

NOT DROWNING, READING ANDREW RELPH

ABOUT THE BOOK

Not Drowning, Reading is Andrew Relph's conversation with the reader about how the act of reading and how his own relationship with books have been his salvation. Growing up with a reading disability, he nonetheless knew that within books lay great consolation. The act of learning to read, as difficult as it was, was a life-affirming, even life-saving, necessity.

Using his relationships with different authors or characters encountered across time – such as Martin Amis, Virginia Woolf and Saul Bellow's Herzog – *Not Drowning, Reading* creates a space for the reader to reflect upon the meaning of books in their own lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

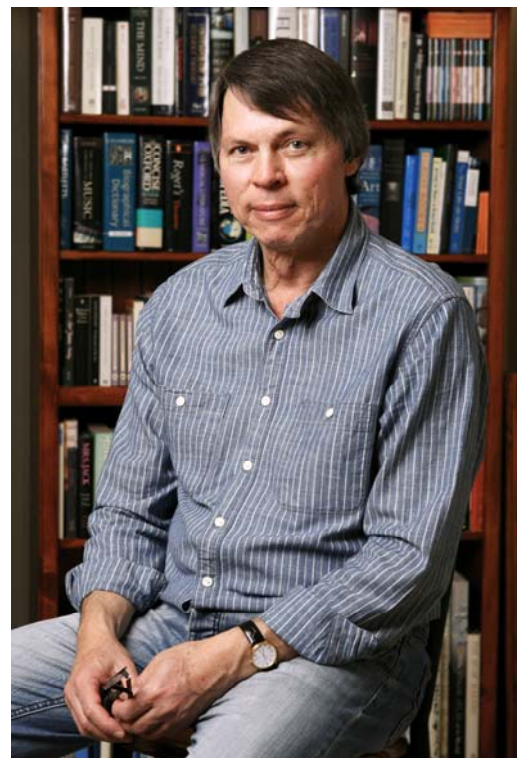
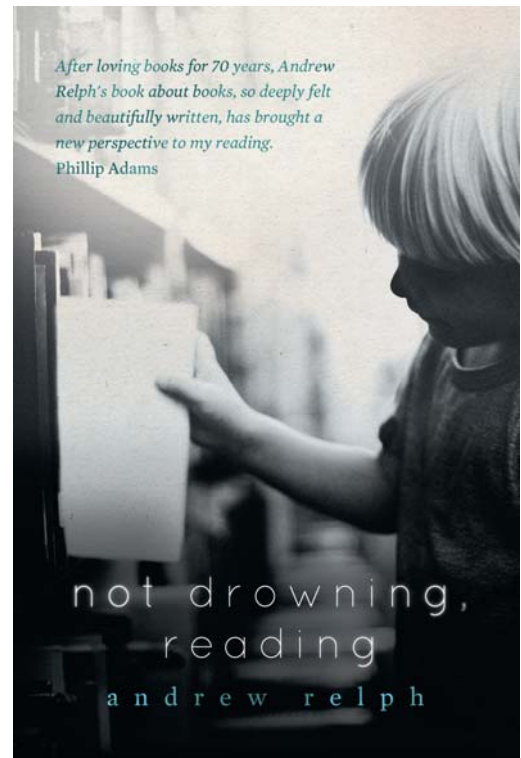
Andrew Relph is a psychologist and psychotherapist. By vocation and by disposition, he often assumes the role of conversationalist, interactions which are highly attentive, highly attuned and carefully guided; their intended outcome is that the other participant in the conversation might come to reflect on themselves and on their life patterns with greater clarity and self-understanding.

It is also possible for books to enable this kind of conversation, and to create this kind of effect of self-clarification in the reader. Through the act of reading, the reader participates in a potential relationship with a book, its author, or its characters, and as a result of this relationship something within the reader has the opportunity to shift or expand or change.

SOME THOUGHTS FROM THE AUTHOR

The writing in this book attempts to open up a conversation between me and the reader. Perhaps book club notes can attempt to move the writer 'into the room' with the reader where even more thoughts can be opened up, more questions asked. The book is the beginning point of a conversation between writer and reader; these notes might be beginning points for conversations between readers.

Even if one reads a good many books, only some are memorable. Of the memorable ones, only some could be said to alter the person you are or the direction you take in life. In *Not Drowning, Reading* I wrote about some examples from my reading life, and when I'd finished I realised there were some really important ones I'd left out. Some of these I made reference to in the book without deep analysis – *Moby-Dick*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Joke* are examples of books in this category; Joseph Conrad and Milan Kundera are examples of authors. Some of these were left on the editorial floor



because they didn't fit with the way the book took shape. There once was a chapter, for example, on the woman who read T.S. Eliot in a voice which made that remote poet alive to me; and there was a chapter on Walt Whitman about how I learnt to think about poetry, but already my devotion to W.H. Auden and other poets had threatened to make it a book focused particularly on poetry, which it wasn't.

