

Voracious

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There was a time in my childhood when I had an insatiable appetite for books and apples. I preferred consuming them simultaneously, the enjoyment of each heightening the other. The fruit bowl on our kitchen table invariably contained those iconic British eating apples, Cox's Orange Pippins—small, firm apples with orange-streaked skin and rich, honey-tart flesh. Every Christmas, my parents laid in a twenty-pound cardboard box, which sat in the pantry emitting a tantalizing fragrance. Each apple was separately wrapped in purple tissue paper and nestled on its own indentation in a layer of soft cardboard.

To this day, my memory of the texture and taste of certain apples is linked to the books I read while eating them. I was munching a sour green Bramley when I read about Jane Eyre being shut in the red room, a Cox as Lockwood wrestled with the icy hand of Cathy's ghost in *Wuthering Heights*, an English Russet as I wept over Nancy's murder in *Oliver Twist*. I look back on it now in some ways like a lost golden age, a five-year period when I read and ate apples with unselfconscious abandon, unaware that such innocent hunger wouldn't last forever.

My apprenticeship in apples began in August 1969 when my family moved from a cramped semidetached house in the London suburbs to a big, rented house at the top of a hill on the north Wales border. It was bounded by a stone wall and a holly hedge so high and thick it looked like the barrier of thorns around Sleeping Beauty's castle. The new house had a rambling garden with a small, neglected orchard of mongrel apple and pear trees. I played in their shade on a rope swing my father rigged up and tussled in the long grass with

my siblings. Already, when we moved in, there were early windfalls—small, hard, and so sour that even I couldn't finish them.

The sensory knowledge I acquired about apples in the next few years has lasted me a lifetime. I'm drawn to their heft in the hand, their tiny speckles, their crunch. An apple has substance; it's almost a portable meal. I find them satisfying because they require some serious chewing and don't vanish in the mouth. Eating an apple is noisy; it is energetic; it is—unless you peel and slice it, which I never do—messy. Afterwards, you're left with a wet core that rapidly goes an unattractive brown.

Socially, the move north was a hard one for me, at eight years old. My speech, which I'd been unaware of till then, suddenly mattered terribly. To the local kids, my Home Counties accent branded me irrevocably as an outsider, and they made it their business to communicate this by shunning, taunting, and throwing stones. School was a minefield, but on Saturday mornings, the whole day yawned and stretched comfortably ahead, with no one to make fun of me. Reading became my refuge, affording an escape into other worlds I could sample at will.

We joined the public library on arrival, but my parents were too overworked to borrow books from it, and my brother and sister were still too young. I became the keeper of the entire family's library tickets: little wallets made of light green cardboard, with each person's name on the top and lines on which the return dates were inscribed by hand. After breakfast on Saturdays, my mother would wheel out the washing machine and fill it with a hose from the sink. It roared and juddered in the middle of the kitchen as it churned a gray, soapy mass of clothes. I would take my stash of tickets and escape to the library, a five-minute walk away, opposite the Comrades Club on Victoria Street. The door had smash-proof glass panels containing wire mesh, and I had to use all my weight to push it open. The floor was covered in bumpy gray linoleum with pale streaks. There was a small children's section with low shelving and a larger, L-shaped adult section with six shelves of books on each wall, higher than my head. The librarian's desk faced the entrance; it was always the same woman, who wore hand-knit cardigans, A-line skirts, and cat-eye glasses on a gilt chain. My routine was to check out ten books for myself on Saturdays (two on each family member's ticket) and stack them precariously in our wicker shopping basket.

On the way back from the library, I would stop at the grocer's for a packet

of Kraft cheese slices and then at the greengrocer's on the square for a pound of apples in a brown paper bag. I almost always picked Coxes, with their rich, almost pear-like flavor, or else Russets, which were tawny and tough-skinned (they are known as leathercoats in the apple trade), with dry, golden flesh and an amiable, nutty flavor.

Once home, I would hole up with my bag of apples and a book in one of the cream faux leather armchairs in the sitting room and unwrap the first slice of processed cheese. My technique was to let each mouthful of cheese soften on my tongue before I took a bite of apple. I chomped through apple after apple, reading vertiginously, obsessively, until both the fruit and the books were finished, sometimes by Saturday night. I'd end up feeling dizzy and empty-handed when there was nothing left to read.

