

Read All About It

My year of falling in love with literature again

PAUL CUDDIHY

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TO MY MUM AND DAD

For giving me a lifelong love of reading and writing.

TO KAREN

For spending the past twenty-three years with me and my books.

TO LOUISE, REBECCA & ANDREW

*I treasure you all more than any Booker Prize ...
but it would still be nice to win it.*

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'No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance.'

Confucius

'Every night I have to read a book so that my mind will stop thinking about things that I stress about.'

Britney Spears

Introduction

'I have never been able to resist a book about books.'

Anne Fadiman

'What age was I when I learned to read?' I want my mum to tell me I was three or four-years-old, confirming, even all these decades later, that I was a prodigiously talented child and destined for a life in letters. I've always believed that I could read even before I started school, taught by my mum, who was a primary school teacher herself. Her answer, after a few moments' consideration, therefore, comes as a slight disappointment.

'I think you were five or six. You didn't read before you went to school because I didn't want to teach you before you started. You would have learned in primary one and by primary two you would have been a very good reader.'

It shouldn't really matter now, over forty years later, that my delusions of genius are just that. In truth, I don't remember a time when I couldn't read, and regardless of what age I learned, it has remained one of the greatest gifts ever bestowed on me. I apologise if that sounds somewhat grandiose, but it is true. The sentiments also fit in nicely with this book and what I'm attempting to do with it. I wanted to, as the title suggests, fall in love with literature again, and over the course of 2013, my aim was to read more books. I had grown lazy in my reading habits over a period of time, blaming work, children, tiredness and television amongst other things for having done little to tackle my ever-expanding collection of books.

I wonder how many books I have actually read since those early days of primary school and the *'Peter and Jane'* series of books which were used to teach children in Scottish schools back in the early 1970s. I start to think about childhood

memories of reading, though the most vivid ones remain wrapped up with corporal punishment that was also part and parcel of school life in Scotland back then.

Those of you of a similar vintage will remember the SRA (Science Research Associates) reading programme that was taught in schools, with different colour coding being used to determine the level of reading competency of each child. The aim was obviously to encourage reading but also to challenge pupils to improve and, therefore, move up the colour chart; I think silver was the top one, but I could be wrong. Someone with a better memory than mine, and that could be just about anyone, can correct me if necessary. One afternoon during the weekly 'SRA time' five of us slipped *Commando* comic books inside our SRA books and read tales of derring-do against Fritz and the rest of those dastardly Nazis. We would have got away with it, too, if it wasn't for the fact one boy, whose name has been withheld to protect the idiocy, was sitting with his back to the teacher, who spied the illicit reading material. My comrade quickly buckled under interrogation and revealed his co-conspirators. In short, he 'grassed' the rest of us up and we were all belted for that transgression.

Later that same year – it was primary seven – I fell foul of our teacher again. Friday afternoon was designated 'story time', and the teacher would read to us for the last hour of the day. The book she'd chosen was *Master of Morgana* by Allan Campbell McLean, a wonderful adventure story set on the Scottish island of Skye. It was thrilling, exciting, dangerous and utterly captivating. After three weeks, I couldn't wait another seven days for the next instalment, so straight after school on the Friday I headed to the local library and borrowed the book, spending the whole weekend reading it. When I returned to school on Monday morning, not only did I boast about finishing the book, I foolishly revealed what happened in it to the rest of my classmates. When the teacher found out, I was hauled to the front of the class and belted again.

For years afterwards, I remained appalled that I had actually been punished for showing some initiative and reading in my own time. If anything was ever likely to put me off reading, then it was this incident. Of course, with age comes wisdom (hopefully) and I now realise that I was punished for being a smart-arse and ruining the book for everyone else. It was a salutary lesson, since I will endeavour, in writing about any particular book on the following pages, not to reveal all lest it spoil your own reading experiences.

Primary school punishments were always unlikely to stop me reading, though teenage angst and apathy could easily have done so. It was a problem when I was at school and it remains so to this day – how do you get teenagers, and boys in particular, to read? My suggestion, while not solving the issue, might help ... give them something to read that they might enjoy. I apologise to any English teacher reading this because I know it sounds flippant, and with a teenage son who does not read books at all, I know how difficult it is, but I think more care in the subject matter would help, and that's advice equally applicable to parents and teachers.

