

## Book Review

Alberto Manguel

*A History of Reading*

Published 1996:

In Canada by Alfred A. Knopf Canada, Toronto, Canada.

In the United States by Viking Penguin, New York.

In the Great Britain by HarperCollins Publishers, London.

Distributed by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Reviewed by Eleanor D. Glor

This book is a delightful intellectual journey. It starts with Alberto Manguel's memory of learning to read and includes a number of other personal stories as he lived in many places worldwide (his father was in the Argentinian diplomatic service) and was always a vociferous reader. He was cared for by a nurse and spent much time alone.

He discusses his wide-ranging intellectual journey through western and other writings and many genres. As quoted on the cover, it is "a love letter written to reading" (George Steiner). The book says: "Read in order to live" (Flaubert). It took seven years to write.

Although a Canadian since the 1980s, the Internet describes him as the Director of the National Library of the Argentine Republic, having been born in 1948 in Argentina. He is author of 19 non-fiction books, 10 critical studies and reviews, and is recipient of 21 awards.

Manguel starts the book with a discussion of pictures of reading from ancient Greece, Palestine, Korea and Milan. He then describes the first times he was able to recognize the written word: one was an advertising billboard. He was first able to read the written word at age 4.

I too was interested in books, but the only books in my home when I was this age, on an isolated farm, were the Bible and some Salvation Army books published by the Christian sect in which my mother was raised. Unlike Manguel, I learned to read when I went to school, starting in grade 1. I was reading books by grade 4. Because of our isolation, I attended school by correspondence for grades 1 to 3. I valued books greatly and, inspired by scarcity, began copying The Bible.

Manguel was a bookworm, as was I, but he read the Canon, while I read whatever was around until we moved to the city and I got a library card, in grade 4. I went to the Bookmobile that drove to and stopped at the end of my block. The first book I remember taking out was a fantasy about children: I found it highly confusing. So did Manguel: "Later I was able to dissociate myself from their fiction; but in my childhood, and much of my adolescence, what the book told me, however fantastical, was true at the time of my reading" (Manguel, 1996, p. 11

[subsequently referred to only by page number]). I learned the difference with my first book, whose magic I concluded just could not be true. Like for Manguel, one of readings' benefits for me was clarifying some expressions that I had absorbed incorrectly.

Manguel experienced the world through books; I never thought of it that way. He read both non-fiction and fiction. I only read fiction when I was young, and lots of it. I remember, in grade 6, hiding a book in my lap at school so I could keep reading it. I got caught after a couple of days but the teacher laughed and did not get mad.

Manguel read all of the world's major religious texts, so did I. He makes more sense of them than I did, saying "The worship of the book is ... is one of the tenets of a literate society. Islam takes the notion even further: The Koran is not only one of the creations of God but one of his attributes, like His omnipresence or His compassion" (p. 8). "Each book was a world unto itself, and in it I took refuge" (p. 11).

Canadian essayist Stan Persky said to Manguel: "(F)or readers, there must be a million autobiographies, since we seem to find, in book after book, the traces of our lives. Virginia Woolf said: "To write down one's impressions of *Hamlet* as one reads it year after year, would be virtually to record one's own autobiography, for as we know more of life, so Shakespeare comments on what we know" (page 8).

I wish this could be said of the literature on public sector innovation. Most of those who write about it quote the same literature over and over but do not build on it. Worse, they are unaware of a great deal of its literature. They consult five journals over the most recent ten years, when little has been published on public sector innovation. My current most-read writings are decades old, so they don't show up. My own writing has used my knowledge and experience of an innovative government to build an understanding of the issues that come to my attention.

Manguel's approach to writings is quite like that recommended by Thomas à Kempis, who instructed his students to take "a book into thine hands as Simeon the Just took the Child Jesus into his arms to carry him and kiss him. And thou hast finished reading, close the book and give thanks for every word out of the mouth of God; because in the Lord's field thou hast found a hidden treasure" (p. 15).

The lucky young Manguel worked in a bookstore. I worked in a meat packing plant (but, by doing so, got to go to university). One day Jorge Luis Borges, the famous Argentinian short-story writer, essayist, poet and translator, came into Manguel's bookstore with his mother. Borges is regarded as a key figure in Spanish-language and international literature. His best-known books, *Ficciones* (transl. Fictions) and *El Aleph* (transl. The Aleph), published in the 1940s, are collections of short stories exploring motifs such as dreams, labyrinths, chance, infinity, archives, mirrors, fictional writers and mythology. Borges' works have contributed to philosophical literature and the fantasy genre, and have had a major influence on the magic realist movement in 20th century Latin American literature. Borges stopped Manguel mid-line to analyze "the stylistic device of defining someone or something by means of an image or category that, while appearing to be exact, forces the reader to make up a personal definition" (p. 17). I, too, I am aware of the definitions of innovation authors use: in fact, most authors do not provide a

definition, maybe assuming the reader knows what they mean or maybe not wanting to bother to actually engage with the field or as an admission that the writing is not actually about innovation. Manguel read to Borges, causing Manguel to nightly reorganize his mental bookshelves.

Manguel says: “Aside from Borges, a few friends, several teachers and a review here and there [who] suggested titles now and again,... largely my encounters with books have been a matter of chance” (p. 20) .... “(T)he artificial dichotomy between life and reading is actively encouraged by those in power. Demotic [popular] regimes demand that we forget, and therefore they brand books as superfluous luxuries; totalitarian regimes demand that we not think, and therefore they ban and threaten and censor; both, by and large, require that we become stupid and that we accept our degradation meekly, and therefore they encourage the consumption of pap. In such circumstances, readers cannot be but subversive.” (pp. 21-22).

Manguel calls his introductory section and chapter The Last Page because it was meant to be the Conclusion. It is followed by sections and chapters called Acts of Reading (Reading Shadows, The Silent Readers, The Book of Memory, Learning to Read, the Missing First Page, Picture Reading, Being Read To, The Shape of the Book, Private Reading, Metaphors of Reading); Powers of the Reader (Beginnings, Ordainers of the Universe, Reading the Future, The Symbolic Reader, Reading within Walls, Stealing Books, The Author as Reader, The Translator as Reader, Forbidden Reading, The Book Fool); Endpaper Pages.

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In 1967, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) linguist Noam Chomsky published an essay on The Responsibility of Intellectuals in the *New York Review of Books* (Chomsky, 1967). He said: “It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies” (Chomsky, 1967: 1).

More expansively, he said: “With respect to the responsibility of intellectuals, there are still other, equally disturbing questions. Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than what Macdonald calls the “responsibility of people,” given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy” (Chomsky, 1967: 1).

Canada had an active literature on intellectual history in the 1950s but some people have been critical of the very notion; e.g. Howard A. Doughty, former book reviews editor for *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, who at one time described himself as having a serious distaste for "intellectual history" or its close cousin "the history of ideas." Canada has also had what we call “public intellectuals” (e.g. Frank Underhill, Marshall McLuhan, John Ralston Saul, Michael Ignatieff, Margaret Atwood). Manguel is one of them.

**About the Author:**

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**References:**

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