

## A Book Reader's Love

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Ever since the Man attempted the ways to express his thoughts, perhaps the development of the ability to write them down has been the biggest leap. In written form, the thoughts take an altogether new avatar. They do not just remain abstract. Like a child in this world, they take a new birth which starts its own life journey thence forward. Once written, the thought becomes permanent, and frozen in time. It will be read by many readers, sometimes even millions of them. The reading brings another form of transformation. From the written form, the thought once again takes an abstract form in the mind of the reader, only sometimes a bit altered by the reader's interpretation of it. This is however not the first time the thought has an alteration. Limitations of the language make it impossible for the writer too to express thoughts completely faithfully into words. Writing is a special way of expression in comparison to speaking or gesturing. When someone writes, it takes more effort; and consciously or subconsciously, more care is put to be transparent in expression, right from the process of recalling and re-evaluating the thought itself – *What* is to be said – and selecting and putting the best words to it – *How* is it to be represented. The process of writing makes the thought undergo a certain level of filtration and become purer, with minimum gap in formation and representation. As inaccuracy or a loss as this slight inevitable gap could be labeled, it could also be seen as a blessing in disguise. It is this alteration only which enables thought to take different forms and versions of itself from the original thinker's mind to the minds of scores or thousands or readers. Seen in this way, it is much like the fortunate error which nature has included in the formation of DNA of off springs of life forms. The birth and rebirth of thoughts and its ability to travel in time forward through writing makes the world of written thoughts beautiful. And in this beautiful world, books are perhaps most loved keepers of the thoughts, and they live the lives which we mortals have only dreamed of. We live our short lives in comparison, and can at the best only love the books temporarily which would eventually outlive us; and in process of reading, we take a part of their souls to merge it with ours till we last. Anything of this world that enters us through our senses cannot leave us unaffected. Expression happens through music or pictures also, sometimes more flawlessly. But interaction of minds through the means of writing and reading remains special just for the attempt of writer to not to leave the interpretation to chance by choice of right words to the best of his or her capacity.

A Reader's love for a book may start even before knowing the book itself at first place. It can start just as simply as an urge to read something, not knowing what. Sometimes this urge may cause reader to go out and explore the available books in a bookstore or library. At other times, this urge may be hidden from the reader himself and show up suddenly on chance encounter with the book. Leave a book-stuck inside a bookshop or library, and you could go watch a movie only to find her back browsing through the shelves and racks. So much could be the bombardment of all the inviting titles, so much so the concentration of the chooser, that the sense of hearing could temporarily be lost, and just two hands would be insufficient to hold the several shortlisted. Finally settling down to a book to read then becomes a rewarding experience in itself. Then there is also an arranged form of love between the reader and the book. It could stem out of a necessity from academics or a personal quest to learn something. Purchase may not always be involved in reaching to the book. A gifted book is like a relationship which we do not choose but comes by itself with no cost. When love happens to a gifted book, a kind of love triangle is formed between the reader, the writer and the person who gifted it. If the latter has also read the book first before gifting or lending it to reader, or when both could be reading it together, a new family emerges out of this process. Whatever be the way for reader to reach the book, there always exists one guarantee – the book will always say yes to the reader's proposal. The hurdles like lack of money to buy it, the unavailability of book in the reader's town or country or language or in sufficient numbers may exist, but these unfortunate difficulties are manmade. The book itself, will always be welcoming the reader.

And on the other side, what a welcome it can be on the reader's side when there is a waiting! Even before the emergent times of online retail, there was an era when the only way to get to a book was through post. Letters would be written to the publishing houses to send the book with title and author to one's address and payment done through the demand drafts. Can there be anything more painful to a heart than to have to wait for one's object of love for an uncertain amount of time? While the plight of the snail mail era reader can only be imagined, the modern online purchaser can find instant comfort with purchase acknowledgement SMS itself. And that's just the start. Each time the book in transit will change hands, the retailer cares to send status updates. And then the final ring, usually on phone from the delivery staff – "Your package has arrived". The hands delivering the package would almost always not bother about its contents, but hands of the receiver? They just become invisible! Once the package is in hands after days of painful wait, it's as if – even though only for a moment or so, but it does happen – that the whole body of the receiver ceases to exist, and for

that matter the body of the delivery staff as well. Only reality that exists is the view of the package and the feeling of holding it at last!

