# not drowning, reading

Despite a reading and writing disability in childhood, Andrew Relph understood that reading was fundamental to his emotional survival, and that in literature lay his consolation and salvation.

This extraordinary series of essays reveals a life via the books the author has encountered, and shows how one might chart a course through reading.

From Amis to Bellow, Blake to Gallico, and Shakespeare to Woolf, these essays ask why it is that our relationships with authors and their characters can be as valuable as any we form in 'real life'.

This is a memoir about the art, and the gift, of reading.

# about the author

Andrew Relph is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist who lives and works in Perth. *Not Drowning, Reading* is his first book.

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# not drowning, reading

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# the stolen child

*Come away, O human child!*
*To the waters and the wild*
*With a faery, hand in hand,*
*For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*
– W.B. Yeats, 'The Stolen Child'

## I

Ireland. Here lay the consolation of the land itself. I had always somehow known that in this place the very soil would be sympathetic.

The Dingle Peninsula is approached from across the water. It is first sighted by the visitor approaching from the south-east across the broad bay of the same name. Through mist or driving rain, the late afternoon sunlight can make the finger of land stretching out towards America appear as in a dream. So it was, that late September day. I saw it through the windscreen wipers, through the rain,

and through sunlight that reflected sharply off the ocean. Through the thousand shimmering tears, I saw the low green hills, dreamlike, suspended between grey sky and grey ocean.

The town was small and banked up on the bay as if it had been washed there by a particularly high tide. By the time we had explored the harbour, the rain had stopped and darkness had begun to settle quietly over the strand. The buildings of the town were losing their colour and the lights were coming on. The house where we would stay was barely fifteen minutes drive away. First we would have dinner in town.

The restaurant was yellow with light and noisy with people as we entered. I was dimly aware of the protest contained in the signs and menus that were written in Irish. I asked the waiter about it and she said that in this settlement the official language was Irish. English, it seemed, was tolerated.

In the black night, we navigated the four miles to the house. It was illuminated only by the dim light over the front door. To me it was unexpectedly modern in its construction. The tourist office in Dublin had said it was on castle lands and I had impulsively asked them to book a room. Shown upstairs with our heavy suitcases, we were soon in bed; weary travellers with a day full of sensations. When the lights were out, I lay on my back retracing our journey. It was a night when the air itself seemed black.

Four hours later I awoke from a dream and everything had changed. The curtains were illuminated from without. The careless gap between the drapes sent a skein of

colourless light across the end of the bed. I pulled myself up on my elbows, orienting myself. Ireland, yes; Dingle, yes; the bed and breakfast. And the light? Unmistakably the full moon at its zenith. My chest and scalp felt swollen and tingling with sensation. I had become sharply awake, as if primitively I knew instant action was required. I sat peering from the headboard, arrested by the moonlight on the mountain peaks of my feet and, next to me, the sleeping form of my companion. My body was oddly still, in comparison to my mind, which urgently clung first to the emotion and then to the images from which I'd woken.

I had been at the base of a medieval scaffolding set up to execute people. Hanging or burning perhaps. A large wooden tower formed the centre of the platform and, around this, with their hands linked together, were women. Were they chained together? Yes, chained. Their hands? No, their waists, where their dresses narrowed then bulged. They were holding hands as in a country dance in an outward facing circle. (Had I, sometime before, seen a clock-tower contraption that played a tune on the hour with a miniature stage on which country women danced in an outward facing circle, smiling?) In the dream, it seemed there were two or three ranks of women arranged around the central post. They looked out to where I watched, in a crowd of onlookers. They were not smiling; they were crying.

This scene of grief was vivid. In my ears still was a sound of unbearable pain. The women were wailing, plaintive and beautiful; almost sweetly. As they wept, they rocked backwards and forwards slowly with each other and with

the sound. I tried to recapture the words. Strange words, ancient Irish words. Surprised, I realised I had understood them. They were crying for the lost people. *'It's you, it's you must go and I must bide.'* The children, the young soldiers, the women in childbirth, the starved, the revolutionaries, the alcoholics. The collective grief was swelling and dying. Tears were falling onto the soil at my feet and the air was full of sadness. Now I was shaking and rocking on the bed and the weeping was now in my chest. The words were in my head: something must be done about the grief of the Irish people.

Something must be done about my grief.

