

As my gift to you this Christmas, I am sharing with you my favourite read of the year. I suspect that it will, in fact, come to occupy a permanent place at my bedside for the rest of my life. It is a slim volume of essays by an American journalist called Anne Fadiman, entitled **Ex Libris: confessions of a common reader**. This collection is exquisitely crafted, elegantly written, warm, witty, and hugely entertaining. It is required reading for all readaholics, book junkies, language fanatics and word freaks.

Anne Fadiman is, as I have said, a journalist. She has worked for a time for **Life** magazine, and her writing has appeared in such illustrious

journals as the **Washington Post**, the **New York Times** and the **New Yorker**. She has written one other book, for which she received the American Book Critics' Award for Non Fiction. At the time that this book



BETWEEN  
THE LINES

Cecily van Gend

was published, she was the editor of the **American scholar**, and the essays themselves first appeared as a column in a journal called **Civilisation**, under the heading *The common reader*.

Anne Fadiman lives in a loft in New York, with her husband, George, also a writer, and their two young children. She also has a brother, and parents who have retired to Florida after a long life in the service of literature. Each one of them is passionate about reading and language. All this we learn in the course of these essays. Her father, a famous English professor, was once a proofreader at Simon & Schuster. At the time that these essays were written, he had turned 90, and was in the process of going blind. In one of her essays, she writes very movingly about his blindness, comparing her role as his reader to that of Milton's daughters, who were his scribes.

The opening essay introduces the family, and sets the tone of the delights to come. It is called *Marrying libraries*, an event, according to the author, of far greater weight than the actual wedding. By the time they made the decision to unite their book collections, she says, 'our mismatched coffee mugs cohabited amicably, we wore each other's T-shirts, and, in a pinch, socks and our record collections had long ago miscegenated without incident... We were both writers, and we both invested in our books the kind of emotion most people reserve for their old love letters.' One of the problems encountered in the mingling of their collections was that of how to arrange them, a problem that arose from their very different personalities: 'George is a lumper,' she tells us, 'I am a splitter. His books commingled democratically, united under the all-inclusive flag of Literature. Some were vertical, some horizontal, and some actually placed *behind* others. Mine were balkanised by nationality and subject matter.' Eventually, after more than a week, a great deal of thought and many weighty decisions, the task was all but complete, except for the hardest task: '...we sorted through our duplicates and decided whose to keep. I realised we had both been hoarding redundant copies of our favourite books "just in case" we ever split up. Gradually, however, the difficulties were amicably resolved, and the two collections settled in together and became one. My books and his books had become our books. We were really married.'

The topics of these essays range widely over the field. In *The joy of sequepedelians*, she describes the thrill of discovering new words. *The literary glutton* is about food in literature, and the temptations of eating in bed: 'After reading MFK Fisher's description of scrambled eggs, in **How to cook a wolf**, or Hemingway's ode to sausages and

potato salad in **A moveable feast**, or Thomas Wolfe's inventory of the contents of Joel Pierce's refrigerator in **Of time and the river**, how could anyone in her right mind not bring a small snack to the matrimonial bed?'

*Words on a flyleaf* is about the inscriptions people write in books they give to others. In *My odd shelf* she shares with us her fascination for Scott of the Antarctic. The essay entitled *The PM's empire of books* is of special interest to librarians, describing in detail William Gladstone's ingenious, though eccentric shelving plans.

*Never do that to a book* will strike terror into the hearts of librarians everywhere as she asserts that it is permissible to leave a book face down - even to dog ear a page or write comments in the margins. 'I could not imagine a more bibliolatrous family than the Fadimans. Yet ... we would all have been found guilty of rampant book abuse.' But, she goes on '...just as there is more than one way to love a person, so is there more than one way to love a book.' With 'courtly love...a book's physical self was sacrosanct...its form inseparable from its content...a Platonic adoration, a noble but doomed attempt to conserve forever the state of perfect chastity in which it had left the bookseller. The Fadiman family believed in carnal love. To us, a book's words were holy, but the paper, cloth, cardboard, glue, thread, and ink that contained them were a mere vessel, and it was no sacrilege to treat them as wantonly as desire and pragmatism dictated. Hard use was a sign not of disrespect but of intimacy.'

In *Secondhand prose*, she describes how George arranged a special surprise excursion for her forty-second birthday. From Grand Central Station, where she is instructed to 'stand at a discreet distance during his sotto voce procurement of two round trip tickets to somewhere' they embark on a train journey, during which she speculates on their destination. 'What could possibly await us here? A three star restaurant? A world-class art collection? A hot-air balloon, stocked with a magnum of Veuve Clicquot and a pound of caviar, from which we would achieve a hawk's-eye view of the Hudson Valley?' But it is none of these. Instead, he has brought her to 'a weather-beaten little shop, perched on such a declivitous slope that it looked in danger of sliding into the Hudson River, with a faded blue sign over the door that said BOOKSTORE. Inside were an unkempt desk, a maze of out-of-plumb shelves, a flurry of dust motes, and 300,000 used books.' They staggered home seven hours later with nineteen pounds of books. 'Now you know why I married my husband,' she says. 'In my view, nineteen pounds of old books are at least nineteen times as delicious as one pound of fresh caviar.'

George has other talents. In *Sharing the mayhem*, she describes how she emerged one morning from her bedroom to find her daughter listening to George reading aloud from Roald Dahl's **Boy**, over the Rice Crispies. They had reached the place where the young Dahl nearly loses his nose in a car accident.

'Read me again about how his nose was hanging by just a little tiny string,' said Susannah.

'Had I been a better mother, I would have said, *after breakfast*. Instead, I joined the audience. George was once a singing waiter, accustomed to linking dramaturgy and digestion, and he attacked the dangling nose with verve. I could see why he had raked in such big tips.'

I hope you are beginning to see why I love this book so much, and why it has become my indispensable companion. I could go on and on, quoting pieces from this delicious collection. Instead, after this small taste, I hope you will go out and buy it for yourselves. And, if you are looking for a special gift for someone you love, someone else who is passionate about reading and the written word, you can't do better than to buy them a copy of **Ex Libris**.