Once the feeling has sunk in that book is now really at home, it is kept safely at a place especially waiting for it. It could be a book shelf with its empty space which could not be recognized without it; it could be a small table top with nothing else on it waiting to become alive with it; it could be a secure safe 'cool and dry' hidden corner in a closet; or it could just be on the bed, near the pillow kept waiting patiently for its first lift at the start of the night. Wherever the book could be kept finally, it is made sure that place is really clean, preferably on a dedicated base and sometimes the book may be kept within its carry bag itself. The place then becomes inviting, as if a heart was transplanted into a dying body. The heartbeats make the place alive but not suddenly. The life comes slowly, some beats at a time, and picking up pace. The moment will come when the hands which held the heart and felt the warmth of its life only recently during its procurement, these hands would part the book for the first time after the first meeting. While doing so, the feeling of weight on the hands could rather increase rather than decreasing. The added feel is of a promise to come back and meet again. The book does not ask for this promise. It is made by the self and to the self.

A suitable time would be chosen for opening the book for the first time. This time would be a personal one; at least for the initial read it would be so. It won't be a hurried-up moment. It would be such when especially it is ensured to have no disturbances around. Silence would be of utmost importance; and a relaxed mind of course. When the silence is mentioned, it could be the silence out of the environment or may be even out of the perception (or for that matter, non-perception) of it. There are times, especially in winters, when while carving for pin-drop silence, even the sound of a wall-clock could become a disturbance. At other times, however, it could be the game of the mind. It is not difficult for the mind to close its ears if the eyes are the ones claiming its maximum energies. When such a state of mind could be achieved, then even the talks of the crowd in a public place could be muted softly.

**N**ow, how to start reading the book? Before the question about reading is considered awaits another unresolved query – From where does the book actually start? 'Heck! It starts from page 1 of course!' – *But Really?* The start is made with knowing the book at first. After all it is the first meeting! The book does not start from the page no. 1. It starts from the book cover.

It is like meeting someone for the first time and giving introduction. One may know the name beforehand. But in the first meeting, the introduction

starts with telling of the name. A book's title could be of prior knowledge. However, is never missed to take note of the name on the cover. Momentarily though, the mind would take note of the color of the text or its style. The pictures or design would be observed next and attempt would be made to draw out its link with the title. Testimonials if available would be read, and that's not only on the front but back of the cover too. The cover of the book is like the appearance of a person, including clothes. It is an identity. It is the first impression. Whosoever said 'Don't judge a book by its cover' hoped in vain this adage would be ever followed by a human. We *are* emotional. We can choose to but cannot naturally ignore the influence the book cover has in developing our impression. The mind can be trained to avoid the biases, but cannot be tamed to not register the cover image as the identity. The *subconscious judgment* could be suppressed, but not the emotional response which happens subconsciously.

The first opening is like first dialogue. It is gentle. Many a time during the first opening, a couple of initial pages would be turned too. The first glance could be placed sometimes on the contents table, or sometimes it would be the title again printed this time on the paper with author's name and that of the publisher's. A bout of mixed emotion would be felt especially if the first glance happens to be on the '*dedicated to*' page – a name, a relation, a pursuit – a chord of imagination about that personality or emotion behind this dedication would be immediately struck.

Care could be taken so as to avoid turning of additional pages along with the cover during first opening. Depending on the thirst's and patience's equilibrium (or the absence of it), one could reach the books main contents by carefully turning just one page at a time and reading each of the word involved. Then be it the address of publisher or the year of first publication or the ISBN number or copyright notes. After all, these are like the place and date of birth and certificates. The history of published editions just indicates which *avatar-life* of the book one is holding and gives a subjective hypothesis of possible number of prior readers of this book. Sometimes one may be holding a book which has already been read by millions of readers in several languages. At times, it could be just newly born. The age of the book seldom matters. We are just coming to know this person!

