

## The Gift of Reading

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People often sit for the Cambridge Proficiency exam simply because they have passed the First Certificate and this is the next exam up the scale. Proficiency assumes that people read a fair amount in their mother tongue and by extension in English. This is not always the case and my guess is that a lot of the people who fail the exam do so because of lack of extensive reading in English.

### Set Books

The idea of "set" books is pretty hopeless as a way of getting people to want to read. My autumn 87 Proficiency class read extracts from the three literary books proposed by the exam authorities and chose the Patricia Highsmith novel. At least they chose by majority decision after a bit of copy-tasting. Some of the group dragged and forced themselves through The Talented Mr Ripley, while others read with mild interest. One Greek girl really got into it and a German girl doggedly decided to know the book for her oral exam. The idea of examiners setting books is a bit like the idea of the family arranging a marriage for a son or daughter. Unlikely to produce passionate reading.

### A book for you

A percentage of my reading is triggered by someone I like and respect saying "Have you read this?". I tried the same tactic with the people in my class. Part of my preparation each week consisted of wondering which books I could lend to whom, so they would really want to read on and finish the book. In some cases the person-to-book match was obvious: to a girl whose father owned a Kosher restaurant in Switzerland I lent Envy the Frightened, by Yael Dayan which describes what it was like to be an Israeli woman soldier. The student had recently spent three months in Israel and told me that the book did not feel at all out of date. She had met people like those in the book. Dayan and her had things to say to each other. I then lent her Operation Thunder by Yehuda Offer, a graphic journalistic description of the 1976 Entebbe Raid. She read the book with interest but it had not touched the same as with the Dayan book.

An 18 year old Greek girl told me in letters she wrote me, that she was fascinated by the time when the colonels had governed Greece (1967-74). She had vague childhood memories of the period but wanted to know more. I asked a colleague to lend her a copy of Oriana Fallaci's A Man, a passionate account of the Italian journalist's love affair with Panagoulis, who had tried to kill the Greek dictator. Katerina read the book through from cover to cover in three or four days; 400 pages of quite hard English. The themes of the dictatorship and a passionate love totally gripped her. Her friend then borrowed the book from her. It was Katerina who said to her: "this is a book for you". In these conditions Tonia was happy to read a 'set book'. It all depends who sets it.

Sometimes I would introduce a book to the whole class and then lend the full

text to whoever bit. I did this with Desmond Morris's Catwatching. The book is organised into one or two page sections that answer questions like: Why does a cat purr? How does a cat manage to fall on its fee? I gave each student three short sections to read and prepare over a week-end. On the Monday morning the students exchanged the information they had read about cats. I offered to lend the book out and a German girl almost grabbed it out of my hand. It turned out that she had had a very strong relationship with one of her cats.

### Spycatcher

Two people in the group had joined an optional, afternoon political discussion group. In early November I came by a copy of Spycatcher and lent it to them. Over the following two months I was able to feed them article after article from the UK press about Mrs Thatcher's absurd attempts to strangle the book. All in all she provided those two students with acres of surrealistic extensive reading!

### Failures

Sometimes I lent a person the wrong book for them. You always know when you have got it wrong, even if the student makes vague attempts to save your face for you. A Japanese student in my group had already read The Talented Mr Ripley during a previous stab at the Proficiency exam. To make her re-reading of it less tedious I gave her Cheats at Work - An Anthropology of Workplace Crime, by G Mars. My idea had been to invite her to focus on the Ripley themes of cheating and doubleness from a realistic, non-fictional angle. The book was definitely not right for her and I doubt if she read more than a few pages. That book did not move sideways to other students - there was no way Naomi would recommend it. It did not become 'social reading' within the group or at any rate a sub-group.

### Social Reading

Sybil, the story of a woman possessed by 16 personalities, did achieve this status. It changed hands three or four times and I think was read mostly from cover to cover. I would forget who had it and then see it in a different part of the room to where I had seen it last time. It was recommended from student to student. Some of them wrote to me about the feelings it aroused in them. I had originally launched Sybil as another way of looking at the double personality theme in the Highsmith book.

### Gifts

Each time I successfully chose a relevant book for a student I was offering her a gift. Each time one of them passed a book on she was making a gift to her classmate. I can think of few more powerful ways of getting TV-reared people wanting to read. Exam-passing improvement in language will only come from motivated, willing reading. People do not learn efficiently from dutiful reading.