

What I'm Reading—Lauren Aimee Curtis

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'There are only so many plots,' writes Renata Adler in *Speedboat*, 'There are insights, prose flights, rhythms, felicities. But only so many plots'.

What matters to me is voice. Reading is intimacy in the truest sense. When it comes to voice, I just know. I can tell from the first lines. The story of Renata Adler's *Speedboat*, reprinted by the New York Review of Books after twenty-six years of dead air, is, along with its author, a remarkable story in itself. Adler was once as big as the movies but after a raucous career in journalism she was all but banished from the New York literary world, and over time her two works of fiction (*Speedboat*, *Pitch Dark*) became cult classics. Both books are postmodernist in style, structurally fragmented, and playful with language. *Speedboat* opens,

Nobody died that year. Nobody prospered. There were no births or marriages. Seventeen reverent satires were written—disrupting a cliché and, presumably, creating a genre. That was the dream, of course, but many of the most important things, I find, are the ones learned in your sleep.

A common trait of postmodernist fiction is thought to be an absence of emotion. Adler's tone is deadpan and wry but there are vulnerable moments here too—you just have to catch them. You might have to read between the lines. Personally, when reading, I don't want to be beaten over the head. I'd rather let it sneak up on me. Speaking on sentiment, Adler has said 'I want to find my way there, but not cheaply.' Without a doubt *Speedboat* was the most fascinating book I read this year. It so eloquently describes the inside and outside world of the self—it's about writing, listening, and coexisting with other people.

2014 was the year of reading women. Inspired by the [Vida count](#), two male literary journalists, after surveying their own bookshelves and grossly underestimating the discrepancy, made a commitment to solely reading and reviewing books by women for a year. Writer and illustrator, Joanna Walsh, began her own movement modestly—she made bookmarks listing 250 of her favourite female authors and gave them to friends. Subsequently the hashtag [#readwomen2014](#) grew. For Walsh it was more about awareness. She did not plan to exclusively read women in 2014, and neither did I. But the movement excited me because drawing attention to all kinds of marginalised authors is overdue and necessary. And also because I have too many friends—both male and female—who have said that they just prefer the male voice, without thinking about the reasons why this might be. This year I read some truly amazing work by women: Catherine Lacey's *Nobody is Ever Missing*, Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Ottessa Moshfegh's *McGlue*, Mary Miller's *Big World*, Jenny Offill's *Dept. of Speculation* and one of Eartha Kitt's many memoirs—*I'm Still Here*, were in my mind for days after finishing them.

There is a certain kind of voice in fiction I often find myself being drawn to, the poetically aesthetic, self-reflexive kind I fell in love with after first reading Marguerite Duras' *The Lover* many moons ago. In four books by four poets I encountered this voice: Eileen Myles' *Inferno*, Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband* and Christine Schutt's *Florida*. When I say reading is intimate what I mean is that sometimes it's just one thought, one sentence, that so perfectly communicates something you already understood, it's almost nostalgic. Eileen Myles: 'Writing is just what I do to frame my longing. I replace myself'. Anne Carson: 'Fiction forms what streams in us. Naturally it is suspect'. Perhaps I'm drawn to fictional texts that explore the act of writing because writing, especially fiction, is still so strange, so elusive, and so compelling to me. It's about articulating things we're used to feeling our way around in the dark.

Some books speak to you. Christine Schutt's prose in *Florida* is so exact, pared back, and then at once opulent, her roots in poetry so evident. 'I miss the touching ways of men,' she writes, 'I miss my mother the way I think I will when she is dead.' Some people don't like sad books, sad songs, or sad films. To be honest, I don't understand these people. Because you can't have humour without sadness and often things are both. Schutt is a master at conveying this emotional complexity. In *Florida* she writes,

A lot of what I said was mean and full of blame and said to make my mother cry, but then, when she did cry, I was embarrassed (this happened often), and I went to the kitchen to get us new drinks. She called out, ‘Come light up one your funny cigarettes and blow it in my face’.

Back to *Speedboat*, Renata Adler: ‘I do not think much of writers in whom nothing is at risk.’ All the books I loved this year have this in common—they risked something. Through voice, structure, subject matter, through the fictional personas they created, the form they took. They challenged ideas about categories of fiction and nonfiction. No more was this evident than in Marion May Campbell’s *konkretion*—theoretically inclined, self-reflexive, and so wildly ‘Un-Australian’ in its ‘Australianness’.

Campbell’s voice is similar to Adler’s—it is smart, acutely observational, hilariously deadpan. But it is also raw, and completely moving. ‘In some ways it’s good to have disappeared,’ she writes, ‘No one will see her shrivelled claws flying over the keyboard—they’ll only see what swarms and buzzes through the words.’ Campbell masters that perfect blend of humour and sadness. I want to say something ridiculous like: ‘You’ll laugh! You’ll cry!’ because you will. And isn’t that what you want when reading?

Lauren Aimee Curtis is a writer from Sydney. Her fiction has appeared in Overland, The Canary Press, Two Serious Ladies, Going Down Swinging, and other anthologies. This year she was announced runner-up in the Overland Story Wine Prize. She is currently at work on a manuscript of short stories, and reads submissions for Gigantic and The Canary Press.

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