In the course of writing this book I also wondered about why it was that some of the relationship effect seemed at some times to be mediated through a book – the whole ensemble as it were – and at other times through a character and still other times through an author.

Because I was writing about my reading history, I came to talk more about it with other people, and I only realised then how different I was from some others in how I read. I explored that difference in writing the book and probably found it greater not less.

I've assumed that how people read, like how people relate, is more individual than collective, yet my job as a psychologist always pushes me in the direction of the collective and my job as a psychotherapist always pushes me towards the individual. (Psychology is a nomothetic science, and psychotherapy the idiographic art). Which is why I describe myself as both. So with the activity of reading I've got half an eye on how everyone reads and the continuums on which we might put people, and half an eye on the entirely unique way each individual reads any particular poem or book.

So, ought we to read everything with the same kind of intensity and therefore select quite carefully what we read? Or should we have various reading styles? Should we give up on books that don't suit us and how soon should we abandon them? I realise now that a very careful and intense way of reading is my style and not everyone's, and that understanding has made me want to experiment with different styles of reading since more flexibility and choice seem to be worthwhile.

There are at least two kinds of reflective relationships one can have: one is with a psychotherapist (at least that relationship *should* be reflective); and the other is with a work of art – music, poetry etc. As I was writing the essays I thought about the similarities and differences between these two kinds of reflective relationships. The reflective relationships are there, or are necessary, partly because family and intimate and friendship relationships don't often offer enough reflective space for the self to grow. That's what the space in the story and in the therapy room is about – a kind of remedy for the other kind of relationships which are always demanding something of one, which always have something in mind for one.

(Then I had a relationship with the editor about my book. She had something in mind for me and my book too, but she provided a lot of space as well. There's a dual process – coming up against difference helps to define the self more clearly and the space in the relationship helps to keep inventing it.)

All that put me in mind of the difference between the writer's public and their reader. The publisher has to remind the writer of their public (but writing teachers should not do this) while the writer has to keep their mind firmly on their reader who turns out to be partly the writer and partly a mythical other who will have the same experience reading the writer as the writer has had being read by an author or by a psychotherapist.

Development is a curiously circular process, not linear as many would have us believe. We carry in us all our previous selves and all our previous relationships: the child, the teenager, the young lover, the ambitious adult, the muddled middle-aged and also all the people who were intimately with us at each of those times.

Books are a good example or metaphor for this circular process because unlike the difficulty of real relationships having to adjust to the two changing people, the book, a really good one, catches up to where one is at any point in one's life. *Sons and Lovers*, *Hamlet*, *Madame Bovary*, *Moby-Dick*, *Herzog* are some that have done that for me where relationships would not have been able to.

And that raises a question: do one's memorable books have to be classics or from the canon? Well no, for me that has nearly been true but then along

came *The Man From Snowy River*, *The Snow Goose* and the book my own mother wrote, and that made it clear that it is the relationship which is key. Perhaps the classics are so, precisely because they have this capacity to move along with us as we circle around in our development.

I'd like to raise the issue of authenticity too. Something about the shield of the novel and the frankness of the essay. Some writers seem to hide themselves behind the fiction of a novel while others remain authentically themselves while writing fiction. Essays usually reveal the author undisguised, naked, brave. I would be surprised if anybody wanted to know anything more about me as a person after reading my book and I would hope that instead they were directed to themselves as persons and readers. Memoir usually comes at the beginning or the end of an author's writing career. (Though Martin Amis' came in the middle.) At those points the memoir writer is too young and narcissistic to sense the other's critical eye, or too old and resigned to worry about what people may think. Whether a novel or non-fiction, there is an authenticity in the writing which is there in all the important books I've had a relationship with – what Bellow calls 'the real thing'.

Some questions from the author's editor

- At one time, the author says, he went around asking people what three books were most important to them in their life so far. Is it possible to make a list of one's most important books? What makes them important? What would be your top three, and why? Has your list changed over time? Is it possible to see how these books have meaning for you on your path on the circular process of development?
- What is the effect of reading the same book across time? How is it that we see different things in a book at different times? Is it because there is a difference in ourselves?
- Have you ever come across the right book at the right time? Is this as serendipitous as it sounds, or do we ourselves need to be open, searching, in the way that we open and enter into a book?
- Have you ever felt indebted to an author or a character?
- Generally, is your strongest relationship with the author or the character, or to the story itself? Or does this depend on the book itself?