I read the standard fare for British children my age. I began with Enid Blyton's fifteen-book series about a group of kids who called themselves the Secret Seven and solved crimes that foiled the police. The Seven held secret meetings that involved snacks and strategizing; inspired by this, I ask my parents if I could use the corrugated iron shed at the end of the garden. It was dark and dank, smelling of rust and neglect. I enlisted my brother and sister as members of the club, and we swept the earthen floor, cleaned out the cobwebs festooning the corners, and carried in some old tree stumps for stools. We used an upturned fruit crate as a table on which to lay out our snacks of Rich Tea biscuits and cocoa. After requisitioning some sliced bread, matches, and candles, we tried unsuccessfully to make toast over a candle flame. We only succeeded in producing bread with charred spots, but we ate it anyway, thrilled, even though it tasted unpleasantly of soot.

At nine, I launched happily into Enid Blyton's most well-known series: the twenty-one novels of the Famous Five series, featuring adventurous, resourceful children who roamed around the countryside, going on long hikes and solving mysteries. I was most attracted to a character who called herself George and refused to wear girl's clothes or answer to her given name, Georgina. A 1940s British version of Jo March in *Little Women*, George was wild, prickly, rebellious, and often sulky, traits I recognized in myself. Blyton's books gave some secret part of me permission not to conform, nurturing the seeds of a future self.

I went through a phase when I prided myself on eating every scrap of an apple, including the hard membranes of the core, leaving only the stalk and

the little, tear-shaped pips. My mother gave up remonstrating that this was not a ladylike way of eating. (My brother, not to be outdone, also ate the pips and tangerine peels.) My family used to joke that they could track where I'd been reading by the little cairns of apple remains on bookshelves or side tables.

In late summer, when our trees came into fruit, my apple consumption went up to a pound a day—a habit my apparently ironclad digestive system handled without protest. Our trees bore knobby green fruit and were some relative of the great British cooking variety called Bramley Seedlings. My mother stored them in boxes in the coal shed between layers of newspaper, but they softened rapidly into mushy, anemic-looking things with dull, greasy skins marred by black spots and rotten points. Picked off the tree or as new windfalls, however, they were hard, sour, and bracing. But they were ours, they were free and abundant, and I was always hungry, so I consumed great quantities of them.

I've eaten so many apples that I can intuit how they'll be from the way they look and the feel of them in my hand. There's something about the quality of an apple's skin that tells me what I'll experience as I bite into it. The skin can be thick or thin, smooth or rough, dry or waxy, shiny or dull, and each quality is married to a different texture and color of flesh: hard or soft, crisp or mealy, juicy or dry, tart or sweet, bland or aromatic. Apples, in my opinion, have to "set": a slight hint of shrivel can be a good sign, and I instinctively prefer apples with some "russetting," or rough, brownish patches. I learned to be wary of a Cox that felt too hard, or was too shiny: it meant it wasn't quite sweet enough yet.

My distant, authoritarian father wasn't as extravagantly fond of apples as I was, but we shared a love of books, and he made an enthusiastic and surprisingly humorous bedtime reader. His loud, plummy voice was perfect at conjuring the manic grandeur of Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*, in ecstasies behind the steering wheel. I adored Dad's rendition of C. S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia series and Finnish author Tove Jansson's gentle, surreal Moominland books. Dad was partial to tales about boats and explorers. He read me the Swallows and Amazons series, about the camping and sailing adventures of a group of children in the Lake District. The stories mirrored some of the family traditions he created—tramping up mountains on weekends, celebrating May Day with a bonfire and breakfast at dawn in the woods, badger-watching after dusk when the wind was right. *Swallows and Amazons* was responsible for my own

secret expeditions to the woods with my brother. Before my parents got up, we sometimes walked out alone to explore, making dens in the undergrowth and building precarious dead-wood bridges over streams, returning elated before breakfast and saying nothing about where we'd been.

In time, Dad's bedtime reading graduated to more epic stuff: *The Jungle Book*, *The Hobbit*, and *The Lord of the Rings*. He read, with great gusto, C. S. Forester's Hornblower series about a Royal Navy officer in the Napoleonic Wars. He had a fine, expressive voice that made story time an enthralling, full-body experience. I got goose bumps from his rendering of Shere Khan; of Mowgli landing in a cobra pit and tremulously announcing, "We be of one blood, ye and I"; and of Smaug, gloating on his treasure. He mimicked broad Cockney accents for the oafish trolls who try to cook Bilbo Baggins and all the dwarves. He sang all of Tolkien's songs, making up tunes for them in his ringing baritone. The episode when the Black Riders first appear in pursuit of Frodo and Sam still makes my heart pound and my palms clammy. My father named our first dog Bilbo, and they adored one another.

