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**The Cone of Silence: A Conversation**

*Ross Gibson and Nick Keys conducted this conversation over email between March and April, 2019.*

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**Nick Keys:** Questions about reading tend to begin with a what. As in: what are you reading? Let’s instead begin with the when and the where. Tell me about your early reading experiences, both literally and imaginatively: when and where did you first read?

**Ross Gibson:** My first conscious commitment to reading came — I’m guessing I was nine or ten — when I realised that time-and-space could reconfigure around me as I delved into a book. I had no words or theories about reading, of course. I just noticed that I could disappear from 1960s Brisbane during trackless amounts of time until I came back unscathed but kinda changed a little bit for the better. What’s more, no one suggested this was weird or unhealthy. My parents, my three older sisters, my younger brother, everyone seemed to be totally unconcerned about the disappearances. Indeed the message was: ‘so long as no-one’s getting hurt, go for it’.

But here’s the twist: as I remember, there were no books in our house, except for a big American encyclopaedia set. (I presume some door-to-door salesman had hooked my folks into a subscription scheme sometime during my sisters’ schooling.) One summer, I waded into those volumes. As I say, I’m guessing I was nine or ten. I just slalomed through them in an idiosyncratic way. I went on a jag where I read everything maritime in all the volumes. It was just a free-form, associative process: read an article about trade winds … chase up some beguiling reference that would lead over to an article about longitude, and on and on. The only stipulation I set was: ‘if you find yourself in an article where things STOP being maritime, bail on that article and find another sea-faring thread elsewhere’. Who knows why this seemed a good idea at the outset! But very quickly it became intoxicating because it took me all over the world and all through the centuries, including way back into Arabian mathematics, Polynesian navigation, colonialism, etc etc etc. While I was reading, space and time were constantly reconfiguring.

PLUS I was plunging into this specialist maritime language that I got the hang of reasonably quickly. So THAT was a revelation: you could disappear into language too! And it so happens that language was my dad’s enthusiasm. He wasn’t a reader, he was a carpenter; but he had this beautiful minimalist ease with spoken language. I recognised his language-gift from the get-go. So my oddball reading project was a way of staying on his wavelength: every now and then we’d have a chat about some word or other.

At the end of the maritime summer, my mum says, ‘you know there are these “library” places?’  My eyes bug out. And she adds, ‘they’re free, and you can ride your bike up there whenever you want.’

So I tool up there thinking I’ll keep going on the maritime jag. What to start with? I ask the lady behind the desk and … in retrospect I can barely believe this happened … she walks me through the shelves and digs out Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. Which I eat up a few times and which leads to Steinbeck. Which then leads to all these masculine American guys. James Jones, Nelson Algren, John Dos Passos, as I recall.

By which time, the jag is not only maritime. Now it’s just kinda otherworldly. Even with the machismo in Algren and his ilk … I’m from a predominantly feminine family, and I read the Algren stuff and think, ‘Hmmmph … so that kind of whackiness is out there in the world! Whaddya know?!’  I’m just this kid, of course, and the books are full of stuff I don’t understand; but that’s OK, because the books are conjuring time-and-space in these disruptive ways. Plus they have this metallic American lingo. So I’m perfectly happy gathering up the 30 per cent that I’m understanding.

To answer your question therefore, the when-and-where of my initial reading was this wildly unstructured but avidly associative scramble through historical and imaginative space-and-time. From the outset I just presumed that reading was invented to let this space-time explosion happen; I presumed that to be a reader was to get temporarily atomised across this constellation of space-time configurations. I never had an idea that reading was supposed to mirror my own life or tell me how to live. I was lucky that I didn’t need a system to validate who I was. Really lucky. I now understand how many people had to go to reading for self-affirmation and to feel not-alone. But for me, lucky sap, the idea was that while my life was blandly happening in actual space-and-time in god-awful Bjelke-Petersen Brisbane, this life was also wildly unlimited somehow because there seemed to be a shit-load of books out there and no one was preventing me from seeking them out and mashing them together.

**NK:** Free Associate, Re-configure, Disrupt, Explode, Atomise, Constellate and Mash. These terms jump out at me. How actively they describe the act of reading!