I just remember my own experience of secondary school and our fifth-year Higher English class. While the girls were given D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* to study, the boys were handed *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller. It was an inspired choice by our teacher, Peter McGhee, and a class of fifteen and sixteen-year-old boys were suddenly engrossed in a book that was, first of all, hilarious and salacious, but one that, upon closer study, was also profoundly moving. It was still the funny bits that got us at that age.

I love that book, and the experience of that class, and it remains one of my fondest memories from just over five years spent at Turnbull High School, so much so that I still retain the copy I was given back in 1982. Technically, I suppose you could call that stealing, but is there not some sort of statute of limitations when it comes to these things? I'd also like to meet Peter McGhee again and shake his hand, maybe buy him a pint, and tell him that I think he probably

helped to make lifetime readers of all the boys who were in that class.

If my love of books was cemented by *Catch 22*, which I actually read again last year and enjoyed just as much, then my love of writing was also in full flow by then, with endless poems churned out in the privacy of my bedroom. I still have many of them in my possession. Not surprisingly, they're not very good. This is from a poem circa 1984 entitled *Waiting for the Train*.

*Every morning in the pouring rain,
She's always waiting for the train;
And I've noticed her just standing there.*

*Every morning in the summer sun,
She's waiting there with everyone,
And I've noticed her just standing there.*

*If only she knew; if only I could tell her.
If only she was mine, then I'd feel a whole lot better;
And she'd be waiting for the train,
Always sheltered from the rain,
And I'd be happy, and so would she,
But for just now I can only dream.*

The poem continues in a similar vein – I will spare you any more pain – but two things immediately spring to mind on reading it again after all these years. One is that I have no recollection of who the mystery girl is that I was writing about and, two, even if I had declared any romantic intentions at the time, she'd have probably jumped under that train if she read my poem.

In much the same way that I have no pre-reading memory, the same is true about writing. It's as if, from the moment the words on a page became clear to me, then I wanted to fill blank pages with my own words. That began with stories which were pastiches of the *Roy of the Rovers*' comics I read at

the time, using the same characters to create my own work. I would show my efforts to my mum or dad, who would offer words of praise and encouragement, regardless of the quality. I suspect they weren't very good. I always wish my parents had kept these stories. It would have been interesting to look back on them and see if I could detect any writing 'talent' at that young age – as opposed to any writing 'talent' now, I hear you whisper cruelly. It might also have proved to be a nice little nest-egg for them on the off-chance that I ever do manage to become a famous writer, in which case they could immediately put the stories up for sale on eBay.

That encouragement was, of course, vital, in making me continue to put pen to paper and believe – I still do – that I have something to say which some people might like to read. I've tried to do the same thing with my three children, though with varying degrees of success, certainly in terms of their love of reading.

As I've grown older, and certainly in recent years, I've found that my own love of reading has been equalled, or even surpassed, by my love of buying books. It's a habit, a hobby, an obsession or a sickness, depending on your point of view and also which member of my circle of friends and family you choose to ask. I'll save you the bother of asking my wife, Karen, and tell you she believes it's a sickness.

With each book that I've bought there has been an increase in the guilt I feel at not reading enough. The motivation for this project, therefore, is to try and assuage that guilt. The idea actually came from one of my daughters, Rebecca, who in 2012, had to keep a reading diary as one of her assignments for her English class at university. It involved reading a number of different things – a novel, a short-story, a play and a poem – and it was from this that the germ of an idea began to take root in my mind. My original aim was simply to try and read more books in 2013, and just keep a note of them so that I could remember everything I read. That it has now become an Appendix in this book tells you that my initial idea has expanded somewhat.

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In as much as it is possible to love inanimate objects, I do love books, and this literary journey throughout 2013 has only served to strengthen that love. I also hope, in committing my experiences to the page that you too, like Anne Fadiman, are not able to resist a book about books.

You Say You Want A Resolution

'I love the smell of book ink in the morning.'

