

Claire Louise Bennett,
"Checkout 19"
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I.

A Silly Business

‘One cannot see the future of something learned.’

A Girl's Story, Annie Ernaux

Later on we often had a book with us. Later on. When we were a bit bigger at last though still nowhere near as big as the rest of them we brought over books with us. Oh loads of books. And sat with them there in the grass by the tree. Just one book in fact. Just one, that's right. Lots of books, one at a time. That's it, one at a time. We didn't very much like tons of books did we. No, not really, and neither do we now. We like one book. Yes, we like one book now and we liked one book then. We went to the library for instance and we soon lost the habit didn't we of taking out lots and lots of books. Yes. Yes. Yes we did. First of all of course we took out all the

books we possibly could. Which was probably eight books. It's always either six books or eight books or twelve books. Unless it's a special collection of books of course in which case it might only be four. And to begin with we took out as many of them as we could. That's right. We'll take this one and this one and this one, this one, and that one too. And so on. Yes. In a pile up on the high counter for Noddy Head to stamp. And we read not one of them all the way through. It was simply impossible. We couldn't get engrossed. No matter what book we had in our hands we found it simply impossible to refrain from wondering incessantly about what kinds of words exactly were inside the other books. We couldn't help it could we. We just couldn't stop ourself from thinking about the other books and the different kinds of words they each contained and when we picked up one of the other books in order to find out it was just the same. It really was just the same no matter which book we picked up. As long as there were other books we thought about the sorts of words they might contain non-stop and were thus precluded from becoming engrossed with the very book we had in our hands. The very book. A silly business. Yes, it was a silly business. Tossing one book down and picking one book up and tossing that to one side and picking up yet another and so on and getting nowhere. Nowhere at all. Over and over again. And we went on like that for quite some time didn't we until we realised that just because we were allowed to take out six books eight books twelve books four books didn't mean did it that we had to.

No, of course it didn't. So then we took out one book. And of course this aggravated people. Yes. Yes. Yes it did. No end. Is that all you're taking out, they'd exclaim.

Go and get some more. Just one – you'll have that finished by tomorrow, they'd say. And we're not coming back again this week. So what. As if the only thing you could do with a book was read it. That's right. We could sit for a long time couldn't we with a book beside us and not even open it. We certainly could. And it was very edifying. It certainly was. It was entirely possible we realised to get a great deal from a book without even opening it. Just having it there beside us for ages was really quite special. It was actually because we could wonder couldn't we about the sorts of words it contained without getting ourself worked up into a ridiculous state. With just one book in the grass beside us we sat there wondering about the sorts of words it contained in a really tranquil and expansive kind of way that in fact enabled distinct images to emerge all of their own accord from who knows where. That was nice. It was actually. The images rarely resembled anything we had seen for ourself directly yet they were not in the least bit vague or far-fetched. Not remotely. From time to time, perhaps to make sure that the images that came about of their own accord didn't deviate too much from the themes and tone and point in time propounded by the text beside us, we'd pick up the book and open it wherever our thumb happened to stop, and we'd read one or two words from whatever line upon the page our eyes happened to coincide with, and those one or two words would be quite enough, wouldn't they, to provoke yet more enthralling images.

When we open a book our eyes nearly always go over to the left page. That's right – the left page, for reasons we have never previously reflected upon, has a much stronger

pull on us than the right page. We always look down first of all at the right page. The right page first, that's right. But the words on the right page always seem much too close. Too close to each other and too close to our face. The words on the right page do indeed make us peculiarly aware of our face. Is it our face? Is it? Well? The words on the right seem far too eager, overbearing, and yes somewhat ingratiating in fact, and very soon our rattled eyes leave the right page in order to seek refuge in the left. We look down at the right page and up at the left page. We do actually. And we nearly always read the left page much more slowly than the right. There seems to be more time on the left page. Yes. Yes. Yes there does. On the left page there is more space it seems, on either side of the words, and above and below every sentence. And the left page nearly always has better words on it it seems. That's right - words like 'shone' and 'creature' and 'champagne' and 'ragged' and 'clump', for example. Words that really don't require any explanation. Words that happen one by one rather than words that bandy together to try to convince you of something that is not happening. It really can't be the case though can it that these distinct operations that words bring into effect are divvied out between the left and the right pages quite so unerringly. No, probably not. Probably it is more likely that we are much more receptive in fact to whatever we read on the left pages than we are to what we read on the right pages because we look down at the right page and up at the left. We do. We do. Which must mean that the book we are reading does not remain still in our hands. It must mean, yes, that after turning the right page over so that it becomes the left page we shift the book slightly upwards. Upwards, yes.

We have a tendency don't we of reading the last few sentences on the right page hurriedly. We do actually. We enjoy turning the pages of a book and our anticipation of doing so is obviously fairly fervid and undermines our attention to such an extent that we can't help but skim over the last couple of sentences on the right page probably without really taking in a single word. Quite often when we make a start on the left page it doesn't make a great deal of sense to us. No. No. No it doesn't. And it is only then, isn't it, that we realise, somewhat reluctantly, that we didn't read the last few lines of the previous page properly. Quite often, we are so reluctant to acknowledge that this makes any difference, we carry on reading. We carry on that's right even though we can't make head nor tail of what we are reading. We carry on regardless because we are vaguely convinced that, surely, if we keep going, the way these current sentences relate to all the sentences we've already read will, actually, sooner or later, make itself perfectly apparent. We don't get very far. No, we don't. We nearly always flick back. We do. And we are nearly always surprised by how much salient detail was in fact contained in the last few lines on the previous right page and we are surprised even further by a very unreasonable thought that comes to us from who knows where which proposes that the typesetter of the book is really quite irresponsible, that they should allow such important sentences to appear at the very end of the right page. Surely the typesetter must be aware that many people derive a great deal of pleasure from turning pages turning pages and as such cannot be expected to read the last couple of lines on all the right pages with consummate diligence. You would have thought so. Turning the page. Turning the page.

Turning the page and holding the book up a little higher. And the reason we do that, now that we are reflecting on it, is because once we have turned the page we feel inclined to lift our chin and gaze upwards. And the reason we feel like gazing upwards is because we have turned over a new leaf. A new leaf! – that's right. We have turned over a new leaf and as such we feel instantly youthful and supremely open-minded and that is why we quite naturally adopt the uplifted mien of an urbane albeit slightly indulged protégé every time we turn the page. A new leaf. Yes. By the time we get to the bottom of the right page we have aged approximately twenty years. We are no longer holding the book up. No. No. The book has dropped. Our face has dropped. We have jowls. We do. We have a double chin. That's right. We wallow. We wallow. We are wallowing in our chins. We really have aged at least twenty years. It's no wonder then is it that we don't read to the very end of the right page properly. No. No. No wonder at all that we are itching to turn it over. No wonder whatsoever that we anticipate turning the page so very fervidly. As if it were a matter of life or death in fact. Life or death. Life or death. It is a matter of life or death in fact. Yes. Yes. Yes, it is. Turning the pages. Turning the pages. When we turn the page we are born again. Living and dying and living and dying and living and dying. Again, and again. And really that's the way it ought to be. The way that reading ought to be done. Yes. Yes. Turning the pages. Turning the pages. With one's entire life.