That you began reading with an analogue search term in the encyclopaedia is very illuminating about the Gibson mind and method: exploring with a selective principle, archive swerving, pattern recognition and the poetics of technical language. That this analogue search term was maritime is intriguing for a few reasons but the main one is how Sydney – a maritime place if ever there was – becomes so important for you. In *Blustertown*, you identify Sydney as the place ‘that puts hooks in where you do your hardest wanting’. Perhaps those hooks have some connection to Sydney being a living manifestation of the maritime worlds you’d been disappearing into as a ten-year old Brisbanite?

Let’s keep this conversation going chronologically. Where does your reading develop after that early irradiation to the metallic voices of America? You told me recently that you got one of the last Leavisite educations in the West. What was that like?

**RG:** 1979 to 1982, I did a PhD in Thatcher’s London, investigating colonial explorers’ narratives and landscape representation. When I got out of there and came back to Australia, Sydney was thrilling. I was just wonderstruck and exhilarated, as if I knew the place already and had found where I was supposed to be. I now understand that a lot of it was to do with what a maritime town it is. Plus it felt like a stupendous privilege, to be living in the golden world the Eora had fashioned. At the time, I didn’t understand much about what a messy, complex aftermath we are in, having commandeered all this Indigenous infrastructure.

But I’ve jumped over a decade. To go back and fill in some of the reader-history that you are asking about: from school I went into the four-year selective ‘honours stream’ in English Linguistics and Literature at the University of Queensland. It was like being drafted into the Manchester United youth academy. It was so demanding and competitive. And I had no idea how to game it. No-one in my family, or even in my suburb, as far as I could tell, had ever been to university. But the good news was that the teaching approach was intensive close reading. In other words, I’d been doing this since I was nine!

This was the drill:

Get inside the chosen text; understand it from every possible angle — structural, linguistic, musical, ethical, historical, generic. If you feel compelled to do any reading outside the text, bring what you learn in the secondary text straight back to the primary text. Serve the text. Reading outside the text must be regarded as minor-key work. Only after at least two readings of the text … only then is it permissible to dally with secondary reading. But be careful, because the secondary reading can fuzz your thinking; it can dull down the vibrating you’re meant to do with the primary text.

Once again, I got lucky. Because my family and neighbourhood were so not-academic, each time I pulled my head out of the text, there was the ‘real world’ demanding attention and comparison. So, first point, I was saved from the art-for-art’s-sake blather that the close-reading approach can encourage. And, second point, I received this high-powered hermeneutic education (without my being aware that hermeneutics was a thing). Third point: because the university changed over to the semester system (as opposed to the year-of-study approach) in the year I started, the lecturers just treated it as an opportunity to throw eight years-worth of reading at us across a four-year span.

They didn’t re-design the courses; they just crushed them into half the previous duration! The Romantic Literature course, which used to run for a year … they just doubled down and banged it out over six months, without reducing the reading-load. They lined up all the subjects that used to be electives and said, ‘here you go, these are all compulsory’. We read so much and we wrote so much. And the lecturers had to mark so much. They soon wised up to their overload mistakes. But it took a few years to sort it out and by the time we finished our four years, we had read more than any cohort before or since. It was gruelling. But extraordinary. Those of us who survived — the Youth Academy kids who survived to play at Old Trafford — we were kinda freakishly fit. I remember a fourth-year subject which was called, simply, ‘Melville’. We read every single novel, most of them more than once. Patterns emerged inside that magnificent corpus, patterns that were just revelatory. I haven’t read at that level of intensity ever again.

It was manic. And not sustainable or healthy, especially if you value family and friendships. No goofing off. (I now believe goofing off is extraordinarily important). But the rigours let me glimpse what can happen when you get deep inside a text and bounce the light around into every corner for as long as you can, especially if the text is by someone of the calibre of Emily Dickinson or W. Shakespeare.

