

# Still Reading

By David Vickery

Jonathan awoke. Overnight, a dull ache had settled into the joints of his bones that now objected whenever he moved. Frowning, he raised himself up on one elbow to look through the bedroom window. Yesterday's crisp winter sun had been replaced by a chilling mist. For a moment he was tempted to stay indoors, but that would have broken his rule. He got up.

Even so, he shivered as he prepared the boiled egg, toast and tea that saw him out into the world. But what was so surprising about that? He was not a young man. Far from it. He smiled wryly, remembering Dr Farley's habitual jibe whenever he dropped into the surgery with some minor ache:

"You're fitter than I am, man!"

It just needed a touch more care on these cold mornings. The thicker scarf.

Jonathan felt the cold with a shock as he opened the door. It streamed icily up the sleeves of his coat and wrapped itself round his shoulders. To shrug it off, his mind leapt ahead to the library. An almost warm satisfaction suffused him as he calculated how many books he had already got through.

The librarian gave him a vague "Good morning, Mr Temple," as though not quite aware of him. But that was the way of librarians the world over. Surrounded by all these books they seemed to merge into the background of the worn dust jackets. Jonathan smiled a thin smile at the thought.

He could feel the cold oozing out of him as he walked into the body of the library: a little less rapidly than usual, but he hardly noticed. The lights looked sick in the premature gloom of the reluctant day. But he was blind to that too. As he walked slowly in amongst the books he realised, with a quickening of his pulse, that he had finished another whole section. Today would be the start of not just another book but another subject. A childlike cocktail of pride and excitement filled him briefly.

He was turning towards the next set of latticed shelves when he saw an old stack of books from the corner of his eye. Two small shelves, framed by wood instead of the regulation steel of the rest of the library. Lucky he had seen them or his rule would have been broken. He blinked towards them. The light was bad there; no doubt why he had nearly missed them. No matter – he would carry the next book into the carrels where it was warm and light. Fifth row, third from the left, unless some oaf ignorantly got there before him. Not too far in, but far enough so that he could read without being disturbed by passers by. People often passed that way, looking no doubt for the S – Z section of historical fiction. But Jonathan had read all those books several years ago.

The first book in the wooden shelves made even Jonathan quail slightly at its sheer size. Not for the first time, he heard the voice of some imp suggest that he move on, miss this one out. But again he knew that it couldn't be done. He had read every single book from cover to cover so far. Even "Set in Monotype Garamond" and "Copyright subsists". A single deviation from his plan would have made the whole thing worthless. And, after all, large books like this were a challenge, a landmark, a feather in his self-made cap.

He was breathing heavily when he finally got back to row five desk three. The book was much heavier than he had thought. His coat was hemming him in, and as he peeled it off and sat down, a sudden wave of dizziness poured over him. He gripped the wooden surface of the carrel tightly as though to stop himself falling. The spasm passed almost instantly, and he breathed again, blotting his forehead with his immaculate handkerchief. These things happen. Perfectly normal though. Something to do with balance and the inner ear. He took out his reading glasses and opened the book.

The title stood out in an unusual typeface, particularly striking as the page was otherwise blank: no author, no subtitle, none of the usual clutterings common to title pages. The title that leapt out at him was “The Book of a Life.” And when he turned the next page, it started straight in to the text. That is, if text was the word...Jonathan read the first few pages with growing bewilderment. It was like reading in a foreign language where occasional recognition glimmered for a second, only to be submerged the next by meaningless chatter.

What little Jonathan could make out seemed to be descriptions of images, but in a violent and novel form. He sighed. It looked like a particularly distressing case of “experimental writing”. He found himself wishing that the author had chosen another art form: music perhaps, or drawing pictures in the sand. A Native American Indian tribe used to do that, he recalled from a book in the Anthropology section. Something about the impermanence of their art reflecting the transitory nature of their lives. No fools, those Indians.

Jonathan struggled on. He had arrived at the first examples of (attempted) dialogue. Again, meaning eluded him for several pages, but then a flash seemed to illuminate the darkness. It was like some hack writer’s portrayal of a baby’s first words.

