



WHY FINISH BOOKS?

Tim Parks

“Sir—” remarked Samuel Johnson with droll incredulity to someone too eager to know whether he had finished a certain book—“Sir, do you read books through?” Well, do we? Right through to the end? And if we do, are we the suckers Johnson supposed one must be to make a habit of finishing books?

Schopenhauer, who thought and wrote a great deal about reading, is on Johnson’s side. Life is “too short for bad books” and “a few pages” should be quite enough, he claims, for “a provisional estimate of an author’s productions.” After which it is perfectly okay to bail out if you’re not convinced.

But I’m not really interested in how we deal with bad books. It seems obvious that any serious reader will have learned long ago how much time to give a book before choosing to shut it. It’s only the young, still attached to that sense of achievement inculcated by anxious parents, who hang on doggedly when there is no enjoyment. “I’m a teenager,” remarks one sad contributor to a book re-

view website. “I read this whole book [it would be unfair to say which] from first page to last hoping it would be as good as the reviews said. It wasn’t. I enjoy reading and finish nearly all the novels I start and it was my determination never to give up that made me finish this one, but I really wish I hadn’t.” One can only encourage a reader like this to learn not to attach self esteem to the mere finishing of a book, if only because the more bad books you finish, the fewer good ones you’ll have time to start.



But what about those good books? Because Johnson certainly wasn’t just referring to the bad when he tossed out that provocation. Do we need to finish them? Is a good book by definition one that we did finish? Or are there occasions when we might choose to leave off a book before the end, or even only half way through, and nevertheless feel that it was good, even excellent, that we were glad we read what we read, but don’t feel the need to finish it? I ask the question because this is happening to me more and more often. Is it age, wisdom, senility? I start a book. I’m enjoying it thoroughly, and then the moment comes when I just know I’ve had enough. It’s not that I’ve stopped enjoying it. I’m not bored, I don’t even think it’s too long. I just have no desire to go on enjoying it. Can I say then that I’ve read it? Can I recommend it to others and speak of it as a fine book?

Kafka remarked that beyond a certain point a writer might decide to finish his or her novel at any moment, with any sentence; it really was an arbitrary question, like where to cut a piece of string, and in fact both *The Castle* and *America* are left unfinished, while *The Trial* is tidied away with the indecent haste of someone who has decided enough is enough. The Italian novelist Carlo Emilio Gadda was the same; both his major works, *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana* and *Acquainted with Grief*, are unfinished and both are considered classics despite the fact that they have complex plots that would seem to require endings which are not there.

Other writers deploy what I would call a catharsis of exhaustion: their books present themselves as rich and extremely taxing experiences that simply come to an end at some point where writer, reader and indeed characters, all feel they've had enough. The earliest example that comes to mind is D H Lawrence, but one thinks of Elfriede Jelinek, Thomas Bernhard, Samuel Beckett, and the wonderful Christina Stead. Beckett's prose fiction gets shorter and shorter, denser and denser as he brings the point of exhaustion further and further forward.

All these writers it seems to me, by suggesting that beyond a certain point a book might end anywhere, legitimize the notion that the reader may choose for him or herself, without detracting anything from the experience, where to bow out (of Proust's *Recherche* for example, or *The Magic Mountain*). One of the strangest responses I ever had to a novel of my own—my longest not surprisingly—came from a fellow author who wrote out of the blue to express his appreciation. Such letters of course are a massive pep to one's vanity and I was just about to stick this very welcome feather in my cap, when I reached the last lines of the message: he hadn't read the last fifty pages, he said, because he'd reached a point where the novel seemed satisfactorily over, for him.

Naturally I was disappointed, even a little angry. My leg had surely been pulled. Wasn't this damning criticism, that I'd gone on fifty pages too long? Only later did I appreciate his candor. My book was fine, for him, even without the ending. It wasn't too long, just that he was happy to stop where he did.

