

# A life in books

*by* Alison Wells

Books I always thought I would read before I died: War and Peace, Remembrance of things Past, Ulysses.

Then they told me I was going to die.

How long does it take to read a book? I wondered.

I tried to read Ulysses once but I found I couldn't. There had been too much hype and I couldn't see through it. I wish I had found it years ago when my brain was elastic and plastic. I wish I had found it before I knew, on some train station bench, dog eared and lovingly thumbled. I would have put it in my bag and gone home and laid down on my stomach on my single bed and forgotten to eat. Ate of lexicon's bread. But as a young man it might have been beyond me, now it's far behind.

It's in middle age that death catches up with you, taps you on the shoulder. It's not that you ignore it before, it just doesn't occur to you in your twenties, in your thirties you catch it in the periphery but there's plenty else to distract you, the trajectory of your career, of your clothes in a black bag after the affair has been found out and in your forties it is at your side, after that it stares you in the face from behind the mirror.

Forget Ulysses, life itself is a stream of consciousness if you ever have time to get out of the stream and take a look at it. And there's nothing that gets you out of the stream like a short sharp shock. They gave me six months, then they said it could be any day from now. There's nothing like a death sentence to make you want to be a character out of a Marquez novel. Like that dubious protagonist out of Memories of my Melancholy Whores, he wants to ravish a sixteen year old girl and then cannot out of tenderness. Sexual congress with youth as an elixir is a cliché as old as they make them and I cannot sign up to lazy living.

Sitting is as good as doing as long as the sun is out. Watching footsteps of light tap forward and back on the living room floor, watching plant's chlorophyllic heaving, listening to the wash of

traffic on the nearby arterial, turning the pages of a novel that took three years to write and a day, like this, to read, all that time crammed in. So in the sweet acrid pages is the smell of optimism, rage and decline, the hush of crushed leaves, the spill of endeavour. And the man found the spiritual in Steinbeck's 'To a God Unknown' in the cathedral vaults of that ancient, ubiquitous forest, light in beams like a UFO enthusiasts dream. Steinbeck and Spielberg juxtaposed in the elevations of the soul. Or if I could go like Howard's elderly folk in the movie 'Cocoon' to the alien world of the never-ending. Or if I could sit by the rockpools of my youth and search for anemones, prise limpets and cockles off the black rocks, trail seaweed along the long strand, leap along the cliff edges. If I could stay out between breakfast and supper and fold time into those little ridges that you see at the shore where the sand is wet before my mother called me in for tea. If I could shake her out of the blanket she used to tuck me in with, she never seems gone far. If my life was still unknowable like a great ocean like it is when you look forward from the start. If I could set out on Lewis' Dawn Treader to the world's end and come to something. I make a quiet ending. I could bungee jump into oblivion. I could visit the remaining wonders of the world before they fade. I could gaze upon Machu Picchu or the Old Mountain and I could gasp, as I will gasp my last. I could shout out loud.

But instead I will make a honeycomb of my humanity. Everything inside, in my head, time, love, memory interlocking. I will not do, I will read. I will read until my eyes fade and through resonance will recollect everything I loved about being alive. I am deciduous. I will tear out the lines that speak to me, sing and scatter them about my failing feet and fade into the whispers of books.