A note or an introduction by the author or some eminent personality, usually another author, or critic of an allied field would usually be included. This section and the contents table prove to be a massive cause of a crushing heavy dilemma. To read it or not is a difficult decision. The fear of encountering the spoilers is just one of the risks. The chapter list not only discloses *what* will come, but also tells in black and white *how much* will come, with each dose indicated by the page number of each chapter telling

the chapter lengths in advance. Other dangers involved are of developing a prejudice and even worse, compromise of the revered element of surprise! Does a movie remain a fresh storytelling if its reviews have been read first? Was the book written first or chapter list or the introduction (even if it is by the author)? No. Why then shall these be *read* first? If the time moves only in forward direction, why shall it be revisited in reverse? With starting of a book read, its life has just begun. When the author wrote it, *started to write it*, the author's mind was at a certain state. Of course, as the writing happened, this state changed and developed into another and another till it reached a new level by the end of finishing of the book. Isn't it more realistic way to experience the book in same order as per which it or the author's mind grew? It sounds compelling, but just perhaps so. The real situation may not warrant that the book's plot or outline was not available before *phrasing* the book actually. And then, there remains the process of editing. During author's revisit to the whole draft, the changes in the original manuscript could have taken place, and the book at hand does not necessarily the first train of thought of author's mind. Nonetheless, knowing or knowingly ignoring these harsh realities, what is held in one's hand is what it is as per the author's desire – the final script. And there is a strong urge to follow the chronology of book's main contents first and the introduction afterwards. There remain chances that this decision proves wrong later on. The introduction could sometimes be like a primer and formative of the mental ground which author desired to be delivered first. It's a bet. This decision is a gamble, and the coin is loaded. When Galileo Galilei read just the preface of book *Mysterium Cosmographicum* by astronomer Johannes Kepler, he was so much affected by the Copernican idea of sun being at the center that he immediately wrote to the author to congratulate him on the beautiful discoveries concerning truth and promised him to read the book. Reading this, and Galileo's confession that he too had similar thoughts but did not dare to publish it only out of fear of ridicule, Kepler got so much delighted that he sent him two more copies of the book for encouragement. Such relationship between an author and his reader! And just out of a preface!

**W**hen the reading would finally commence, sometimes the environment would be made up first. If the leisure permits, it could be anything from the place of sitting (or standing!), whether indoors or outdoors; the posture, shall one be in relaxed form or an alert disciplined form; the light, natural or artificial; the questions concerning noise to no noise, or for that matter from sound to no sound and so on. The liberty of setting up may not be there always. At times, it is like stealing the time out of busy life. Then it



may not matter whether one is reading in a crowded public transport or amid noisy chatter of people and devices. While a rich reader may book a personal reading corner in a comfortable café on a winter afternoon, a student reader studying in a dim candlelight on other extreme is as much follower of her love as well.

It is difficult to not get lost in reading. Any interesting book would certainly make one lose the sense of time. Losing the sense of space however needs a more intense reading experience. Just good content would not be enough. If the work is of historic nature or fiction, the intense experience would mean getting teleported to the space and time of the book. To big extent or small, the reading experience does get affected by what is experienced by the body, and hence the setting – time, place, light and sound, and also the reader's health in general. It is easier to experience the book's content's setting of space-time when the senses are wholly engrossed into the reading act. In a comfortable, silent and dark room under a reading lamp? Out in open in isolation under a sunny sky? It is possible that teleportation of mind in such situations would be easier than reading while say travelling or amid noises from other people or urban devices. A book is potentially a time machine.

When television became a media of narration, a newfound love for radio was discovered along with. The television or a movie feed both the audio and visuals to the viewer. Radio, on the other hand feeds only audio of the story and the visual is imagined by the listener. What a great freedom indeed! Each listener would imagine the characters and scenes as per her own imagination. This is one of the reasons of good charm of storytelling retained by the media of radio. The narration by means of book however adds an additional dimension of freedom for its reader – the pace of time. The pace of progress of the story depends on the pace of reading by the reader. Noting that the type of content and the skills of reader affect this pace too, but even so, the pace is a personal experience of each reader. More than reader, if anyone enjoys such freedom of virtual experience, it is probably the book writer himself. Anyone who ever got lost in day dreaming would agree.