He sighed again. Here we go, he thought, more stream of consciousness. And there he was, thinking he’d finished with all that after the Modern Novel. Still, nothing to do but plough on. A marginal clarity had emerged, and the book certainly couldn’t get any worse. He glanced down at the sheer weight of pages under his right hand and felt sure that even the most aggressive Modern Novelist couldn’t keep up this stuff for that long.

Jonathan’s patience seemed to be rewarded. Imperceptibly, as the pages passed, the descriptions of objects and happenings took on a more recognisable quality. As the writing toned down, Jonathan even understood one or two things that had mystified him earlier. Light through windows, for example, described almost entirely by its effect on other things. Even then it came across closer to a roaring waterfall than the pulling of a curtain. Again that flash of insight, and Jonathan saw, if only for a moment, exactly what the author meant. Grudgingly, he had to admit it was good. And the style was certainly original, even if not easy to get into. He kept on reading.

A pattern began to emerge with the relaxed ease of an evening sunset drawing itself in over the sea. As the title said, the book was the story of a life. Quite an uneventful life. It was now clear that the book was following the history of a boy, but in incredible detail. Simply nothing seemed to have been left out.

Jonathan looked at his watch. Three hours, one hundred pages, and two years had passed. Wasn’t all this rather a waste of time and effort – in fact, a prodigious waste – on the part of the unknown writer? So many things in life, as this book made apparent, were entirely purposeless. Yet it was becoming more and more difficult to stand back from the

book in this way. It seemed to draw him into it by some process quite divorced from its mundane subject matter.

Yes, he had to admit, he'd got the hook. Perhaps it was the very originality of the book...but no, it was more than that. Like so much great art, it had the feeling of the familiar. Jonathan remembered working his way through colour plates of Rembrandt in the Art section. He had felt a sense of recollection that was almost painfully poignant at times; yet Rembrandt had been just a name to him before he began to go to the library.

But such reflections slipped away from him as the book, planted immovably in the middle of the desk, called him back. He read on into early childhood: the unshakeable *reality* of that time, when a day seemed to last a week, packed with energy and events so that sleep came swiftly, wrapped in the cosy womb of bright colours and soft toys. The losing of time and space as taking out a few toy cars or tin soldiers swept the carpet away and replaced it with the dust-dry desert trailing into a Wild West town, or a battlefield drenched in valour and desperate heroics. The braggadocio of young boys together. The sudden, world-ending squalls of tears. The dreams that whirled in the head, rooted in bewildered acceptance. The first wide-eyed curiosities: sun through a butterfly's wings, pebbles dropped into a pond, sharp hearing, sharp smells, a black and white world. Peace.

He left the library in the late afternoon, surprised at having to drag himself away from the book. He replaced it carefully in its dark shelf, his mind still wandering down byways he had thought closed forever.

Over the next few days Jonathan kept on reading, an unbroken routine. Mealtimes were scanty and he usually missed lunch altogether so that he could stay with the book. He hurried out of the house in the morning, oblivious or nearly of the dull ache that dogged him. At the end of the day he would read until the final bell to clear the building sounded before walking home dreamily.

It was hard to say exactly when the thought began to form in his head. What was clear was that, for the last two days, he had deliberately kept himself from acknowledging its truth. The strangest feeling had accompanied these mental jugglings, part horror and part ecstasy, two emotions that lay on each other like oil on water yet were somehow linked. He knew why he had put the thought from him: it was as if, by admitting it, the book would fade away like some gossamer and he would be left with nothing. But now, flushed with a strange joy, he could face the truth: the book was his story. Not like it, but exactly it. He was reading the story of his own life.

His reading had acquired over the years a precision, neither skimming nor dragging but swift and efficient. But now he read as slowly as if reading were an act of praise. He knew now that he would meet Sylvia again in the pages of this impossible and wondrous book, and this pulled him on slowly, not wanting to miss a single thought or glance.

