

## **The Joy of Reading**

Last week, I was sitting there listening to Mr. Wong's and students' presentation on reading and I suddenly realised that I did not have a chance to say something about reading. Last Monday happened to be a holiday. So, I have decided to use this Monday to continue the theme of Reading.

Unlike Mr. Wong, I am not recommending books to you because I think most of the books that I am going to talk about later are either too outdated for you, or not of any interest to you. Yet, it does not matter, because reading is something very personal. You do not have to read books that other people like, because people have different preferences. What I would like to do today is to share with you my journey of reading, how I came to love reading, and share with you some of the books which have had an impact on me.

I guess the first book that took me to this world of reading is surprisingly a lesser known book called "Lost Horizon" which is a 1933 novel by British writer James Hilton. The book is best remembered as giving people the name 'Shangri-la'. I think I was in Form 4 or Form 5 when I read this book.

The story starts with a plane hijack. On the plane were two diplomats, a missionary and one American fugitive. Instead of flying away from India, the plane flew over the steep mountains to Tibet but was forced to make a crash landing. Fortunately, they were met by a party directed by Chang, who seemed to be expecting the arrival of those foreigners. They eventually were taken to a lamasery in a highly remote place known by the people there as Shangri-la. I enjoyed reading this book because it took me to this fictional utopian world of Shangri-la where the people there were all scholars who lived a long life without ageing. My young mind was captivated by the sense of mystery and mysticism surrounding this oriental 'lost

world' of an advanced civilization. The story had colourful characters like the beautiful young Manchu princess Lo-Tsen, who was actually 70 years old but she looked 18, and the 250-year-old French Lama who was a pupil of Chopin.

It was the first book that I had read from cover to cover - my first taste of success in reading, my first love.

As for a book that had quite a different impact on me, I have to mention "To Kill a Mockingbird", an American classic written by Harper Lee in 1960. I read it when I was in Form 5. I did not like it at first because the setting, a small town in Alabama in the 1930s, was simply far too remote to me. I kept complaining about the teacher's poor choice of textbook but I had to read it to the end because it was a set text for the then Certificate Examination in English Literature. By the end, I had grown to love it. It is a story of racial tension and prejudice between the white and the black races in America. It is a story of the injustice suffered by the minority groups at that time. It is a story of racism, of people who are quick to take the moral high ground to judge and condemn others. The book has taught me a number of things, but one which I remember most is what bravery/courage is.

On the one hand, bravery is seen in the main character Atticus Finch, a lawyer, who defended the black man in a trial even in face of threats and violence by his fellow countrymen. A different kind of bravery is also seen in another character, Mrs. Dubose, who despite her illness refused to rely on any morphine or narcotics as pain killers. One of the more famous quotes occurs when Atticus Finch told his children about Mrs. Dubose: *"I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand. It's when you know you're licked before you begin but you begin anyway and you see it through no matter what. You rarely win, but sometimes you do."* They did not win. In fact,

Atticus lost the trial and the black man was not only wrongly convicted but was even shot dead by some of the townspeople. Mrs. Dubose eventually died of cancer. Nonetheless, they have all demonstrated what real courage is all about.

In case you think that Mr. Yuen is so ancient that he reads only old books that usually fall apart when you hold them, one of the most recent books that I have read is called “Kohinoor” by William Dalrymple. Kohinoor, or the “mountain of light” is actually the name of the biggest diamond on earth, discovered in the eighteenth century. It is now in the Tower of London, decorating the crown of the Queen of England. The book covers the history of the stone and how it was snatched from the Peacock Throne in India to Persia, and then by Nader Shah to Afghanistan and later ended up being worn by the great Sikh maharaja Ranjit Singh. When the stone was passed to his son Duleep Singh, the 10-year-old heir was coerced into giving it as a gift to Queen Victoria. The story of the Kohinoor is a riveting story of historical adventure, full of drama, deceit, betrayal and in Dalrymple’s own words, the Kohinoor “is the symbol of looting of colonial times”.

However, I think the book “Kohinoor” is not the best of Dalrymple’ works. I actually prefer some of his previous works such as “Return of a King” which is an account of Britain's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in 1839–42. Another of his books that I like is “The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi 1857”, which is not just an account of the Indian Mutiny in 1857 but also a sad tale of how the last monarch of the once greatest Mughal Empire, a descendant of both Genghis Khan and Timur the Great, was brutally and callously reduced to a prisoner of war by the British Empire, sent to live in exile, and died in isolation somewhere in Burma.

As you can see by now, I may be a school principal tied to his desk to handle all the daily work at our school, but in my mind, I am an adventurer - ever since my

first book “The Lost Horizon”. For most of my day, my existence revolves around meetings, phone calls, reports, interaction with students and staff and dinner engagements. At home, I am a son, a father and a husband. By the end of the day and during weekends, I yearn for a different kind of time - a time of reading which takes me to land of the past or land afar, to exotic cultures where people speak a different language and wear unusual clothes.

I know in this day and age of modern technology when everything is reduced to easily digestible visuals and sound-bites, talking about reading that requires you to plough through lines and lines of text may seem rather outmoded. Yet, reading is still one of life’s simplest pleasures that can be enjoyed anywhere, anytime and can be free of charge at your school or local library.

Of course, you can still get by even if you do not read. You can be fixated on your TV, or your video games, and the world still moves on regardless. Yet, reading helps you to connect with other human beings. It helps you to develop empathy, appreciation, compassion and respect. You may be able to save the whole world in your virtual world of video games but these are what we need in the real world of artificial intelligence. As Tim Cook nicely puts it: *“I’m not worried about artificial intelligence giving computers the ability to think like humans. I’m more concerned about people thinking like computers without values or compassion, without concern for consequences.”*

I am not a voracious reader who has read a lot of books, as some of my friends do. I am not even a fast reader and it often takes me a long time to get through a book when my friends can do it in a week or two. But reading is a personal pastime that I enjoy a lot. I hope you too share the enjoyment of reading and have found a book you like. Next time when you have lunch at various eateries outside the

school or as you commute to and from school, instead of playing video games on your phones to save the world -as I know many of our students do- I hope you will pick up a book and read!

*Dennis Yuen*