



InSight



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Call Me Pollyanna

Sometimes a steady diet of society's woes – from elder financial abuse to gun violence – such as we often address at The Commonwealth Club and about which I sometimes reflect in this column, can get a little too serious both for me as a writer and for you as readers. So this column will focus on a lighter topic: literary fiction.

I am an avid reader and have been since a very young age. I devour books, particularly literature, in part because I read quickly. When I was in high school, after being measured through some sort of reading comprehension test, one of our English teachers asked me to join a "competitive speed reading team," for which he was the faculty advisor. After I got over my surprise that such a thing existed, I decided that in fact I did not want to spend my time on competitive speed reading, and politely informed the teacher. He was miffed for some time afterwards.

Nonetheless, I have been blessed with the ability to zip through books at a rapid rate. I have always had trouble keeping enough reading material in the house to satisfy my appetite, even after ordering books online became possible. So, as you can imagine, my reaction to the era of the e-book reader has been like that of the proverbial kid in the candy store. I find the ability to download a new book on my Kindle, whether I am up in the mountains, awake in the middle of the night, or in a relative's home in Italy, amazing and wonderful.

Yet I find myself reacting with distaste to the characters in many of the novels I read these days. I tire of a steady diet of people who are violent, crazy, sadistic or otherwise ethically compromised. As much as I love Michael Chabon's work, and loved being able to read about familiar territory in his recent novel *Telegraph Avenue*, virtually all of the characters were deeply flawed people. Cheating on their spouses, murdering, lying – it's not just that I don't personally know people of this sort, but it's ultimately depressing to spend hours in the company of such folk.

While understanding the importance of realism in literature and portraying all aspects of the human condition, I find myself asking, "Are these people whose lives and exploits are worth studying? Do I really want to spend my time with these people?" Increasingly,

my answer, is "no," and I sometimes stop reading a book before finishing because, even if the writing is good, I cannot stand any more tediously negative events, people or dialogue.

My current favorite novelist is Alexander McCall Smith, the Scottish writer, ethicist, legal scholar and musician who writes *The #1 Ladies' Detective Agency* and several other series of novels that are lighthearted and offer thoughtful moral observations. While darkness is certainly present in his work, it is not a main focus, and the protagonists are good people. He has a light touch, and he writes with considerable humor. It seems as though authors who are able to tell a positive story, and bring a sunny touch to their work, are increasingly rare.

One of the most wonderful aspects of having e-book downloads at one's fingertips, though, is the ability to browse widely through thousands of books and encounter literature beyond those works that are presently the most popular. Looking through Amazon.com's "under \$3.99" Kindle Books recently, I downloaded a novel of which I had never heard, *What Love Sees*, an early work by Susan Vreeland, the author of the popular novel *The Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. And I found an unexpectedly joyful story. It was an amazing, fact-based tale of a wealthy young Connecticut woman, Jean Treadway, who was blinded in a riding accident in her teens in the 1920s. One of the first recipients of a seeing-eye dog, in 1944 she married a young California man, Forest Holly, who had been blinded in his teens in a football accident. She (and her dog) went to live with him on his family's hard-scrabble ranch in the remote settlement of Ramona in San Diego County.

There, both totally blind, they raised a family of four sighted children, raised cattle and rode horses, grew a garden, built a home, did all their house and ranch chores themselves, and started a successful construction company, which began with the hand production of adobe bricks on their land. They supported themselves financially, were involved in the community, and lived a life of adventure that sighted people rarely experience. The book is full of wonderful and honest vignettes of their life together, both its struggles and successes.

Call me Pollyanna, but when I finished the book, I had a sense of joy at having spent some hours with these remarkable people. ☺

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