The floor was cold on my feet as I walked across the room and with both hands parted the curtains. Opening the double windows with the single catch, I looked out onto the ruins of a small castle less than fifty metres away. We had not seen it in the darkness of our arrival. Now, the light was bright and the night was terribly quiet. The moss-covered walls were irregularly decayed, the masonry seemed to be resisting being taken back into the earth. All around, stretching out on the low hills and down to the ocean, the air was cool and sad. It lay like a mantle of moonlit mourning. I was conscious of it lying across many generations. This was cultural despair; here was a geographic grief. I could feel in myself a merging sympathy. Was that in my chest or was it in the air? I stood unclothed, brave in the night air as one can be when one is still warm from bed. There, breathing in the night light, entranced by the vision of the ruin I'd not seen before, and still straining to hear the dregs of the sad singing, I began to experience the relief that comes from

shared and recognised pain.

This was a beginning; the start of consolation.

To take back that weeping child who had been stolen. To resist the longed-for comfort of others: the women who would cry for me; the land that would be green and soaked with tears; and the people who would sing sad songs for the child who would never be soothed. Let the aching subside rather than have it define me. Take back my own childhood and care for it myself. True consolation is internal. True consolation takes courage and responsibility. Only now, accepting this responsibility, could I understand that the source of my sadness was not only the unresponsiveness of those who had cared for me as a child. There was a deeper well of grief that was not mine; it was my mother's I'd spent my life experiencing for her. It had happened because she had neglected her grief and, in the moment of greatest pain shied away.

## I I

I had garnered the story from my reluctant parents. It was the year before I was born that Howard had got sick. My mother had been a nurse; she'd interrupted her training to marry my father. Together they had three healthy children in quick succession. Gifts from God, they said. They had joked about the first two boys; the first was hers and the second, his. The girl that came next seemed strangely to belong to neither of them, at least not as strongly as the boys.

Howard, the second boy, died a little after his second

birthday. It was so quick that no one could comprehend what had happened.

In the morning he was playing happily with his brother. They had a spot in the dirt, at the side of the house, where they spent time with blocks of wood and buckets and trikes. In the afternoon, Howard was suddenly sick, very sick, and she'd taken him to the doctor. Yes, he had a high temperature and seemed to be in pain. It was Saturday, specialists were difficult to get hold of and the hospital would mean a long wait; it would be uncomfortable for them both. Why not take him home, tepid sponge him? She'd learnt how to do that in nursing college; keep an eye on him till tomorrow.

Tomorrow he was dead. He had worsened during the night and become weak. My father said he'd got up to the little boy in that darkest of nights and seen his life was draining away. They'd driven him to the hospital and within half an hour the doctor had come out with the terrible news. Fifteen hours before, he'd had his last go on his little blue trike. It was still there, abandoned in the driveway.

The day of the funeral she was composed and distant. After the ceremony she told her husband and her mother that the Lord had spoken to her. He had taken little Howard to be his servant. He would be an angel in the heavenly realm. His purpose would be greater than any earthly purpose. She must not be sad; she must open her hands to God and let her child go.

In the weeks that followed, my father emerged out of the shock into a terrible grief which, from time to time for the rest of his life, would overwhelm him. At the same time, my mother found inspiration in religion. She told her husband

over and over, as if reading from a shopping list, it had been God's will that little Howard had been taken from them. As she glowed with this sacrifice, her grief was aborted. In her prayers she whispered that she identified with Mary and the loss of her son to God for the fulfilment of a wonderful plan. She sang hymns of praise, while my father could not listen to 'Danny Boy' without leaving the room, his face congested with unacknowledged tears. He could not bear the loneliness of his own grief. He could not yet allow himself the violent anger he felt in response to these strange and distant ideas into which his wife had fallen.

But God had not taken her grief away. She had fiercely excised it from her heart and refused to let it into her thoughts. Everyone seemed to idolise her for her Christian virtue. Wasn't it wonderful she could hand her grief over to God? In fact, she'd handed it over to a magical new life stirring within her. I had come to be conceived in this strange climate of grief, anger and religious perversion.

When another boy was born, my father's grief was partly assuaged. 'He can be a replacement for our little Howardie,' he said. But her distant smile conveyed to him, as it always did, a kind of absence. Something had always been missing for her. It had made in her a deep detachment which, while felt by those close by, was seldom seen by others.

