Of course I should be interested to hear that a new novel by Mr E.M. Forster was going to appear this Spring, but I could never compare that mild expectation of civilised pleasure with the missed heartbeat, the appalled glee I felt when I found on a library shelf a novel by Rider Haggard, Percy Westerman, Captain Brereton or Stanley Weyman which I had not read before.

Graham Greene: ‘The Lost Childhood’.

1. My earliest memory of the pleasure of books: I lie in the sun at the poolside in the small town in Egypt where I grew up. It is midday. I am suddenly overwhelmed with pleasure at the thought of the long afternoon siesta when I will be able to carry on reading Enid Blyton’s *The Castle of Adventure*.

2. The pleasure of reading by oneself is quite different from that of having one’s parents read to one. The latter does not feel like pleasure at all, more like an essential part of life, whose abrogation would devastate one almost as much as the disappearance of one’s parents themselves. The thought of an afternoon reading *The Castle of Adventure*, on the other hand, is bound up, like the thought of sex, with one’s growing awareness of oneself as both private, bounded by the contours of one’s body, and immersed in a world of others.

3. What does not get into even the best critical essay: A friend writes to me from Paris about the pleasures of reading the novels of Thomas Bernhard: ‘I find myself waking up at three in the morning with a broad grin all over my face.’ Yet *that* is what the best criticism is always trying to convey.
4. ‘A good read.’ Firm in their belief (which is completely justified) that this is the ultimate criterion, newspaper reviewers forget that one person’s good read is another person’s big yawn. I, for example, go on finding Kafka and Beckett good reads but find I am bored stiff by Ian Fleming (or A.S. Byatt’s Possession).

5. Does this mean that there is no such thing as objective quality, only personal taste? One does not need to be a philosopher to realize that there are two truths jostling each other here: (1) Some books are better than others; (2) no objective criteria will ever be devised to establish that hierarchy.

6. But if there are no objective criteria how can we say with certainty that some books are better than others, that Kafka is better than Ian Fleming? Northrop Frye’s answer seems eminently sensible: Don’t worry your head about such questions in the abstract; you will soon find that you finish some books and not others, that you return to some books and not to others.

7. Borges was once asked: How have you managed to read so much, Mr Borges? I haven’t read so much, he replied, only since I never read anything I don’t enjoy I have remembered all I have read.

8. Of course there are books which we read compulsively but which, by the time we have reached the end, leave us dissatisfied. And there are others, which we may have struggled through with effort, which nevertheless leave us at the end with the sense that we would like to reread them. Most detective stories fall into the first category; Ulysses, for me, into the second.

9. There are books too which we read with pleasure and excitement at some point in our lives but which we find unreadable later on. This does not necessarily mean that we have grown more discerning, only that for a while we entered into their orbit and have now passed out of it. Auden mentions the poems of Rilke in this connection; I think of Lowry’s Under the Volcano.

10. There are also of course some books we could not get on with at all when we first read them but which seem utterly delightful when we return to them much later on. Jane Austen’s novels are a case in point for me.

11. Different again is the case of books which have a particularly powerful charge and which one can only reread at certain moments in one’s life. Dostoevsky’s novels are a prime example of this for me.