What, then, since clearly I'm talking about books with aesthetic pretensions, of the notion of the work of art as an organic whole—you haven't seen its shape unless you've seen all of it—and what, since again I have mainly referred to novelists, of the question of plot? Doesn't a novel that is plotted require that we reach the end, because then the solution to the tale will throw meaning back across the entire work. So the critics tell us. No doubt I've made this claim myself in some review or other.

But this is not really my experience as I read. There are some novels, and not just genre novels, where plot is indeed up front and very much the reason why one keeps turning the pages. We have to know what happens. These are rarely the most important books for me. Often one skims as heightened engagement with the plot reduces our attention to the writing as such; all the novel's intelligence is in the story and the writing the merest vehicle.

Yet even in these novels where plot is the central pleasure on offer, the end rarely gratifies, and if we like the book and recommend it to others, it is rarely for the end. What matters is the conundrum of the plot, the forces put in play and the tensions between them. The Italians have a nice word here. They call plot *trama*, a word whose primary meaning is weft, woof or weave. It is the pattern of the weave that we most savor in a plot—Hamlet’s dilemma, perhaps, or the awesome unsustainability of Dorothea’s marriage to Casaubon—but not its solution. Indeed, the best we can hope from the end of a good plot is that it not ruin what came before. I would not mind a Hamlet that stopped before the carnival of carnage in the last scene, leaving us instead to mull over all the intriguing possibilities posed by the young prince’s return to Elsinore.

In this regard it’s worth noting that stories were not always obliged to have an end, or to keep the same ending. In *The Marriage of Cadmus* and *Harmony* Roberto Calasso shows that one of the defining characteristics of a living mythology was that its many stories, always so excitingly tangled together, always had at least two endings, often “opposites”—the hero dies, he doesn’t die, the lovers marry, they don’t marry. It was only when myth became history, as it were, that we began to feel there should be just one “proper” version, and set about forgetting the alternatives. With novels, the endings I’m least disappointed with are those that encourage the reader to believe that the story might very easily have taken a completely different turn.

To put a novel down before the end, then, is simply to acknowledge that for me its shape, its aesthetic quality, is in the weave of the plot and, with the best novels, in the meshing of the writing style with that weave. Style and plot, overall vision and local detail, fascinate together, in a perfect tangle. Once the structure has been set up and the narrative ball is rolling, the need for an end is just an unfortunate burden, an embarrassment, a deplorable closure of so much possibility. Sometimes I have experienced the fifty pages of suspense that so many writers feel condemned to close with as a stretch of psychological torture, obliging me to think of life as a machine for manufacturing pathos and tragedy, since the only endings we half-way believe in, of course, are the unhappy ones.

I wonder if, when a bard was recounting a myth, after some early Athenian dinner party perhaps, or round some campfire on the Norwegian coast, there didn’t come a point when listeners would vote to decide which ending they wanted to hear, or simply opt for an early bed. And I remember that Alan Ayckbourn has written

plays with different endings, in which the cast decides, act by act, which version they will follow.

I also wonder if, in showing a willingness not to pursue even an excellent book to the death, a reader isn't actually doing the writer a favor, exonerating him or her, from the near impossible task of getting out of the plot gracefully. There is a tyranny about our thrall to endings. I don't doubt I would have a lower opinion of many of the novels I haven't finished if I had.

And finally I wonder if it isn't perhaps time that I learned, in my own novels, to drop readers a hint or two that, from this or that moment on, they have my permission to let the book go just as and when they choose. 📖

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At Home With Books 'Portrait of Edmond Maître (The Reader)'
by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1871).

YOU ARE WHAT YOU READ

A lucid exposition of how Proust put his reading to work
in the creation of *In Search of Lost Time*.

Joseph Epstein

No one should read Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* for the first time. A first reading, however carefully conducted, cannot hope to unlock the book's complexity, its depth, its inexhaustible richness. Roughly a million words and more than 3,000 pages long, it is a novel I have read twice, and one of the reasons I continue to exercise and eat and drink moderately and have a physical every year into my 70s is that I hope to live long enough to read it one more time.