The day came, and the building, always shadowy, was stripped away in a single sweep as he read on like some holy man at his devotions. It was thirty years ago and yesterday that he met her, their eyes meeting across the cramped sea of faces with neither dropping their gaze. The minute detail of the book, which once seemed so inconsequential, he now relished through his tears of joy. Everything was charged with immense and crazy significance. He was childishly proud of his body again, proud also of her place beside him when they entered a pub for a snack on a summer drive. He lived again the heady optimism and charged aliveness that whirled them drunkenly faster than

wine. Single days by the sea were bathed in gold and seemed to stand outside of time. A frame of him sitting and looking out across the water as she slept beside him filled pages. He saw the pale shine of her eyes in the darkness lit by the stars through the window of the flat. Everything before and after was a parade of ghosts. Only for these few years was Jonathan Temple really himself.

When he left the library that night he literally jumped at the reflection of his worn features in the glass doors. He wanted to call out, impostor! but it was true. The real Jonathan had died thirty years ago. This other held no reality for him.

He felt weak the next day and left half his breakfast egg. It was a rule broken, and he felt bad about that. But it was the thought of what was waiting for him in the book that day which sapped his strength and took away his appetite rather than the icy grip on his bones.

He read quickly through the account of Sylvia's death, trying to avoid hurting himself again as little as possible. And in fact it was not so hard; the brief golden years which had warmed him over the last two days were already cold.

After Sylvia's death, Jonathan's life seemed, as he read, to revert to what it had been before. But now that existence was revealed for what it was, hollow and worthless. It was like the stark ruin of a monastery compared to the living place of worship it had once been.

The years and the pages passed with surprising quickness after that. The six months after the funeral in particular seemed almost without event. Then it was that Jonathan had hit on the plan that had saved his life. His later reading of the Psychology and Physiology sections made him feel that that was not putting it too strongly. His will to live had all but gone, he saw that now: Jonathan had put a new ambition in its place. The library had given him a new goal, one that had lasted for many years and had the potential for many more. He kept on reading, and the last few years zipped past. Then, when he retired, the library had really come into its own.

He was shocked to see how set in his ways he had become. Up at the same time every morning, into the library, read the next book, shop in the afternoon (although not recently), home in the evening and a simple meal before bed. He began to wonder whether his plan had really kept him alive, in any meaningful sense, after all. Had he not instead been turned into a reading machine?

The years continued to slip effortlessly past. He was reading slowly again now, and a trepidation was creeping over him. With the one great highlight of his life gone, what lay ahead? He got up abruptly and walked away.

In the cloakroom of the library was an automatic coffee machine. Jonathan drank coffee and sat on a bench, not hearing the sounds of traffic and voices around him. Surprising how weak he felt. The coffee tasted funny, too. But it was no good. He should be reading. He had to finish the book.

He sat down again in the carrel. The book sat as he had left it. His coffee steamed beside him, untouched. He felt bowed down by a heavy weight, but began to read where he had stopped. Now he was nearly up to the present. He gave a start as he saw on the page below him:

"Jonathan awoke. Overnight, a dull ache had settled into the joints of his bones that now objected whenever he moved. Frowning, he raised himself up on one elbow to look through the bedroom window. Yesterday's crisp winter sun had been replaced by a

chilling mist. For a moment he was tempted to stay indoors, but that would have broken his rule. He got up.”

He got up himself after reading that and stood for a moment in a helpless inertia, afraid to stay and read on and afraid to go and not read. His will though seemed to have slipped from him in that act of standing, and he sank back again, still reading, slumped over the book like an alcoholic his last bottle.

The words stood off the page at him as he lived once again through the last few days. He saw from the outside his interior joy and happiness – although now it seemed less joyful than before.

And now he had caught up to the present. He was mirrored alive, fear shining in his eyes through the pallor of his face. He could feel himself waiting to see what would happen. With a final wrench he tried to shut the book, get up and walk away from the whole bad dream; but just as his fingers closed around the left-hand pages, his eyes like thieves flitted on to the next paragraph:

“With a final wrench he tried to shut the book, get up and walk away from the whole bad dream; but just as his fingers closed around the left-hand pages, his eyes like thieves flitted on to the next paragraph....”

He closed his eyes. When he opened them, all resistance had left him. He sat in the carrel, an old man in the fading afternoon light, the massive book before him like a great stone. And he kept on reading: “He kept on reading he kept on reading he kept on reading he kept on reading....”