A few years ago, I read Anne Carson’s *EROS the Bittersweet* for the first time. (It was her PhD thesis! Bewilderingly good.) Bear with me, here’s a long quote, where she is ruminating on the transition out of Ancient Greek orality to written literature:

An individual who lives in an oral culture uses his senses differently than one who lives in a literate culture, and with that different sensual deployment comes a different way of conceiving his own relations with his environment, a different conception of his body and a different conception of his self. The difference revolves around the physiological and psychological phenomenon of individual self-control. Self-control is minimally stressed in an oral milieu where most of the data important for survival and understanding are channelled into the individual through the open conduits of his senses, particularly his sense of sound, in a continuous interaction linking him with the world outside him. Complete openness to the environment is a condition of optimum awareness and alertness for such a person, and a continual fluent interchange of sensual impressions and responses between the environment and himself is the proper condition of his physical and mental life. To close his sense off from the outside world would be counterproductive to life and to thought.

When people begin to learn reading and writing, a different scenario develops. Reading and writing require focusing the mental attention upon a text by means of the visual sense. As an individual reads and writes he gradually learns to close or inhibit the input of his senses, to inhibit or control the responses of his body, so as to train energy and thought upon the written words. He resists the environment outside him by distinguishing and controlling the one inside him. … In making the effort he becomes aware of the interior self as an entity separable from the environment and its input, controllable by his own mental action … The individual personality gathers itself to resist disintegration.

On reading this passage, I thought of those four years at UQ inside the 1970s troppo-Leavisite cult: how hermetically we had to shut out the clamouring world, how much energy we had to train upon so many written words. The UQ overload was unreal, loony, unsustainable, but it was also an enormous privilege insofar as I happened to come through it healthy enough and well befriended. That eight-years-in-four compaction and that mania for reading primary texts: it does not happen nowadays. And it probably shouldn’t, not to the extremity that I and my Youth Academy buddies had to survive. But I do think it is important to develop reading techniques, controlled via one’s own mental actions and within one’s environmental setting, that saturate the self with the intricacies of the text. You’ve gotta let a great text give over ALL its affordances. You’ve gotta set the conditions for that catalysis.

Sorry, this is meant to be a conversation. What about you? I’ve always been intrigued about how this process of self-sequestration works for people who had the internet land on them while they were trying to become readers. When I was learning how to read deeply, all I had to do was stanch my doses of television, govern the urge to daydream in the movies and then just read for hours and days on end. You folks, and everyone coming after you, have been formed within the deluge of online ramification. What does that fibrillating, capillary connectedness, attractiveness, distractiveness do to the sequestrated reader-brain that you are trying to build?

**NK:** Landed on is a good way to describe it. People of my age, born in the early 80s, growing up on the east coast of Australia, sit at an interesting point on the technological threshold: we were teenagers when it happened. The internet landed on us at the same time as our hormones went berserk. If you’re born late 70s then you were of university age when it hit. If you’re born late 80s then it’d already become the air that you breathe.

Amy Heckerling’s superb film *Clueless* is the ticket here. This film came out in 1995, when I was 12, and I saw it with a whole bunch of new high school friends at the Hoyts cinema in Westfield Belconnen. Under hormonal attack, and crippled by coolness, we only half-watched the film, and by the cinematic authority vested in me by my father, I dismissed it as trash. Much later I saw it again and was bowled over by how smart it is. All the contours of our technological future were being made visible to us. The main character, Cher, was a perfect herald for what was coming to us: mobile phones, personal computers and cars, and the social network just over the horizon.

An uncanny moment of *Clueless* for me is the shot in Cher’s walk-in-wardrobe where she has a computer that simulates and compares different combinations of clothing. As a basic piece of software it functions the same as the first version of Facebook that Zuckerberg (b. 1984) would later code in his dorm room at Harvard. Cher was Facebook before Facebook. Cher was millennial before the millennials.

I’m very conscious of the words I just used talking about movies in response to a question of what the internet did to my reading development. Such an answer activates some of the capillaries of the distractive mode of attention that you’re asking about. A key issue, obviously, is the movement across media formats: *Clueless* is an adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, a classic author whose work I only know through the transmigration of her books into film and television. It was not the internet that did this. If you grew up on Gameboy, Walkman and the glow of television, then chances are you were wired differently.

But I also grew up on the ink of newspapers. I was a sport-obsessed child and hoovered up everything to do with soccer and cricket and much else besides. I loved the scores of Sheffield Shield games. I would stare at the Premier League table for an age running over all the permutations needed for my team Arsenal to triumph in the title race over our rivals Manchester United. I loved the poetics of numbers as a child. I was very fast at calculation but terrible at algebra.