Told with France's Belle Epoque (that bright and lavish quarter of a century before World War I permanently darkened all life in Europe) as its background, *In Search of Lost Time* is the recollections of a first-person narrator over several decades. This narrator, who bears many resemblances to its author (he is called Marcel, and his family and circumstances are similar to Proust's) but who also differs from him in striking ways (chief among them that his life is not devoted to writing a great novel), is relentless in his energy for analysis. In his detailed attempt to remember all things past, he is as all-inclusive as literature can get; what normal people filter out of memory the narrator channels in. And so it was with Proust himself: While most authors working at revision tend to take things out of their manuscripts, up to his death in 1922 Proust was continuing to add things to his.

In Search of Lost Time is a masterwork. Masterworks seem to require new translations every half-century or so, and such has been the case with Proust's vast novel. Penguin has recently undertaken a re-translation, with different hands assigned each of the novel's seven volumes, though, alas, not each of these hands is up to the difficult task of translating Proust, and so the translation is uneven. I prefer Terence Kilmartin's 1970s reworking of the earlier C.K. Scott Moncrieff translation, which appeared under the title "Remembrance of Things Past" (a phrase that Scott Moncrieff took from Shakespeare's Sonnet XXX: "When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past"). It remains in print from Random House, and among its other advantages is that the edition is spaciouly printed, no small benefit in a lengthy work composed of sentences sometimes running several cubits long.

Masterworks also engender writing about them by superior people. Small books have been written about Proust's novel by François Mauriac, Samuel Beckett and Jean-François Revel. Other studies of the book have been done by the poets Howard Moss and Howard Nemerov and the critic Roger Shattuck. Full-length biographies of Proust have been written by George Painter, André

Maurois, William C. Carter and Jean-Yves Tadié. Others have written books about photography and Proust; about painting and Proust; about his May 1922 dinner meeting with James Joyce, Igor Stravinsky and other of the great figures of Modernism; about his interest in but limited knowledge of English. There is even an excellent biography of Proust's mother, who played so important a role in his life. Proustolators, of whom I count myself one, do not want for excellent reading about their idol.

With "Monsieur Proust's Library," Anka Muhlstein has added another volume to the collection of splendid books about Proust. A woman of intellectual refinement, subtle understanding and deep literary culture, Ms. Muhlstein has written an excellent biography of Astolphe de Custine, the 19th-century French aristocrat who did for Russia what Alexis de Tocqueville did for the United States. Her previous book, "Balzac's Omelette," was a study of the place of food in that novelist's life and in his work.

"Monsieur Proust's Library" is a variation on her Balzac book. Early in "Balzac's Omelette" she wrote: "Tell me where you eat, what you eat, and what time of day you eat, and I will tell you who you are." Much to it, but there is even more to be learned by discovering, as Ms. Muhlstein in effect does in "Monsieur Proust's Library," what a person reads and when, what he thinks of what he reads, and what effect it has had on him. Omelettes for Balzac, books for Proust: Ms. Muhlstein is an excellent provisioner of high-quality intellectual goods.

Marcel Proust (1871-1922) was immensely well read. *In Search of Time* encapsulates within itself the main traditions in French literature: both in fiction (from Madame de Lafayette through Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert and Zola) and in the belle-lettristic-philosophical line (from Montaigne through Pascal, La Rochefoucauld and Chamfort). Proust formed a strong taste for generalization through these latter writers. I own a small book of his maxims, drawn from the novel and his discursive writings, and an unusually high quotient of them are dazzling. Let one example suffice: "It has been said that the greatest praise of God lies in the negation of the atheist, who considers creation sufficiently perfect to dispense with a creator."

As an asthmatic child, Proust read more than most children. Ms. Muhlstein recounts that, by the age of 15, he was already immersed in contemporary literature, having read the essays and novels of Anatole France and Pierre Loti, the poetry of Mallarmé and Leconte de Lisle, and a number of the novels of Dostoyevsky, Tol-

stoy, Dickens and George Eliot. Unlike Henry James, who referred to their works as “baggy monsters,” Proust fully appreciated the great Russian novelists. He thought Tolstoy “a serene god,” valuing especially his ability to generalize in the form of setting down laws about human nature. Ms. Muhlstein informs us that, for Proust, Dostoyevsky surpassed all other writers, and that he found “The Idiot” the most beautiful novel he had ever read. He admired Dostoyevsky’s skill with sudden twists in plot, providing the plausible surprises that propelled his novels.

