I cannot say.

It becomes a book to dip into, rather than to read cover to cover. There's no
sustained narrative. In the end it's not a history but merely a series of interesting
anecdotes. I like it and I'll find it useful as a starting point for countless reading-
related projects, but it's not a book I'll ever read again. There are chapters on
'Private Reading' — Eleanor of Aquitaine, forever captured in marble, reading, on
her tomb, Collette at Chatillon Coligny, a lengthy discussion of reading in bed,
the privacy or otherwise of the bed; 'Metaphors of Reading', a chapter mainly
about Walt Whitman, with the explanation of metaphors: 'To say that an author
is a reader or a reader an author, to see a book as a human being or a human being
as a book, to describe the world as text or a text as the world, are ways of naming
the reader's craft.' So book and reader become one: we are what we read.

We've now reached the third section and what must be chapter twelve, although
the sections and chapters aren't numbered. We're at 'Beginnings,' in pre-Gulf War
Iraq in 1989 and then back through 2200 years to Akkadian Babylon, and then to
the fourth millennium BC and the pre-history of books, stone tablets, scribes and
their readers. The jumps back and forth across the centuries are disconcerting,
the Middle-Eastern names and places familiar and yet, in the end, jumbled in my
mind. Alexander the Great is juxtaposed with Strabo, Aristotle, Callimachus,
Roger Bacon; Alexandria with Athens, and so back to Buenos Aires, Canterbury,
Brussels. Eventually I gave up trying to keep track not only of where we were, but even of why. Occasionally an illustration jumped out and grabbed my attention — the haunting, sculpted head of Constantine the Great. Where I was familiar with the history Manguel was summarizing, I was able to follow with interest, but this isn't a book for the historically uninitiated, and my sense is that it would be impossible to learn about, say, the Greeks and reading, the Roman emperors and writing, from this book. It's a book you turn to for confirmation of what you already know.

In the chapter, 'The Symbolic Reader,' he goes back to the issue of you are what you read, citing examples of suitable books to be seen with on the subway, on a long train journey, on a weekend in the country; books as backdrops; books as furniture; books as symbols of intellect. Manguel painstakingly describes a photograph of an old woman reading. He speculates on the book in her hands and the shifting interpretations we make of the picture depending on what we think she's reading: identity coloured or filled in by the book.

His chapter, 'Reading Within Walls,' is about women readers and women writers, with the emphasis on segregated groups such as the Japanese court, and with a nod in the direction of Carolyn Heilbrun and George Eliot: not the high point of A History of Reading. 'Stealing Books,' by contrast, is one of those autobiographical chapters which immediately demands and then engages the attention, not that it's necessarily about stealing books. Instead he has books as property, 'faint scholarship,' 'a sort of inventory of my life,' the marginalia and paraphernalia — jottings, bookmarks, interleavings — books and possession. And what can be possessed can be stolen, as Manguel describes at length through the example of the nineteenth century bibliokleptomaniac, Count Libri-Carucci della Sommaia. His conclusion is perhaps more convincing than his case study. As Charles Lamb said, 'A book reads the better which is our own.' Ownership establishes an intimate relationship, a relationship sustained even if the books aren't actually read: I remember Marigold and Dandelion.

Manguel turns to reading in public. From Pliny to books on tape, we have accounts of the author as reader. He cites Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot. When I played tapes of these authors to my second year poetry class they laughed out loud at Eliot. As Pliny found, context is everything. The stimulus of the author reading his work is a two-way affair: confirmation, emendation, adaptation, entertainment. The reader is part of the artistic process. There's a long discussion on Rilke under the heading 'The Translator as Reader,' another of those detailed case studies, not fully accounted for. This moves into a discussion of the Bible, 'the text judged most infallible of all,' and then to 'Forbidden Reading.' Manguel tells of slaves as readers, Chinese emperors destroying books, Nazis burning books — clearly books are potentially dangerous for the power, the experience, they give their readers. Manguel doesn't discuss the Penguin Lady Chatterley's Lover trial and so misses the opportunity to quote the opening address for the prosecution: 'Would you approve of your young sons, young daughters — because girls can read as well as boys — reading this book? . . . Is it a book that you would even wish your wife or your servants to read?' A major omission. In 'The Book Fool' there's discussion of reading glasses, who in history has worn them, blurred and impaired
vision — back to Borges — depictions of spectacles in art. This turns into a discussion of intellectualism, and, as a coda, there’s a photograph of readers browsing in the bombed library of Holland House in London in 1940, bespectacled of course. In the final chapter, ‘Endpaper Pages,’ Manguel confesses, ‘Among the books I haven’t written — among the books I haven’t read but would like to read — is The History of Reading. He pictures it vividly for us, describing its tone, its informativeness, its reflectiveness and erudition. He compares it to the unicorn and Atlantis: something that doesn’t exist and yet which is frequently discussed. He describes it as a subject without end, concluding with ‘I imagine opening it up tonight, or tomorrow night, or the night after that, and saying to myself, “It’s not finished”.’ It may be that he accounts for or excuses A History of Reading in the same way.

Perhaps I’m old-fashioned in expecting something that labels itself a history to be arranged chronologically, or thematically, or regionally. Perhaps I’m unreasonable in expecting a $36 book to be pleasing to the eye. Perhaps I’m naive in expecting a book about reading to be readable and rereadable. And yet, despite all the negative feelings I had as I grappled with Manguel’s layers of complexity and unfathomable overall plan, the book is engaging. It leaves a deep impression of the man if not of the detail of his countless subjects. He’s a man clearly obsessed by books, and he conveys that obsession with enthusiasm, indeed over-enthusiasm. One mistake, if mistake it is, is to assume that he can do in this book what millions of books in general, through history, have done for millions of readers. But perhaps his greatest mistake is his choice of title — ambitious, implying authority, comprehensiveness, reliability. In the end however, despite misgivings, I like the book. It’s exciting for those of us professionally and academically interested in books that a book about reading has received the attention it has, not least a George Steiner review in March 1997. How often do the Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada review the same book as The New Yorker? I like the idea of the book, its blatant ambition, its clear disregard of the academy, its honest determination, its lack of pretension, to show us what happens when we read, who we are as readers, where we belong in what Manguel would call history. I like the fact that this is the latest of Alberto Manguel’s books because he’s a writer I admire and enjoy. The book falls short on no ends of grounds. I want to be able to recommend it, but to whom? It’s too general to be of interest to an academic reading specialist and yet too specific, and not pretty enough, to be a coffee-table book. Yet in the end it’s a book which everyone interested in books must know about, a book we can’t ignore.

GILLIAN FENWICK
Trinity College, University of Toronto