

My year reading a book from every country in the world

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| 00:12 | It's often said that you can tell a lot about a person by looking at what's on their bookshelves. What do my bookshelves say about me? Well, when I asked myself this question a few years ago, I made an alarming discovery. I'd always thought of myself as a fairly cultured, cosmopolitan sort of person. But my bookshelves told a rather different story. Pretty much all the titles on them were by British or North American authors, and there was almost nothing in translation. Discovering this massive, cultural blind spot in my reading came as quite a shock. |
| 00:51 | And when I thought about it, it seemed like a real shame. I knew there had to be lots of amazing stories out there by writers working in languages other than English. And it seemed really sad to think that my reading habits meant I would probably never encounter them. So, I decided to prescribe myself an intensive course of global reading. 2012 was set to be a very international year for the UK; it was the year of the London Olympics. And so I decided to use it as my time frame to try to read a novel, short story collection or memoir from every country in the world. And so I did. And it was very exciting and I learned some remarkable things and made some wonderful connections that I want to share with you today. |
| 01:41 | But it started with some practical problems. After I'd worked out which of the many different lists of countries in the world to use for my project, I ended up going with the list of UN-recognized nations, to which I added Taiwan, which gave me a total of 196 countries. And after I'd worked out how to fit reading and blogging about, roughly, four books a week around working five days a week, |
| 02:09 | I then had to face up to the fact that I might even not be able to get books in English from every country. Only around 4.5 percent of the literary works published each year in the UK are translations, and the figures are similar for much of the English-speaking world. Although, the proportion of translated books published in many other countries is a lot higher. 4.5 percent is tiny enough to start with, but what that figure doesn't tell you is that many of those books will come from countries with strong publishing networks and lots of industry professionals primed to go out and sell those titles to English-language publishers. So, for example, although well over 100 books are translated from French and published in the UK each year, most of them will come from countries like France or Switzerland. French-speaking Africa, on the other hand, will rarely ever get a look-in. |
| 03:06 | The upshot is that there are actually quite a lot of nations that may have little or even no commercially available literature in English. Their books remain invisible to readers of the world's most published language. But when it came to reading the world, the biggest challenge of all for me was that fact that I didn't know where to start. Having spent my life reading almost exclusively British and North American books, I had no idea how to go about sourcing and finding stories and choosing them from much of the rest of the world. I couldn't tell you how to source a story from Swaziland. I wouldn't know a good novel from Namibia. There was no hiding it – I was a clueless literary xenophobe. So how on earth was I going to read the world? |
| 03:55 | I was going to have to ask for help. So in October 2011, I registered my blog, ayearofreadingtheworld.com , and I posted a short appeal online. I explained who I was, how narrow my reading had been, and I asked anyone who cared to leave a message suggesting what I might read from other parts of the planet. Now, I had no idea whether anyone would be interested, but within a few hours of me posting that appeal online, people started to get in touch. At first, it was friends and colleagues. Then it was friends of friends. And pretty soon, it was strangers. |
| 04:33 | Four days after I put that appeal online, I got a message from a woman called Rafidah in Kuala Lumpur. She said she loved the sound of my project, could she go to her local English-language bookshop and choose my Malaysian book and post it to me? I accepted enthusiastically, and a few weeks later, a package arrived containing not one, but two books – Rafidah's choice from Malaysia, and a book from Singapore that she had also picked out for me. Now, at the time, I was amazed that a stranger more than 6,000 miles away would go to such lengths to help someone she would probably never meet. |
| 05:18 | But Rafidah's kindness proved to be the pattern for that year. Time and again, people went out of their way to help me. Some took on research on my behalf, and others made detours on holidays and business trips to go to bookshops for me. It turns out, if you want to read the world, if you want to encounter it with an open mind, the world will help you. When it came to countries with little or no commercially available literature in English, people went further still. |

