

Circles of Light

By Nancy Lecourt

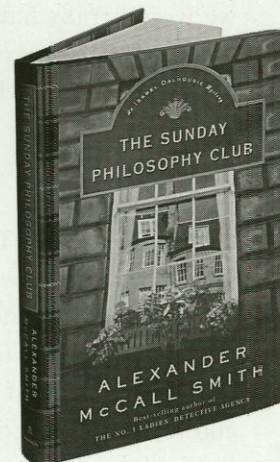
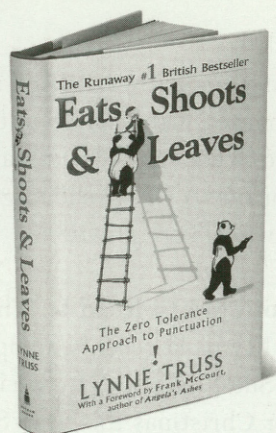
At the present moment, you, Reader, are sitting in a circle of light, reading *Spectrum*. As readers, we travel from book to magazine to newspaper and back, always scanning the horizon for what will next appear on the bed table or beside our favorite chair. We read many things for many reasons. Here are some of mine at the moment.

I'm Stuck in the Middle Seat. On a recent airplane trip to Washington D. C. to visit a new baby in the family, I left my body stuck in its tiny space while my mind took a vacation with the help of *The Sunday Philosophy Club* by Alexander McCall Smith. Since I love his series, which begins with *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, this book might also be categorized as "I Love Anything by this Author."

In any case, it belongs to the Miss Marple genre of murder mysteries, where

the "detective" is some innocuous and unassuming person, often a woman (though Chesterton's Father Brown is an avatar), who turns out actually to be far more observant and trenchant (Miss Marple famously has "a mind like a meat cleaver") than police or other official investigators.

These books tend to be more about character and setting than plot, and *The Sunday Philosophy Club* is no exception: set in present-day Edinburgh, it is Scottish to the core. It introduces us to many people



Billy Collins, *Sailing Alone Around the Room* (New York: Random House, 2002)

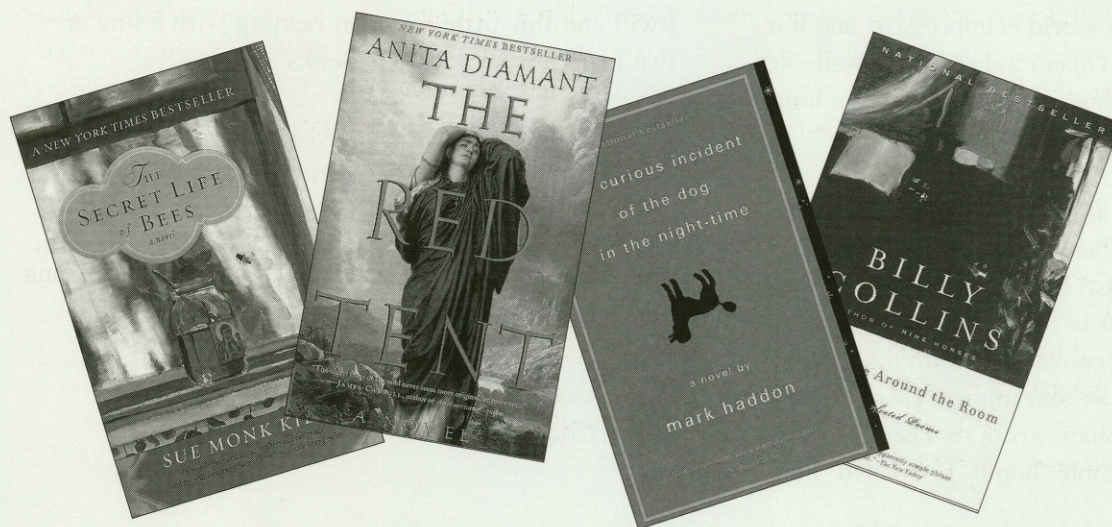
Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997)

Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (Canada: Doubleday, 2002).

Sue Monk Kidd, *The Secret Life of Bees* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002)

Alexander Smith McCall, *The Sunday Philosophy Club* (New York: Pantheon, 2004)

Lynn Truss, *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* (New York: Penguin, 2003)



we would enjoy having tea with, not least among whom is the main character, the editor of the *Journal of Applied Ethics*, who is constantly ruminating on the moral implications of life. A light read; a good read. Before you know it, wheels are down.

A Friend I Trust Told Me to Read It. This category is endless, of course. My most recent example is *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kid. I gave it to most of my own friends for Christmas this year. Set in South Carolina in 1964, it is a coming-of-age novel, really, and tells the story of a runaway white girl who finds

order to save useless work and make the world a better place. Can we say, “monomania”?

I Read It for Work. In my case, this means choosing books for my literature classes, and in this category comes a surprising book that my students (all but one) enjoyed very much: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon. The narrator is a fifteen-year-old autistic boy who is writing a mystery about the murder of the neighbor’s dog. The real purpose, of course, is to help us understand a little better what the world looks like to a boy like Christopher.

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herself in the middle of the civil rights movement, loved by and loving a community of black women who worship God by way of a statue of a Black Madonna and a lot of honey. I know, it sounds strange—just read it. I also recommend the book on tape/CD version. The voice is just right.

I Found It at the Thrift Store. I’m a firm believer in serendipity, so when a nice new copy of *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant presented itself for \$1.99, I knew the time had come to read this book I’ve been hearing about since it first appeared in 1997.

For those of you who haven’t read it, the protagonist/narrator is Dinah, only daughter of Jacob. She tells the story from the moment Jacob arrives chez Laban (her mother and the other women of the camp have told her the story many times) to Joseph’s bringing his two sons to be blessed by Jacob before he dies. Diamant’s recreation of this ancient world is impressive, and if it sounds a bit like a soap opera in her hands, well—let’s face it, romance, adultery, deceit, rape, murder, long-lost family, revenge—it’s all there in Genesis!

Everyone’s Talking about It. I am an English teacher, after all, so when a book about punctuation made the best-seller list, I had to get it. *Eats, Shoot and Leaves* by Lynne Truss is certainly amusing, and oh-so-British. It may not convert you into a punctuation fanatic, but it will amuse and inform. How’s this for surprising? Bernard Shaw wrote to *The Times* in 1945 to suggest that the atomic “bomb” be spelled “bom” in

And as my students felt, we don’t just learn about him—we learn from him. Here is their favorite quote:

Prime numbers are what is left when you have taken all the patterns way. I think prime numbers are like life. They are very logical but you could never work out the rules, even you spent all your time thinking about them. (12)

I Need a Poem Once in a While. I confess, I am not a big reader of poetry. But I tuned in to National Public Radio in the car one Sunday a few years ago and was mesmerized by the voice and texture and well, lightness, of the poetry being read by someone who turned out to be Billy Collins. *Sailing Alone Around the Room* is the book I have, but I’d recommend anything by him. His poems are accessible, welcoming, and yet often poignant and profound. I will end this little essay on reading with a line or two from his poem titled “Books”:

I see all of us reading ourselves away from ourselves,
straining in circles of light to find more light
until the line of words becomes a trail of crumbs
that we follow across a page of fresh snow;... (12)

And so I wish you happy trails.

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