I read Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House on the Prairie series about her settler childhood; America was as exotic to me then as Egypt. I was baffled by some of the words—what were *bangs* and *maple syrup*? There was an undercurrent of power in the narratives that tugged at me—Laura was willful, physically strong, and not very pretty, with straight brown hair, just like me. Her parents reprimanded her for being greedy, selfish, unladylike, and disobedient. I felt she was treated unjustly. Strong emotions—resentment, craving, hurt, ecstasy—burn just below the surface of her accounts in a way that made them as unforgettable as the foreign world she portrayed, one where snow fell so deep you could lie in it and make angel shapes; where rivers, lakes, and meat froze; where there were wolves, bears, and panthers. Ironically, when I eventually came to America myself, I settled in Wisconsin, the state where Laura was born and spent her early years.

I read and reread anything to do with orphans, an identification fueled, no doubt, by the loneliness and vulnerability I felt after our move north. I was especially drawn to Mary Lennox in *The Secret Garden*, Oliver in *Oliver Twist*, and Pip in *Great Expectations*. Reading Dickens was a stretch for me, but I was eased into *Oliver Twist* by the musical, the film version of which came out in 1968. We had the LP and would regularly sing along, especially to "Food, Glorious Food." A scene that has stuck with me is the one in which a

starving Oliver tremulously asks for more gruel in the workhouse, unleashing the wrath of Mr. Bumble and the authorities.

“More, sir?”

“*More?!!*”

All of us, including my mother, would chorus this last word with mock outrage; we were hearty eaters and always competed for seconds, if there were any. The pain of going as hungry as Oliver seemed a ghastly fate to me.

I would often smuggle an apple into bed to eat while surreptitiously reading after lights-out, secreting my bedside lamp under the covers. There is a black hole in the carpet in my room where I once fell asleep while reading, having propped the lightbulb on the floor under my bed. I woke, hours later, to the smell of smoldering rug. It’s lucky I didn’t set the house on fire. I would have been the first to perish.

From orphans, I moved on to time travel and historical fiction—*A Wrinkle in Time*, *A Traveller in Time*, *The Wool-Pack*, *The Sprig of Broom*, and Arthurian legends. I read many of these in Puffin editions, the Penguin paperback imprint for children, whose logo was a plump puffin with an orange beak. *A Traveller in Time*, by Alison Uttley, was particularly vivid to me because I associated it with Manor Farm, my aunt and uncle’s home, which we visited every year. It had an Elizabethan walled garden that reminded me of the one depicted in *The Secret Garden*. Like Thackers Farm in *A Traveller in Time*, my aunt and uncle’s house was over four hundred years old, with huge, thick walls; narrow, hollowed-out wooden stairs; mysterious, dark rooms; sloping oak-beamed ceilings on which you could hit your head; and a loudly ticking grandfather clock. Like Thackers, it was also a working farm. After reading *A Traveller in Time*, I wished passionately that I could slip in and out of the Elizabethan age the way Penelope Taberner does. In Manor Farm, I imagined I could feel the press of earlier times and inhabitants, still somehow present, and I loved the notion—seen in the Narnia series, too—that one could have lengthy adventures in another world but step back into this one to find that no time at all had elapsed.

There were fruit trees in the peaceful, brick-walled garden at Manor Farm—a giant cherry tree and some antique apple varieties whose names I never knew, that are now gone. My aunt made amazing apple crumbles with them, served with pale yellow custard poured steaming from a jug at the big farm-style kitchen table.

I learned to play the Tudor ballad “Greensleeves” on the piano, tearing up every time I sang it because in *A Traveller in Time*, the song encapsulates yearning for a lost world: it is sung to Penelope by the boy she loves in her Tudor life, whom she eventually has to leave behind. I read everything I could about the Elizabethan era. My parents gave me a 1960s hard-backed Ladybird book, priced two shillings and sixpence, called *The Story of the First Queen Elizabeth*. I kept it by my bed and perused it every night. How could I resist a heroine who wrote poetry, read Latin and Greek, played the harpsichord, and refused to get married? On the cover was a picture of her sitting sidesaddle on a white horse as she addressed the troops at Tilbury in 1588, surrounded by men in armor and battleship masts, the country braced for invasion by Spain. I loved her rousing declaration that “I may have the body of a woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a man, and a King of England, too.”

As I neared adolescence and began to harbor a crush on a boy at school, I became hungry for stories about romance, which were in short supply in the children’s section of the library. I owned a hardback copy of Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Tristan and Iseult*, beautifully illustrated with pen and ink drawings by Victor Ambrus, which I read many times. The idea of two people being made for each other was irresistible. Around that time, I also read K. M. Peyton’s Flambards trilogy, set in the First World War. I lingered over the scenes where the heroine sees Dick, the stable boy, looking at her over the horse’s flank and knows he loves her. I read those parts over and over again, with a strange internal melting feeling. I was in love with Tristan and with Dick too.