Umberto Eco

The last song we sing at our Christmas night party is Matt McGinn's *The Wee Kirkcudbright Centipede*, at about six o'clock on Boxing Day morning. Apart from the fact that it's probably my favourite song ever, by this stage of proceedings I can't really focus on any of the words on the song sheets I brought with me, and so have resorted to playing tunes on the guitar from memory. It's a simple four-chord song and I know all the words, ingrained in my head and my heart from childhood, so it's a perfect choice. Everyone else at the party is fairly drunk as well, so no-one will even notice if I mess up the song.

Boxing Day morning comes and goes without me playing any part in it. I finally surface around three o'clock in the afternoon. Unfortunately, the local *Greggs* isn't opened for my usual hangover cure of a fudge doughnut and a chocolate doughnut, washed down with Diet Irn Bru. It's only 'diet' because I prefer the taste rather than any health or weight-conscious decision on my part.

For reasons that remain unclear to me – it may well be that I'm still half-drunk – I gravitate to the dining room where all my books reside. Doesn't everyone have a library in their dining room, or is it just those of us living in stately homes? Actually, I don't live in a stately home, but a three-bedroom semi-detached house in Bishopbriggs, a town situated

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about five miles from Glasgow. About four years ago Karen, fed up with the cupboard in our bedroom bursting at the seams with books, suggested building shelves along the length of one of the walls in the dining room. There were two caveats to that suggestion; the first was hers, that there would be sliding ‘wardrobe’ doors to hide the books from sight. The second was my own – that I didn’t have to put the shelves up since I am the least handy man I know. Instead, my father-in-law got out his tools and assembled a new home for my books.

Most of the shelves were quickly filled, and they have continued to welcome new arrivals in the intervening years. As I push open the ‘wardrobe’ doors on Boxing Day, it seems like the voices of a million characters all shout at once ‘Read me!’ ‘Read me!’ ‘Read me!’

I have lots of books. Hundreds. Thousands. I don’t actually know how many. I’m afraid to count them in case the revelation will lead to pressure for a clear-out or a ban imposed on any new acquisitions. Occasionally, I have resolved not to buy any more until I’ve made a serious dent in the ones I’ve already got, but then I’ll spot a book in Waterstone’s or in a charity shop, online or even in the supermarket, and as if by magic it will appear on my shelves, just one more to add to the pile of ‘still be read’ tomes. I’ve also realised that I will never read all the books that I own, even if I live to be one hundred. By then, I’ll be lucky if I can read my congratulatory card from the Queen, or the King, or whoever’s on the throne in 2066. It’s a slightly depressing thought, which I take to be a sign that I’m getting old rather than an acceptance that I have too many books.

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Why, on this of all days, have I decided to start reading again? The truth is, I don't know. The shelves of unread books always make me feel guilty whenever I look at them, so I don't know what makes Boxing Day so different from any other day. It's not that I haven't been reading at all, but as someone who professes to love books, and who aspires to be a great novelist – for great, I mean 'best-selling', because I actually dream of becoming Scotland's answer to Dan Brown – I have been neglecting one of the essentials tools of the trade. A writer who doesn't read is like a singer who doesn't listen to music or a plumber who doesn't like flushing the toilet. Okay, so that's maybe not such an appropriate example, but you know what I mean. Stephen King, who knows a thing or two about writing, gives this piece of advice:

'If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot.'

From the moment I learned to read, in the dim and distant past of the early 1970s, I fell in love with books and as well as wanting to keep reading, it made me want to write my own books. That it only took me about another forty years to finally achieve that ambition is a story for another day.

I knew 2012 had been a bit of a wash-out as far as reading was concerned. I had managed to publish my third novel, *Land Beyond The Wave*, the final part of what I like to call my 'Costello trilogy' following on from *Saints and Sinners* and *The Hunted* – available from all good book shops and some rubbish ones too – but while I basked in the 'Ready Brek' glow of that achievement, I wasn't doing enough of what

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Mr. King was advising. True, the two weeks of my summer holiday saw my reading output restored to healthy levels aided, for the first time, by a Kindle which I'd purchased specifically for the trip, but that enthusiasm for the written word soon dissipated. Where before I could sit for hours, albeit in the sunshine, and read, as soon as I returned to a grey and gloomy Glasgow – and that's the summer weather, folks – I quickly returned to my previous bad ways.