When my moral and critical consciousness developed I devoured the current affairs and news sections of the papers. I was weaned on Aunty, Fairfax and Jack Waterford’s *Canberra Times*. My father was a Whitlamist, my mother full of compassion: hence my primary coding as a social democrat. By 16 I was systematically cutting up and archiving all the think pieces from the *Good Weekend* that seemed to me helpful in trying to figure out what the fuck was going on in the world. 9/11 happened when I was 17 and this gave some impetus to the knowledge quest.

One reason I dig the Carson quote is because it helps me to see how oral and embodied my sense of literature was during this whole period. The news was information. Literature was drama class or going to a play or Dad reciting Shakespeare at the dinner table. Literature didn’t exist in books. It was words sounded out by people. The only book I remember reading outside of the syllabus was Herman Hesse’s *The Glass Bead Game* and I can recall almost nothing about it. In university I acquired some of the discipline of the sequestered reader and soon became addicted to theory and avant-garde American poetry, where I found David Antin, who made talking and thinking into an oral form of literature.

What did the internet do? It hyper-accelerated the existing trend toward screen reading. Reading was scattered across the surface of screens. Reading became even more a matter of scanning for information. Semiotic ways of reading supplanted verbal ones. In our optical rampage we forgot that reading is music for the eyes. This was the gift of vowels the ancients had given us, autonomously readable text, the voice of the author, right there, in your eye’s ear. But images travel at the speed of light and that is way too fast for sound.

**RG:** Yes … and I’m pretty sure that this screen reading is real reading too. Certainly it generates its own kind of knowing. Something valid and valuable. Villem Flusser’s writing nails this, I reckon. And Harun Farocki’s extraordinary video ‘tracts’. I’m really not that interested in lambasting screen reading, as if to say ‘it has blown away the serious and more important activity of deep reading’. They’re both rich modes — skimmy screen reading and deeper-dive textual reading. Just cognitively different.

And why not try to have both? As you say, *Clueless* is super-smart. And poignant. And mordant. Why would you abjure that? The question is whether — neurologically — each mode cancels the other out. Y’know, that lament that ‘my phone has destroyed my ability to read for more than five minutes.’ Anne-Carson-style, I think it just comes down to a kind of personal discipline, or determination — to set the conditions of text-reading as opposed to screen-skimming.

And … different as the two cognitive modes are, I do think that each can ‘flavour’ the other. One example: in the dazzling screen reading that happens in some of Kogonada’s video-essays for *Sight & Sound* magazine, he trawls a deep line even as the meditations sparkle all across their surfaces.

And then there’s the other example, the one I’ve been trying to get the hang of for the past twenty years or so. This is a process where the sequestration that Carson describes still allows deep engagement with ideas and feelings even in situations where the cone of silence might get drawn down for just a few minutes, or even seconds. Without going into details, there was a challenging period a couple of decades ago when some health crises in my family called for long periods of vigilance. It was implausible to expect the extended, uninterrupted stretches of reading concentration that I had customarily brought to books. Through trial and error I found that reading haikus was the best thing. Ten seconds ON — long minutes OFF — ON again — OFF for a while. Pulsing like this, I read R H Blyth’s magnificent four-volume *HAIKU*. Then I learned how to stretch the aperture of sequestration out to cover, one by one, Pasolini’s Roman Poems. Then came the complete Emily Dickinson.

Those difficult days have passed now. But the experience taught me how to ‘bring the cone down’ just for moments of deepness and then then skip or skim surface-style until the next moment of sequestered deepness. It’s been a blessing, because it’s given me so much poetry-reading. Plus, if I turn the phone off, the brain is still able to take on a Marilynne Robinson novel, or a DeLillo. But I must say … with novels nowadays, if the sentences aren’t ‘singing’ —  haiku-like — I do tend to bail. (Hence people like Robinson and DeLillo are my exemplars.)