My years of curling up with a bag of apples and a stack of books were destined to come to an end as I approached thirteen, in 1973. I was changing; the world was changing; apples were changing; and my reading was about to change. For one thing, I was starting to realize that what I ate shaped how I was perceived. One day, I took off all my clothes and studied myself in my mother’s full-length mirror, something I’d never done before. The sensation I felt in my nakedness was shame. The message I received from my schoolmates and family was that I was too much: too intense, too sensitive, too brainy, too opinionated, too tall. Standing there in front of the mirror, I could see that my hips and belly were also too big. I couldn’t do anything about my height or my character traits. But my weight—maybe. If I ate less, maybe I could make myself look less hefty. Maybe that would allow me to pass muster in the world, fit in, and be accepted.

This changed my relationship with apples. For the next few years, they became things I ate because they were low in calories, and only rarely. When I did eat them, I couldn't enjoy them the way I had before. My habit of eating apples while reading was broken too. Adolescence was my own personal version of the Fall, dividing my life into a before and after. Although in my version of Genesis, the fall from grace stemmed from *not* eating.

Dad's bedtime reading came to an end around that time—I was outgrowing it, and there were three younger children needing stories. Although I must have been reading at home in my teens, the books that made the deepest impression on me were the ones I read in high school—*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Bleak House*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and works by Jane Austen, William Blake, T. S. Eliot, and William Wordsworth. In English class, I was learning to read differently, to decode books rather than simply devouring them. I was awed as our teacher, Mr. Garner, showed us how to look at a passage from angles I couldn't have imagined, unlocking strange and wonderful secrets. It felt momentous, as if he were opening a great door for me to pass through, and I worshipped him for it. But it was the beginning of books becoming not worlds but texts—a different experience of reading altogether.

The orchard that came with our house was sold when I became a teenager, so we no longer had our own apples. My parents bought the house we had been renting, but the recession that hit the U.K. in 1973 meant that they couldn't afford to buy all of it. The property was divided, and the chunk of land containing the fruit trees was bought by a real estate agent in town who was notorious for acquiring properties and letting them go to seed. Later, on trips home from university, slogging through the massive reading lists assigned during the vacations, I would stare across at our old orchard languishing untended behind a large fence, the fruit unpicked and rotting sweetly in the long grass, a source of sadness for us all.

In 1973, Britain entered the Common Market (which later became the E.U.). That move ushered in an era of change in apples and apple-buying. The British food writer David Shapley notes that the 1960s and early '70s had been a golden age for independent greengrocers operating from small shops, like the one in our village, and for selling traditional British apple varieties. In those years, there were some 40,000 greengrocers in the U.K. But just as I hit adolescence, in the mid-1970s, they began to disappear, replaced by supermarket chains such as Sainsbury's and Tesco. Supermarkets demanded

a different kind of apple, one that looked immaculate, and they carried apples from around the world, preserved for months before sale. Supermarket apple varieties were chosen not for their flavor but for their looks and ability to withstand long-distance shipping and cold storage. British growers accordingly began cultivating foreign apple varieties, in search of yield and consistency over tradition. This change resulted in the first Gala and Braeburn apples appearing in stores in Britain.

The average supermarket apple is close to a year old. It has been treated with chemicals, coated in food-grade wax containing fungicides, fumigated with ethylene-blocking gas, and stored in “controlled atmosphere” warehouses with high humidity, low oxygen, and controlled carbon dioxide levels, to maintain freshness for up to twelve months. It is considered fresh fruit, but it is really a preserved relic whose texture and taste bear scant resemblance to untreated apples in season—the apples I had grown up with.

In my twenties, I moved to the United States for what was supposed to be a year, but I never left. I was bewildered at how different the world of apples—and apple-buying—was. In Wisconsin, by 1986, greengrocers didn’t exist. My beloved Coxes, Russets, and Bramleys were impossible to find. The 1980s and ’90s were the heyday of single-color supermarket apples, and for what seemed like a long while, they came in only three kinds: sour, rock-hard Granny Smiths; bland, waxy Golden Delicious; and worst of all, pulpy, soft Red Delicious, with their bitter, crimson skin, like the poisoned apple that Snow White ate.

Faced with these new, alien nonapples—large, lustrous, perfect, and perfectly disappointing—I couldn’t get excited about buying or eating them. Even decades after my eating problems had ceased, my special relationship with apples seemed a thing of the past.