Yet, there was genuine excitement in her voice one evening when my father came in from work. 'He's got a God-given gift,' she said, and he was pleased that she'd found something to love in the infant whose eyes always were looking, searching. 'Yes,' she said, 'this morning I had the terrible pain again. I was lying down. He started crying in

his crib. I picked him up and held him above me and his feet touched my sternum where the pain was greatest. It was miraculous, do you understand? His feet were hot, really hot, and as they touched me the pain vanished. I think he's got healing feet!' Though taken aback, my father was outwardly enthusiastic. But his mind went darkly to his lost love, his son. For my mother, my dandling feet were truly a gift. The pain was in her chest. It was the only manifestation of the grief she could not bear. But, for the young boy, it became my burden. My mother's grief became my grief. It was why I watched her so carefully. I was looking for something that had no outward sign.

## III

A great tide had been held back. A powerful wall had been erected, buttressed by the pronouncements of God himself. When, as a young child, I first began to experience emotion I could feel it sweeping over me, inundating me with unreasoning sadness. Nor could this strange inner force be understood or contained in the usual ways of parenting.

Sleeping during daylight was particularly bad for me as a child. That little death, which some people develop a liking for, became, later, something to be avoided. Tiredness overcame me easily; and I would go to sleep, but when I awoke I would be covered with despair. I would run wildly, tears coursing down my face, to my mother and spend several minutes sobbing, my face buried in her skirt. It was fortunate I had no inkling then that she, the comforter,

was the source of this emotional tumult. Children are pragmatic, as all animals are; I simply learnt never to sleep during the day.

Recognising the sadness in me created a sort of bond between mother and son. When she realised I loved being read to, she did so frequently but often from books which nurtured my unhappiness. She would read, I would cry, and she could experience in *me* what she could not in herself.

My memories of the daily events of my childhood are much less full and fluent than of the stories that she read me. I cannot recall whether I lay next to her or sat at her feet. My experience was not of the top half of her body. I cannot recall if she wore glasses. I especially cannot recall what she did with my tears when the story became too sad for me. But I do know that she continued to read, and often the stories were sad. Did she select sad stories to read to me or have I selected them from the stories we shared?

I remember *The Snow Goose*. My mother first read me Paul Gallico's story when I was eight or nine. She may have read it to me again later. My child's mind wanted the same things repeated; and there was, now I recall, a vinyl record that dramatised the story and which I wept to hear whenever I played it to myself. Later, as a young adult, I read the story again. What was it that so captured my mind? I can still see and smell the saltmarshes where the disfigured man lived, away from people, in the abandoned lighthouse. I can still picture Rhayader the man and Frith the girl who brought to him the injured snow goose. Most of all I can see, not so much in memory, but as a part of me, the large white bird with black wingtips. I see her soaring upwards as she

takes to the sky after her wing mended, dwarfing the figures on the ground. I don't have to read it now to remember the words that passed between them:

*'Look! Look! The Princess! Be she going away?'*

*Rhayader stared into the sky at the climbing specks. 'Ay,' he said, unconsciously dropping into her manner of speech. 'The Princess is going home. Listen! she is bidding us farewell.'*

This scene, and the two people, defined me. The big-breasted bird, soaring, defined me. This was not a daydream stimulated by some pattern in the curtains of my bedroom. Here, I was entering a world, fully formed. It seemed more vivid than the room where I sat or the suburb where I lived. I now realise how much I longed to be somewhere else and how my mind's eye was, even then, more real than the world around me. But there was another reason why this story had me in its thrall. I was learning about emotions. Those associated with the bonds between people gripped my young heart and hurt it again and again. People? Yes, and animals. I made no distinction between my family and my dog, the birds in the aviary, and the two tortoises. So, Frith's and Rhayader's connection to the Princess and how that connected them to each other and to the world of suffering, was instantly recognisable to me. I was Frith's age. The love, and with it the pain, of the unfolding drama between the goose, the man, the girl and the world at war, gave me connection. The story didn't cause me such waves of grief and sadness so much as it allowed me their expression.

What had I lost? What death in my family? What war? At the time I was puzzled as I drifted in the misery unable to disentangle the sadness or liberate personal from historical grief. None of it was explicit. The minister on Sundays would have seen a regular sort of family; but I was going home to play the record of *The Snow Goose* again, and to look out of the window and up into the grey sky and let the tears run ceaselessly down my cheeks.