Forty years ago I read somewhere (no idea of the citation now!) that there are two kinds of frames that you can place around art. One is centripetal: it forces you deeper and deeper inside the thing that’s been framed, and inside that compression you can break through to insight. The other type of frame is centrifugal; it drops you onto something momentarily framed and then it flings you out in an associative, montagist manner to whatever, whatever is in the “outside world” or in your obsessing head. Novels tend to be centripetal; cinema tends to be centrifugal; but you can get literature such as what DH Lawrence saw in nineteenth-century American literature, which is all about horizon-broaching, all about lighting out for the territories, kinda pre-cinematic, pre-screen-reading. I like how my anxious year-of-haiku-reading showed me that you can get a personal cognitive machine going that oscillates from centripetal to centrifugal to centripetal and on-and-on.

**NK:** My brain was wired by the centrifuges of television, newspaper, cinema and computer. These modes taught me how to read and I will never lambast them. Also, it’s a fallacy to say that screen reading has ‘blown away’ and ‘destroyed’ textual reading when the very opposite is true: it has exponentially increased it. More people – by far – read and write words than ever before. The ways in which text is dealt with has undergone rapid transformation, and this is where neurological questions become, as you say, paramount.

The two terms centrifugal and centripedal are very useful in helping us name the difference in cognitive modes we’re getting at here. The lineage of media technologies has accelerated centrifugal modes of reading, but those centrifuges go back long before the internet, cinema and television. DH Lawrence, as you say, and also Jane Austen.

I’ve now started reading Austen’s *Emma* (the golden rule: if you name drop a book – read the book). Emma herself is already the internet in 1816. There’s a section quite early on when Mr. Knightley, the only one around Highbury who has Emma’s match, refers acerbically to Emma’s reading habits:

‘Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing-up, at various times, of books that she meant to read regularly through –and very good lists they were, very well chosen, and very neatly arranged – sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen – I remember thinking it did her judgement so much credit, that I preserved it some time, and I dare say she must have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to understanding. Where Miss Taylor failed to stimulate, I may safely affirm that Harriet Smith will do nothing. You never could persuade her to read half so much as you wished. You know you could not.’

Wanting the status of being a reader but never actually reading. Hmmm… that sounds familiar. But what bakes my noodle here is thinking about the proliferation of Emma’s reading lists. That’s just like people on Instagram posting alluring photos of books in their houses. A bit later in the book, Emma cajoles Harriet into sitting for a portrait. In her haste to begin the picture we discover Emma’s portfolio of earlier efforts:

Her many beginnings were displayed. Miniatures, half-lengths, whole-lengths, pencil, crayon, and water-colours had all been tried in turn. She had always wanted to do everything, and had made more progress, both in drawing and in music, than many might have done with so little labour as she would ever submit to. She played and sang, and drew in almost every style; but steadiness had always been wanting; and in nothing had she approached the degree of excellence which she would have been glad to command, and ought not to have failed of.

Going in all directions but doing nothing properly. Hmmm… that sounds very familiar! What twice-bakes my noodle here is reflecting on how Emma is making this picture as part of an elaborate scheme to make Mr Elton fall in love with Harriet. She sends Mr Elton off to London with the picture to have it framed. Emma is generating and circulating images in order to induce romance – which is what Tinder does. Emma induces romance in the wrong direction – also what Tinder does. The difference between Miss Emma Woodhouse and the internet is not so very great after all.

We could keep tracking this mode – the ‘Centrifuge to Whatever’– and go far further back than 1816, all the way back to the oral modes Carson speaks of. At which point it seems clear that the oral traditions, which most people in the world never left, are simply migrating into audiovisual culture and bypassing a certain paradigm of textual literacy. The novel is also migrating as part of this dynamic. If all the novels in the world disappeared overnight, novelistic energies would still continue. In the last few decades there has been a clear transmigration of the soul of the popular novel into long-form television.

All of which is to agree that too much talk about screens and attentions spans leads to false simplifications. I do however still burn a candle for the ‘serious and important work of deep reading’. As do you: *let a great text give over ALL its affordances*. The centripetal has qualities that are never entirely transferable to the centrifugal, which is to say, literature does things that only it can do.

