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ESSAY

I Was a Teenage Illiterate

By CATHLEEN SCHINE

At the age of 26, when I returned to New York after an inglorious stab at graduate work in medieval history on the frozen steppes of Chicago, I had a horrifying realization: I was illiterate. At least, I was as close to illiterate as a person with over 20 years of education could possibly be. In my stunted career as a scholar, I'd read promissory notes, papal bulls and guidelines for Inquisitorial interrogation. Dante, too. Boccaccio. . . . But after 1400? Nihil. I felt very, very stupid among my new sophisticated New York friends. I seemed very, very stupid, too. Actually, let's face it, I was stupid, and it was deeply mortifying, as so many things were in those days. But I have since come to realize that my abject ignorance was really a gift: to be a literarily inclined illiterate at age 26 is one of the most glorious fates that can befall mortal girl.

Of course I could not know that then, and in a panicky attempt to rectify the situation, I slunk in shame to the Strand and stood, paralyzed by the yawning vastness of the store and of my ignorance. I have a very distinct memory of coming home, sitting on the mattress on the floor of my tiny apartment, and staring hopelessly at the forlorn little collection of books on my window sill. A fat Latin dictionary. A fat dictionary of Christian saints. To which I added the skinny gray novel I had just bought. Out of every book in the Strand's famous miles of volumes, I had desperately, randomly, impulsively grabbed a beat-up Modern Library edition of Anatole France's "Penguin Island." Oy.

Anatole France? Not Balzac. Not Flaubert. I'd never heard of them. I didn't know them from Maupassant. Or Anatole France, for that matter. As for English or American literature, I had never read Austen or Eliot or Dickens or Melville or James or Wharton or. . . .

I blame [Dostoyevsky](#).

When I was a child, I was always allowed to stay home from school with even the flimsiest of maladies (had I known the word "neurasthenic" I would have employed it weekly) if I promised to sit quietly and read. I read "The Cricket in Times Square" and Beverly Cleary and books about horses and young Indian braves and biographies of George Washington Carver from the school library. At home, there were books by Albert Payson Terhune about collies (we had a collie) and my father's Hardy Boys collection and my mother's [Louisa May Alcott](#) novels. I read a lot. I was one of those children they used to call "readers."

So what happened between "Mr. Popper's Penguins" and "Penguin Island"?

"The Idiot" happened. In seventh grade I saw a copy of Dostoyevsky's novel in the library and, thinking it would be a funny book about a stupid person, began to read it. I read and I read and I read. I developed a crush on Prince Myshkin. He seemed so sweet. I did not know what epilepsy was, and I was too lazy to look it up in the dictionary. I did not know what naïve meant and was, again, too lazy to look it up. But I kept

going, in my own naïveté, fascinated and absorbing perhaps a tenth of what was there. A tenth of Dostoyevsky is plenty for a seventh grader, I think. The problem is that now, when as an adult I might understand the other 90 percent, I have no desire ever to read Dostoyevsky again. Ever. Dostoyevsky ruined Dostoyevsky for me.

Which is why I am grateful to him. My Dostoyevsky phase, in which I lugged one heavy volume or another everywhere (there are photos of me stubbornly pretending to read on a sailing trip, on a ski trip, on the beach), lasted through most of high school. If you spend all your time reading books that you only pretend to understand, year after year, there isn't much room for anything else. In school, we were inexplicably forced to read "The Ox-Bow Incident," I recall, and there was some Shakespeare. But it was the '60s, and for one entire year I managed to get away with reading "The Forsyte Saga" (the television series, which was fantastic, was being shown on public television) as an independent study. I also wrote a paper on existential despair in "Crime and Punishment," "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter" (assigned to the class) and (my one foray into contemporary American literature) "Portnoy's Complaint." Look, I didn't say I wasn't pretentious; I said I wasn't well read.

A few oddities cropped up on my high school reading list, some unfortunate (like Robbe-Grillet: I had never read Emerson, but I'd read Robbe-Grillet?); and others like gifts from the gods (a heavy dose of Colette, thanks to my mother). But these were tiny islets upon the great, heaving ocean of my ignorance.

So, that day, the day of my illiteracy epiphany, I came home from the Strand and sat shamefaced on my mattress staring unhappily at "Penguin Island," which I had started and put down in confused boredom several times. Then I remembered a bag in the closet with stuff my ex-boyfriend had left behind, including a paperback copy of "Our Mutual Friend," his favorite novel. A few days later I emerged from that exquisite book and cursed myself for wasting so much of my life doing things other than what God in all his wisdom clearly meant for me to do for the rest of my life: read Dickens.

This was a defining moment; it was my discovery of the English language. It could never have happened if I had not been blessedly illiterate.

Imagine the satisfaction, the exhilaration when, not long after, I stood as a newlywed surveying my husband's bookcase. It reached from one wall to the other, from floor to ceiling. It had been culled and collected by a person of knowledge and taste, a product of Columbia's core curriculum, and . . . it was arranged alphabetically. I started at the upper left hand corner ([Jane Austen](#)! J. R. Ackerley!) and worked my way to the lower right (Waugh! Wodehouse! Woolf!). I got to read "Huckleberry Finn" for the first time when I was 35 years old. And when I eventually moved on to a different partner, there waiting for me was a new bookcase full of other books. I read "My Antonia" for the first time last month. That is a kind of grace.

If Dostoyevsky had not overwhelmed me at such a young age, and I had read "Huckleberry Finn" at 14, would I have reread it at 35? Maybe, but it wouldn't have been the same transcendent experience as discovering it as an adult. And maybe I never would have gone back to it: it took me decades to recover from "The Old Man and the Sea" and try Hemingway again. On the other hand, I did just recently reread "Buff: A Collie," and was stunned at how good the prose is. [Italo Calvino](#), in "Why Read the Classics?," said that a work read at a young age and forgotten "leaves its seed in us." If that's true, and I think it must be, then I thank you, Albert Payson Terhune, and I suppose I must thank you once again, too . . . Dostoyevsky. And, oh

all right — even though just the sight of your name reminds me of a time when I thought it was O.K. to walk around Manhattan barefoot, I guess the day has come to give “The Idiot” another shot.

Cathleen Schine’s most recent novel is “The Three Weissmanns of Westport.”

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