

A Review of My New Yorker Subscription

written by Guest Contributor | October 10, 2018



I read about a hundred words each minute. It rings impressive, but it's less than twenty pages an hour in a typical book. I stumbled through a history of the Russian Revolution for weeks at about eleven pages an hour. If my wife enjoys a book, she'll lie in bed on a Saturday and devour three hundred pages in a single sitting. *The Hunger Games* certainly goes a bit faster than *Anna Karenina*, but even Tolstoy is no match for her interest piqued. We have very different tastes so it's hard to compare, but we recently went over some legal documents together: she easily reads three or four times faster than I. She's an exceptionally fast reader, but I confirmed what I always suspected. I'm also quite slow.

I would love to think I'm particularly thorough. I'm not. I don't skim, lose the thread, or fail to understand. I'm just an unusual reader, and "thorough" isn't the word for it. When I finish an essay or chapter, it slowly reduces to one or two lines that catch in my ear. An entire book may pass without one such line but a half dozen pages of Camus or Baldwin may reveal four or five. It's a purely aesthetic attraction. I don't really have favorite essays or novels, so much as a handful of scenes and turns of phrase that I'll never forget. Billy Pilgrim watches the fire-bombing of Dresden in reverse. Winston screams as O'Brien orders him to count fingers. "It is difficult in the extreme to continue fancying one's self Cathy from *Wuthering Heights* with one's head in a Food Fair bag."

If pressed for favorite books or essays, I choose from the lines buried deep in my dark mind. George Orwell's criticism of contemporary English poetry faded long ago, but I'll use the phrase "Hard cheese, old chap!" until my dying breath. I remember only the gist of James Baldwin's "Fifth Avenue, Uptown" but it rushes back each time I think of "our long history of moral evasion." Ta-Nehisi Coates argued in an slapdash post of political fare that "hope still lies in the imagined thing." I'm a weird reader, slow and hooked by beautiful words more than a clever plot or powerful message. I don't think

about it until my wife walks down the hall and announces the completion of a book in the time it took me to claw through a handful of essays.

Earlier this year, I compounded my problem. I went on a subscription binge and paid out to numerous periodicals; some small, others prominent, some political, others literary. The centerpiece of my collection was *The New Yorker*, generally considered a collection of the best writing around. It's hard to argue. I've never read much poetry, but that of its weekly issues prompted a spending spree at The Strand. There's criticism and fiction, shouts and murmurs, goings on and talk of the town. I read a profile of engineers that staff a paper-jam crisis squad at Xerox headquarters; another of Yazidi immigrants that formed an intelligence clearing house from a motel in Washington during ISIS's advance in Northern Syria. Henry Worsley's superhuman feats of antarctic endurance unfolded from inside a February issue. *The New Yorker* is a century-long collection of extraordinary writing, but collides uncomfortably with the way I read.

Saul Bellow wrote that "the 'good' writing of *The New Yorker* is such that one experiences a furious anxiety, in reading it, about errors and lapses from taste." Bellow is known for harsh opinions and has far more right to them than I. More to the point, I don't quite agree. Exquisite craftsmanship and fine language applied to patent law and the history of Barbie has value of its own. But Bellow follows with his impression that, to the editors, "the smoothness of the surface and its high polish must not be marred." Polish prevents the inconsistency essential to the revelation of beauty. The main campus of my college was lovely; elegant brick buildings lined with a breathtaking array of uniformly pruned crape myrtles. The sea of pink and white blooms were stunning from a third floor window, but on the sidewalk I couldn't distinguish one tree from the next. I do remember the enormous weeping willow in my parents' backyard; a great scraggly crooked thing, knobbed and burlled with roots bursting from the wet clay of the creek bottom. A bolt of lightning split the trunk for kindling years ago, but its irregularities left an imprint. Something odd and sublime emanated from the mass of tendrils and bubbling bark.

