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Books, eh?

I've had some weird experiences recently reading books. No, not those kind of experiences but something that has caught me for the first time.

When I was young and started the same secondary school as my brother, it turned out that we had the same English teacher. He asked her about my reading habits one day, saying that I read three or four books at the same time and was this normal? He worries so, Ah bless. Of she said it was normal, and was pleasantly surprised when it turned out that I actually enjoyed Trollope, Shakespeare and Dickens.

Since then of course, I read voraciously. Books, magazines, comics at one stage and newspapers. In fact I read so much that I can tell you all the ingredients of a bottle of Head and Shoulders shampoo, what the special ingredient is in HP sauce and the full listing of additives on the back of a Heinz ketchup bottle. At various times in the house this was all I had to read, and I got right down to the small print about the copyright. So I'm somewhat disturbed to find that the last three books I've started to read I can't finish. It is a very strange experience and leaves me somewhat angsty; unfinished business and all that.

Now these aren't turgid Stephen Donaldson books, or some dire David Eddings humongous fantasy decology; not even L Ron Hubbard at his best. In order they are: Black House by Stephen King and Peter Straub, the Lake House by James Patterson and, just in case you thought it was a 'house' thing, Quicksilver by Neal Stephenson. The first two are by international bestsellers, we all know Stephen King and James Patterson is responsible for Alex Cross – the hero in books (and movies) Kiss The Girls and Along Came A Spider. Both of who are 'good' writers I think we can agree. Neal Stephenson is the author of Snow Crash and The Diamond Age amongst others and I have been raving about him for ages now – indeed Quicksilver has just won the Arthur C. Clarke award for 2004.

So what's going on?

I start with King and Straub. This book is just a word fest, for the sake of. I like Stephen King's books, and have mentioned this on my [blog](#) a number of times. I know he is a bit wordy at

times, but it always seems to be just enough to paint a detailed picture, and keep the plot and story line going. I think this is how he makes his books so creepy: you get a full picture of what is happening, the background to the characters and begin to empathise with them and their surroundings. However, I assume, that Straub has just taken this and run with it – there is some much detail, so much description that I'm at page 60 and nothing, and I mean nothing, has happened. Worse it looks as if nothing is going to happen soon. I may re-visit this one, but I doubt it.

Patterson on the other hand suffers from the Jackie Collins phenomenon. You lift any book by her, or any of the other airport favourites, and you'll find short sentences, in short paragraphs in two or three pages chapters. I know this is a device for writing and selling block busters, but it is just so Goddamned lazy it actually makes me annoyed. As I moved from one chapter to the next I kept finding myself say, whoa, hang on, you just can't leave there... Where did that character come from? Why did that just happen?

Now I have to say, in the poor man's defence, that it is a follow up to "The No.1 bestselling When the Wind Blows" and so it may be that this is all assumed. Apart from the fact that the book therefore doesn't stand alone, leading to much smaller sales I assume, it still doesn't forgive the lazy and frankly trite writing that the first twenty chapters (60 pages – you work it out!) has left me, well looking for another book.

The Stephenson book really pissed me off. I know that he is moving away from topics covered in Snow Crash and The Diamond Age and is doing something different, but this is just not interesting. It reads like someone has done all their research into the period and then woven this into a novel, or trilogy that makes up The [Baroque](#) Cycle. It reads like an enlivened text book from some O Level history class, and it really pains me to say that. I've read a couple of hundred pages of this and I know it is going to get better, I know that things will begin to come together and the next two books will be a wonderful story but Jesus, the prose I have to wade through to get there. Historical facts dominate, real people are characters and the plot follows a version of history just slightly out of kilt from our own. What it comes right down to is that he makes me feel stupid for not knowing who invented this or that, who wrote which treatise and who founded the Royal Society. At least my history teachers didn't do that.

What now for these books and their authors? Stephen King will still get my attention, but his job shares will not. I'll try reading some of Patterson's better known books – catch up with Alex Cross. And God help me, I'll continue to struggle on with Quicksilver and hope to report later what an idiot I am for not 'getting it' sooner. Until then I'll enjoy some Kay Scarpetta novels from Patricia Cornwell. At least I've been to Richmond, Virginia where most of her books are set: that's Leslie's hometown...



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