Let me take an example from what’s already on the table: Marilynne Robinson. *Housekeeping* was an astonishment to me. The book is set in a small poor town on the edge of a mysterious lake crossed by a rail bridge. For weeks after reading it, I had this sense of the lake lingering around in a freaky way. It’s a cognitive fiction and not a real lake, yet somehow it was, to borrow your phrase, *singing* inside me, like the memory of a real lake. It’s some serious ninja shit, how Robinson manages to generate this embodied sense of a lake in the reader. It’s not in the description of looking at the lake. It’s something to do with mood and the lake as this emanating presence.

Such a sensation is not just a difference in degree but in kind. Jane Campion’s *Top of the Lake*, which lingered in its own way, did not generate any such embodied sensations as *Housekeeping*. It’s the same, although in a different way, with Fred Schepisi’s *Eye of the Storm*: there are dimensions of the novel that simply cannot be made visible in the form of cinema. The interiority of Basil, Dorothy and Elizabeth and the way Patrick White interfaces it descriptively with his fictive Sydney, the way *King Lear* and *The Charterhouse of Parma* hover and weave through the work – it does something specific to the form he is a master of. The best phrase I know to describe it is: cognitive music. The film cannot help you experience why Patrick White is so fucking good. Only reading him deeply can. The zeitgeist is against White and will bury him, and so be it, that’s how it goes – great shit gets wiped out all the time. This only enhances my sense of his value.

I’m moved to learn that your ‘Cone of Silence’ technique was developed in the midst of soul-thickening challenges. I have come to see that illness and deep reading are regularly in close proximity. That you imbibed all of Emily Dickinson in that moment is apposite. I’m also very taken by the idea of personal cognitive machines, and the oscillation of modes, or blended flavours.

**RG:** Another way of thinking about the ‘centripetal’ setting and about the deep-reading determination that Anne Carson identifies: call it CONTEMPLATIVE. Call it contemplative on the understanding that conTEMPLATion is founded on the templum, the template, the focussing frame. (It’s why temples are temples. They are arrayed in the landscapes so as to focus the devotee and to channel the mojo that courses abroad through the country. Name-drop: Vincent Scully’s *The Earth, The Temple, and the Gods.* WHAT a book!) A template is a frame, of course. Deep reading is a frame, of course. Devotional practice. Focussing frames. You get inside the novel or the poem, shut down the outer distractions as much as possible, and allow the stringency of the framed world to bring you some acuity or some defamiliarisation. And here’s where the oscillation-factor is important: the contemplation or meditation that the template affords, really it’s a benison only if you get up off the mat and walk out of the temple sometime during the day. Or as they say in the zen classics, the lamp in the hut shines inside and out. CENTRIPETAL <—> CENTRIFUGAL and back again. That’s the good oscillation.

Hence the benefits, for me, of the past twenty years of haiku reading: the oscillation between the intense contemplative focus of the seventeen syllables, grasped in one beat or breath, and the chancy open-ness of the scan to the horizon, appreciated in the next beat or breath. I can’t tell you how sustaining, how nourishing, that rhythm has been for me. But that’s just me. Each horse has its own stripes. With all this temple talk, I really don’t want to preach. I’m just saying, the oscillation can be good; screeny reading and framey reading can serve each other. And it doesn’t have to be just haikus. Obviously, a long way from the haiku-parlour, Emily Dickinson was a supreme templater. Ditto local epiphany-diviners like Gig Ryan and Emma Lew. Light shines in, light shines out. And the spookier the light, all the better. Emma Lew, case in point.

**NK:** Contemplate, Temple, Template. Wow. That triad nails it right there. The Cone of Silence is a mobile Temple. It’s got a Zen Buddhist tinge to it, for sure, but you’re definitely not preaching. What you’re doing is articulating the life-long discovery of a deep reading technique, and naming some of the fellow travellers in whose ambience the technique lives. What’s compelling about your Cone of Silence is the charged mix of brevity and depth, the blending of two cognitive flavours. It’s both adjusted to the rhythms of contemporary life and sacrificing nothing in the intensity of the act of attention.

It’s one deep reading mode among many. It feels important to me to articulate, as closely as you have here, as many of those modes as we can. As Emma Lew says in that excellent opening poem from *The Wild Reply*, *‘*Of Quite Another Order’: *Let them be collected. Let them be classed with method.*

**Works Cited**

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