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| 05:52 | Books often came from surprising sources. My Panamanian read, for example, came through a conversation I had with the Panama Canal on Twitter. Yes, the Panama Canal has a Twitter account. And when I tweeted at it about my project, it suggested that I might like to try and get hold of the work of the Panamanian author Juan David Morgan. I found Morgan's website and I sent him a message, asking if any of his Spanish-language novels had been translated into English. And he said that nothing had been published, but he did have an unpublished translation of his novel "The Golden Horse." He emailed this to me, allowing me to become one of the first people ever to read that book in English. |
| 06:38 | Morgan was by no means the only wordsmith to share his work with me in this way. From Sweden to Palau, writers and translators sent me self-published books and unpublished manuscripts of books that hadn't been picked up by Anglophone publishers or that were no longer available, giving me privileged glimpses of some remarkable imaginary worlds. I read, for example, about the Southern African king Ngungunhane, who led the resistance against the Portuguese in the 19th century; and about marriage rituals in a remote village on the shores of the Caspian sea in Turkmenistan. I met Kuwait's answer to Bridget Jones. |
| 07:22 | (Laughter) |
| 07:25 | And I read about an orgy in a tree in Angola. |
| 07:32 | But perhaps the most amazing example of the lengths that people were prepared to go to to help me read the world, came towards the end of my quest, when I tried to get hold of a book from the tiny, Portuguese-speaking African island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe. Now, having spent several months trying everything I could think of to find a book that had been translated into English from the nation, it seemed as though the only option left to me was to see if I could get something translated for me from scratch. Now, I was really dubious whether anyone was going to want to help with this, and give up their time for something like that. But, within a week of me putting a call out on Twitter and Facebook for Portuguese speakers, I had more people than I could involve in the project, including Margaret Jull Costa, a leader in her field, who has translated the work of Nobel Prize winner José Saramago. With my nine volunteers in place, I managed to find a book by a São Toméan author that I could buy enough copies of online. Here's one of them. And I sent a copy out to each of my volunteers. They all took on a couple of short stories from this collection, stuck to their word, sent their translations back to me, and within six weeks, I had the entire book to read. |
| 08:54 | In that case, as I found so often during my year of reading the world, my not knowing and being open about my limitations had become a big opportunity. When it came to São Tomé and Príncipe, it was a chance not only to learn something new and discover a new collection of stories, but also to bring together a group of people and facilitate a joint creative endeavor. My weakness had become the project's strength. |
| 09:25 | The books I read that year opened my eyes to many things. As those who enjoy reading will know, books have an extraordinary power to take you out of yourself and into someone else's mindset, so that, for a while at least, you look at the world through different eyes. That can be an uncomfortable experience, particularly if you're reading a book from a culture that may have quite different values to your own. But it can also be really enlightening. Wrestling with unfamiliar ideas can help clarify your own thinking. And it can also show up blind spots in the way you might have been looking at the world. |
| 10:02 | When I looked back at much of the English-language literature I'd grown up with, for example, I began to see how narrow a lot of it was, compared to the richness that the world has to offer. And as the pages turned, something else started to happen, too. Little by little, that long list of countries that I'd started the year with, changed from a rather dry, academic register of place names into living, breathing entities. |
| 10:33 | Now, I don't want to suggest that it's at all possible to get a rounded picture of a country simply by reading one book. But cumulatively, the stories I read that year made me more alive than ever before to the richness, diversity and complexity of our remarkable planet. It was as though the world's stories and the people who'd gone to such lengths to help me read them had made it real to me. These days, when I look at my bookshelves or consider the works on my e-reader, they tell a rather different story. It's the story of the power books have to connect us across political, geographical, cultural, social, religious divides. It's the tale of the potential human beings have to work together. |
| 11:26 | And, it's testament to the extraordinary times we live in, where, thanks to the Internet, it's easier than ever before for a stranger to share a story, a worldview, a book with someone she may never meet, on the other side of the planet. I hope it's a story I'm reading for many years to come. And I hope many more people will join me. If we all read more widely, there'd be more incentive for publishers to translate more books, and we would all be richer for that. |
| 11:57 | Thank you. |

11:58

(Applause)
