

Unputdownable

When you begin reading a book, you create a new universe in which that book's contents are taking place. Starting a new book is always a bit of a wrench. You have to give up a bit of your being to allow that world to come into existence. But it's worth it (most of us feel that), you get more being back than you put in, if it's a good book; after all the writer gave hugely of his/her being to create it (you'd think).

This explains things. The pull of a book you're reading. Especially near the end. You can't bear to leave that other world unresolved, in tension. You want to give that world the wholeness it deserves by finishing it. Here the metaphysicians of reading differ. Some believe the separate world ceases to exist. It has been completed and returns to the uncreated state from which your energy wrenched it. But surely something so perfect and whole cannot just disappear? It must persist. Freed from the reader's mind as soon as she moves on to the next book, it moves on in space and time, completely free.

There's a downside (bound to be, always). Books you don't finish – they're limbos. I know this, this isn't theory – I've seen them. Worlds in which characters are endlessly stranded. History books in which events never play out, cannot be made sense of. Those popular science texts in which theories are never induced from the array of evidence. Most poignant are the autobiographies. Impotent copies of their own authors, unable to progress to a point at which they can say yes, it was worth it; whatever happened got me here. Who is to blame? The reader for abandoning them there? Yes, of course. The writer for not having the skill to coerce closure? Equally, yes.

Each world is individual to its reader. Just imagine all those teenage part-readings of *Lord of the Rings*. Childishly imagined characters (not Tolkein's fault – just the immaturity of the reader) stranded at The Prancing Pony because the poor child lacked the stamina to continue. There's hope for them, of course. You come back to the book. Older, wiser – the characters now bear the wisdom of your suffering also. Suddenly, Bilbo's disappearing act seems more understandable. And as you move through the book your first childish thrill about the magic ring, now shadowed by experience, recolours everything several shades darker. You like Gollum. The novel is finished. Quiescence, peace.

But not everyone is so compassionate. Many cast unfinished books aside, never dreaming of the torment they cause.

I am the cure. Well, not a cure as much as a punishment. Vengeance even. Let me tell you a bit about myself.

The book is dark in colour. On the back cover there's no blurb. Just one word in quotation marks – “unputdownable”. You can't see from here where this quotation is from. Watching someone reading it you might toy with some of the following scenarios. One: the reviewer, herself an eminent novelist, unsparingly giving due credit to a rival writer, despite personal animosity. Two: totally out of context – the reviewer actually wrote “no one could say this book was unputdownable” before enumerating a formidable catalogue of errors in research, grammatical infelicities and just plain poor story-telling. Three: a stupid hack who hasn't even read the thing – paying back a pal in the trade for a particularly fine lunch.

Still, you're curious. It's infuriating to not know what it is. So gratifying to see someone reading something one has read oneself. Or perhaps to get a tip on something new and hot – “saw a guy reading this on the train, never heard of it, bought it, read it, absolutely fantastic”. Another possibility (if you like) the superior feeling of watching some imbecile devouring a book you consider “trash”.

Lucky for you he didn't drop it on the train. But like it says, it's unputdownable.

He found it in a book-sale. Summer fair, country churchyard. Trestle tables, paperbacks in irresistible profusion. He looked below the tables at more full boxes. A moment of fury – what if there was something in one of those he really wanted? Why aren't all the books out at once? Why should these ones wait to fill the spaces vacated by the sold? Senseless. He picked the book up and handed it over. The old dear demanded 50p and put it in a nondescript paper bag. His wife muttered something like: “Haven't you got enough on the go?” She was ignored. He put the book in the back of the car. He hadn't actually read a line of it yet. But it intrigued him.

The following morning he walked to the station, as normal. Well, not quite. Don't think he's walked along reading a book since he was a teenager. He got on to his train, reading, reading. What's it about? Please don't disturb, I'm reading.

He lost his job a few days later. The guy isn't doing any work – every time you come to speak to him he's reading. He's reading all through lunch. He's silent or monosyllabic.

His wife left him shortly after that.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just let me finish this paragraph.” He doesn’t come to bed. When he does come up, he lies face down, the book on his pillow. He reads, his head nods, he wakes up like that.

“I’m going away for a couple of days, George. Call me when you finish your book.” He doesn’t notice the acid in her voice. He reads on the toilet, always did that anyway. He doesn’t wash – can’t get the book wet. You can read in the bath, but actually washing and drying yourself is impossible. He eats things you can eat with one hand, and prepare without actually putting the book down. He takes his contact lenses out with the book between his knees. He does a surprising number of things with the book tucked under his arm. He realises he doesn’t really need his lenses in anyway. He’s very dirty. He needs some air. He seems to be reading the same page over and over. He’s beginning to experience that strange feeling you can get near the end of a book you love. You actually don’t want to finish it because then you will no longer be living there, breathing the same air as those characters. He’s walking. He walks out under the wheels of a car. He dies quite soon after that. You comfort the driver. Not your fault. I saw it all. He walked straight out in front of you. Didn’t look, head in a book I think! How thoughtless! Lucky it was only him killed. He’s dirty. Look at his clothes! A weirdo. So selfish – you’ll carry this with you always now. Not your fault though. Car damaged much? Where’s that book? I’ll chuck it in the bin. Better not though, in case the police, y’know, need it for evidence.