Order is impressive, but not always beautiful. Beauty emerges from flotsam and chaos. Most exceptional writing doesn't glow with incendiary sentences. It burns slowly. (Most exceptional masonry doesn't end in the Brooklyn Bridge or Cloisters.) Most great writing simply is. It's clear and brief, eloquent and free of flash in the best way: superbly functional. (A splendid block of row-houses in old Bay Ridge.) Much of *The New Yorker* is reportage and falls into that category, no matter its power. I get lost in the sheer volume of characters, squiggles on the page, lines, sentences, paragraphs, sub-sections, and articles. There is little on which I can grab. I remember stories, but have few points of reference; few verbal flares by which to navigate. I stare at the list of contents and scratch the hair behind my ears, uncertain of where to start. By the time I choose one story and finish it, there's a new issue in the mailbox. I come home on Tuesday, stop in the hallway by the elevator, turn the key in the lock, and open the tarnished metal door. An ice-skating penguin or caricature of a politician gazes up, funhouse warped, curved against the walls of the compartment. I start anew

and truly commit, abandoning my Paul Auster or George Orwell. I finish in the nick of time and my book sits neglected on the shelf. The journalism is exceptional, but how can one read so much without either a trust fund or abandoning books entirely? I might be missing the point.

Is *The New Yorker* even meant to be read? Of course it is, but its role is more cultural than lexical. *New Yorker* wears a red overcoat and top hat, adjusts his monocle, and looks down his nose. I don't subscribe to stack magazines on my bookcase, but rather to open them to the subway air. The subscription is a trophy. I want to be the guy on the train with the *The New Yorker*. Do I want to be the guy on the train actually *reading* it? Knowledge is currency in elite circles; paper with value that fluctuates, tied to a rate of exchange. We'll exchange it now for much less, package it in derivatives, wring it for every drop. Facebook pages and Twitter feeds fill with powerful headlines and clickbait. That I've read the article is irrelevant; I want to be the person posting it. We're collages free of serious ideas; scrapbooks of clippings we hope demonstrate our intellect and I like to think of myself as a *New Yorker* kind of fellow. The gentleman across the car with the Warby Parker frames and flat cap knows what I mean.

The casual collection of tidbits, the Twitter feed, CNN ticker, and magazine skim can't substitute for exceptional words. There's an app called "Blinkist" that offers fifteen minute summaries of nonfiction. Their slogan: big ideas in small packages. But a book can't be distilled into cocktail chatter. A sketch in pencil above the staves would do as much to summarize Beethoven's "Sonate No. 10 en Sol majeur." Real language can't be packaged at all. Ideas are electrons running from light that would freeze them on a slide, energy resisting stasis. Change the words and the idea changes too. I might say that "I keep a notebook in my backpack and scribble in it daily." Joan Didion might say that "these are bits of the mind's string, too short to use." Those two thoughts can be summarized in much the same way, but they don't say the same thing. My phrase is a fishing lure bobbing at the surface. Didion's language dredges the ocean floor, her thought made distinct and incomparable by the uniqueness of her words.

The world is a shallow place and I lose the subtleties as week after week of depth stacks beside my desk. "Two Schools of Thought: Success Academy's theories of control in the classroom." (December 11, 2017) "Unbreakable: the singular vision of the filmmaker Claire Denis" (May 28, 2018) That depth is admirable in itself, but I get lost and read slowly, labor through words as they rush around me. I need landmarks. People navigate by way of inconsistency and disorder in the landscape. An oddly formed tree, an outcropping shaped like Richard Nixon in profile, a mailbox with a name that resembles a profanity, a bend in the river, a dilapidated house. All odd and noteworthy for their oddity. Not all are beautiful, but all beauty is odd in its own way.

I drown in a ten-week backlog of *New Yorker* issues I've yet to peruse. It's not their fault. They simply mail me a hundred pages of meticulous writing each week. But the scars and pockmarks, dangling participles and unusual syntax are absent. There are no twists or burs, split infinitives or wild colloquialisms to mark the road. Hard cheese, old chap! I may not be doing

myself any favors. Ideas change when we summarize them and we require the words – potholes, imperfections, beauty – to recall their original form. Forget the countless pages unread, when only a vague outline remains, the idea is no longer the one I read in the first place. I probably won't discontinue my subscription. I genuinely love reading them when I can. Besides, who voluntarily chokes a steady stream of short stories, commentary, art reviews, and essays?

Some kind of a monster, no doubt.



Peter Amos is a native of rural Virginia. The son of an English teacher and a librarian, he studied music in college and moved to New York City where he works, performs, explores, and writes about it. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Brevity*, *The Museum of Americana*, *The Bitter Southerner*, and elsewhere.