But that isn’t the end of the story. Lives are messy and take unexpected turns. In 2002, I had a child—which is, as Rivka Galchen says, “like rereading your own childhood.” I wanted to pass on my heritage to my American son. One of the things I tried to transmit was my past love of apples. When he was a toddler, I began taking him on regular pilgrimages to the Eplegaarden, an orchard founded by Norwegian immigrants. The smell under the trees and in the barn where the fruit was stored reminded me poignantly of home. Gradually, I started to learn my way around American apple varieties: tart, thick-skinned MacIntoshes; sweet, finely-grained Cortlands; juicy Jonagolds;

crisp, white-fleshed Paula Reds; tangy, brown-sugary Zestars; conical, pale green Ginger Golds; firm, purple-red Spartans; crisp, elderflowery Empires; spicy Gravensteins; flattish, russeted Melroses; Winesaps, which tasted like mulled wine; large, irregular Wolf Rivers; mildly tart Haralsons; and yellow-fleshed Northern Spies. It was hard for me to retain the names, but I could still weigh an apple in my hand and tell by feel whether I would like it.

I also wanted my son to experience the books that had shaped my childhood. I was often exhausted by the end of the day, but bedtime reading was a shared pleasure and always energized me. I would lie next to him on the bed with the book propped on my chest while he snuggled in the crook of my right arm, rapt, absorbed, content. I read him all the books my parents had read me: Beatrix Potter, A. A. Milne, Enid Blyton, Swallows and Amazons, Tove Jansson, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, and on and on.

There was a catch, though. I was surprised to note things I hadn't picked up on as a child, but that were now wincingly obvious to me. There were jarring notes in some of the books, moments that were sentimental, classist, sexist, or racist. How had I not seen that *The Secret Garden* was a colonial fiction of English nationalism? Or that Enid Blyton's series centered on upper-class white children who went to boarding school? Or the systemic racism behind the fact that there were no characters or writers of color in the books I had been raised on? But, unlike the experience of revisiting a childhood home and being surprised that it seems smaller than you remembered, I felt in this case that it was I who had shrunk, as well as grown. While my knowledge of the world was greater, my *imaginative* response to reading felt smaller, not greater, as an adult.

As my son grew up, I gradually rekindled my love affair with apples. Now I frequent two heirloom apple growers who sell at the local farmers' markets. From Weston's Antique Apples at the main market in downtown Madison, I can get Pitmaston Pineapples, tiny, golden, russet-like apples that taste of pineapple; flat, strawberry-flavored Wealthys; dark red Victoria Limbertwigs; astringent, juicy Belle de Boskoop; and licorice-scented Sops of Wine. Morren Orchard & Nursery, a newer vendor at a small market near our house, sells knobby, clove-flavored Cornish Gillyflowers; crusty purple Black Oxfords; greenish-gold Roxbury Russets; thick-skinned Westfield Seek-No-Furtheres; and even, to my delight, Cox's Orange Pippins. These American Coxes are larger than the ones I remember. They taste very good, but not quite as delicious as

the ones in my childhood—but then, neither do Coxes in England, when I buy them there. Some childhood sensations we can never quite recreate—they're locked in memory, tantalizing, just out of reach.

But two years ago, at Morren's, I found an apple to rival it: an eighteenth-century English variety called Ashmead's Kernel, one of the few old-world varieties to be grown successfully in the United States. They are small, golden, and beautifully russeted. The skin is dull like antique brass, with a splash of orange-red on the sunny side. They have a sweet-sharp flavor and whitish-green flesh with a lot of juice. They are only available for two to three weeks a year—and not every year, depending on how the trees fared over the winter—which makes eating them all the more precious. A good Ashmead's Kernel is an explosion of tangy, complex flavor I find irresistible.

These days I usually have multiple books on the go at once. My reading is often absorbing, moving, or inspiring, but I rarely experience that unfiltered, unfettered sense of being transported by the imagination that I had as a child. My views and tastes are formed, my prejudices and beliefs entrenched. I know too much to get swept away on a daily basis. I won't go along for the ride with just any narrator—or if I do, it's often with reservations and quibbles. I'm on the lookout for hidden agendas. As Graham Greene asks, "What do we ever get nowadays from reading to equal the excitement and the revelation in those first fourteen years?"

Too much knowledge gets you expelled from Eden. But I can still glimpse it through the foggy portholes of memory: a girl with her feet tucked up on the sofa, absorbed and munching avidly as she turns the pages, an apple in her hand.