Dreams of sleep or full consciousness, however do not last for long. As harsh as it may be, the imaginative voyage of mind gets interrupted by design or otherwise and one has to unhappily return back to reality. A designed interruption in reading would be akin to an alarm clock to wake one up from sleep. If not for the practical constraints of attending other duties of a real living, a book reader would not be pleased to design a similar interruption for herself. Yet the accidental or external interruptions cannot be avoided. Approach of destination (who is reading during travelling) is one such interruption. A power failure and consequent turning off of reading lamp is another example. In comparison, an interruption from another

person seems more annoying. One's own body may become an interruption if reader would become aware to call for food or water during a long session of reading. If given a wish to choose the type of interruption in reading, it would not be surprising if reader wishes that she may transit into a sleep while reading in her bedroom. This will be transition from one dreamy state of mind to another.

If interruption is inevitable and reader does have to take a stop or pause, a tool probably as old as book is – a bookmark. A simple page fold at corner can become a bookmark for the ordinary reader. A reader who is in love with reading would love the body of book as well. A page fold to her is a criminal act. A suitable separate bookmark element would be used instead. It could be a classic one like a piece of thread or cloth, bookmark made out of paper, or plastic in modern times, or even a leaf or a flattened flower. The love could not just stop at the physical personification of the bookmark. Nothing stops the book reader's love to imagine a personality for the bookmark too. When a bookmark leaves its place during start of a reading session and then returns back to a different one at end of the session, the bookmark feels slightly disoriented. The utter confusion that results is most difficult to handle when the bookmark returns to find himself placed in a new book altogether!

'Keeping for the reads' is another way of loving the book. Whether it is some short phrase of the text, or the gist of a learning out of the contents, it is sometimes desired to make it available quickly for a future (re)reading. By means of underlining by a pencil (not recommended for a non-book-body-harming 'Jain' reader) or by taking out an excerpt, a reader would at times attempt to 'keep for the reads'. With the always accompanying mobile phone in modern times, it has become easier for the busy reader to keep the passage by typing or taking a picture. A kind of designed interruption by self, the book reader may feel motivated to allow for it under the hope of a convenient return or possibility of charm of revisit.

**D**eath is inevitable. When the reader finishes reading the book at last, it is no less than a death. Usually it is death after a contended life, so it is not a mourning. But it is not a celebration either. Yes, the contentment of completing the reading is there. So much so that there could be a thanks to God by reader that he himself did not die before finishing the book! But still, mostly it is a mixed feeling of satisfaction accompanied with feeling of loss.

A painful void is left when the hands close the book for the first time after finishing reading it. *Will it not be reopened? Is that all?*

Mind travels into a moment of contemplation and pondering. This moment can be very brief or long. But it cannot be avoided. The whole life of book is flashed in mind. A revisit to some of its pages could follow. How many times is this revisit not a *reading* act but a *viewing* one? If the book reader's eyes are capturing the revisit as image rather than text, it is just the evidence that she fell in love. If reader's heartbeat could be measured during the last reading session and the moments that follow, it will most certainly show the emotions of some or all of eagerness, anxiety, accomplishment and distress.

Like an obituary or eulogy, the reader has options of reading or re-reading the author's notes or the book preface, introduction. The popular books would have its praises written on its covers by critics or related personalities. Reading those could feel like finding a partner in grief. The death of a book is only for its reader to cope with. To the book however, it is just living of another full life.

The body will not be destroyed. Nor it would be buried. The resting place would be for an afterlife of the book. It would be kept alongside the other books who have reached this afterlife. A bookshelf, a closet, a trunk, wherever it is, it is better that it is kept alongside other books. If the bookmark's love for the book was strong, then it is an act of virtue to allow the book the company of its bookmark too. It makes three souls happy.

amit bhola, December 2016