In his 1905 essay “On Reading,” a key document, Ms. Muhlstein notes, in Proust’s freeing himself to write his great novel, he quoted Descartes: “The reading of all good books is like a conversation with the most cultivated of men of past centuries who have been their authors.” Proust’s examination of “the original psychological act called reading,” that “noblest of distractions,” holds that books are superior to conversation, which “dissipates immediately.”


A book, he felt, is “a friendship . . . and the fact that it is directed to one who is dead, who is absent, gives it something disinterested, almost moving.” Books are actually better than friends, Proust thought, because you turn to them only when you truly desire their company and can ignore them when you wish, neither of which is true of a friend. One also frequently loves people in books, “to whom one had given more of one’s attention and tenderness [than] to people in real life.” In his own novel, Proust wrote: “Real life, life at last laid bare and illuminated—the only life in consequence which can be said to be really lived—is literature.”

Ms. Muhlstein provides a comprehensive conspectus of Proust’s reading tastes and habits. But the true strength of her book resides in her lucidly setting out how Proust put his reading to work in the creation of *In Search of Lost Time*. Characters in the novel are imbued with the ideas of the writers Proust admired. The painter Elstir, for example, enunciates many of the theories of the English art critic John Ruskin, whom Proust translated with the help of his mother (whose English was superior to his). As Ms. Muhlstein remarks, Proust also “endows his great creation, Charles Swann, with Ruskin’s artistic taste.”

The narrator’s grandmother is a devoted reader of Madame de Sévigné—whose 17th-century letters are unparalleled for their maternal endearment—who supplies the model for her treatment of her own daughter, the narrator’s mother. At home the Baron de Charlus attempts to imitate the quotidian life of Louis XIV as chronicled by the memoirs of Saint-Simon. Charlus, perhaps the

most brilliant of all Proust's characters—certainly the novel comes most alive when he is at its forefront—is a great reader. The writer Bergotte, who some say is modeled on Anatole France, held many of the views on literature that Proust himself held. The Brothers Goncourt, whose journals provide the most intimate view we have of the great 19th-century French writers—Flaubert, Maupassant, Gautier and others—figure throughout the novel in both direct and indirect ways. Racine's play "Phèdre," drawn from the Greek myth about a woman's passion for her stepson, is used throughout to illustrate l'amour-malade: illicit love, possessiveness, jealousy, disappointment, rejection.

Perhaps no other novel has ever been written in which so many characters are readers, and what they read and how they react to it often determine their standing in Proust's and ultimately our eyes. Characters reveal themselves by snobbishly criticizing lapses in style in Balzac, or, in the instance of the narrator's friend Bloch, chalking up Ruskin as "a dreary bore." The Duchesse de Guermantes, who is socially and artistically the central female character in the novel, sees literature as a weapon of social domination, using her heterodox opinions about books to shock and make others uncomfortable. *In Search of Lost Time*, as Ms. Muhlstein demonstrates, is not merely a magnificent book but also a highly bookish book.

The one sentence in "Monsieur Proust's Library" with which I find myself in disagreement comes late, when Ms. Muhlstein, considering Proust's condemnation of the Goncourt brothers for their attacks on the morality of their contemporaries, writes: "For Proust literature had nothing to do with morality." Perhaps Ms. Muhlstein meant to write "conventional morality," because a reversal of that sentence—"For Proust literature had everything to do with morality"—is closer to the truth. No other modern author was more alive than he to the toll taken by snobbery, cruelty, brutishness; none so exalted kindness, loftiness of spirit, sweetness of character, the kind and generous heart. No great novelist has ever written oblivious to morality, and Marcel Proust is among the novelists in that small and blessed circle of the very greatest of the great. 

Mr. Epstein's *Essays in Biography* has just been published by Axios Press.

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