So 2013 is going to be different. I decide this with five days of the old year still remaining. I'm not waiting for a Hogmanay hangover to prompt any resolutions before tackling my ever-increasing collection of books. No, there's no time like the present, and so I begin going through the shelves, selecting any books which catch my eye. Before too long, I have a dozen to put on a newly-created 'Books To Read' shelf. My reasons for choosing a particular book, I quickly realise, are completely arbitrary. It might be because it's something I've been meaning to read for ages, or one that I feel I should read because it's worthy or has perceived literary merit. It could be that it's the cover which attracts my attention or the synopsis on the back, the same reasons that persuaded me to purchase it in the first place. I keep picking up books and thinking, 'I don't remember even buying this.'

Having resolved to make 2013 a year of reading, I figure that, if nothing else, it will make me feel better about myself, because, to paraphrase the words of the classic 1970s children's TV show, I've switched off my television set and am going to do something less boring instead. I presume it will also, in my conceit, make me think I am better than everyone else who

appears to have consigned books to history and embraced digital TV, Sky+, reality TV shows and the depressing banality of social media. Okay, so I love Sky+ and I still watch a lot of telly, and I use social media and I've even watched the odd reality show here and there. The truth is that I'm no better or worse than anyone else.

Still, I do believe that reading is an infinitely more worthwhile pastime than any of the above-mentioned 'activities', and it does give me a fighting chance of retaining a basic knowledge of grammar, spelling and punctuation, all of which are being systematically destroyed by emails, text messages, Twitter and Facebook. Yes, you might spot the odd mistake here and there in what I've written, which you are free to inform me about in a suitably gloating email, but remember, if you sign off your correspondence with 'LOL' or any similar twenty-first century acronym, then we won't be friends any more. It's as simple as that. Don't say I didn't warn you!

It might be worth pointing out at this early stage of our journey that I mostly read works of fiction. That's just a personal choice. You will find the occasional non-fiction tome sneaking in over the year, but I'm basically a man who likes a good novel.

The first book I decide to tackle is *Diamonds Are Forever* by Ian Fleming. It's not that I have a burning desire to read a James Bond novel, but I had read *Casino Royale* on holiday the previous summer and enjoyed it, so I'm fairly confident that it will be, at the very least, a pleasant and painless reading experience to ease me back in. It is pleasant enough, and painless too, although the story is nowhere near as good as *Casino Royale*, which contains a brilliant last line when

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Bond, on the telephone to M, says of his double-crossing girlfriend, 'The bitch is dead now.'

Having succeeded where Blofeld and other baddies had failed in quickly dispensing with Mr Bond, I move on to *Scoop* by Evelyn Waugh, billed as 'the great Fleet Street novel'. It is funny, if a little dated, which is not surprising given that it was written in 1938. The language gives it away, and some of it does jar with twenty-first century sensibilities, particularly in relation to race. However, it's an enjoyable read which tells the story of William Boot, a young man who contributes 'nature notes' to the *Daily Beast* newspaper. Mistaken for a famous author of the same name, he is subsequently sent to cover a war in the fictional African Republic of Ishmaelia where he inadvertently manages to stumble upon a 'scoop' for the newspaper.

I feel better after finishing it, like it's a book I should, as a journalist as much as anything else, have read. Indeed, while sitting in the press room at a football stadium in Edinburgh, a couple of fellow journalists comment on the choice of book, while one of them promises to lend me Michael Freyn's novel about journalism, *Towards The End Of The Morning*, which he thinks I might enjoy. I won't name names, although anyone familiar with the Scottish football media can make an educated case as to their identities, given that most of the press pack are not what you would consider literary gentlemen, or indeed, in a few cases, literate gentlemen. I might be doing them a disservice but I doubt it.

I bring in the New Year with *Scoop* – not literally, or literary, I hasten to add, since I'm at another party, my acoustic guitar at the ready for festivities that go

on almost as long as the previous week's Christmas ones had. Within a couple of days, I've finished that novel too, and am already on to No.3 – *We Need To Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver.

It is at this point that I read an article in the *The Daily Telegraph* which, while not changing my life, certainly

re-affirms what I've decided to do. Entitled 'The Half Hour That Changed My Life', the article by novelist David Nicholls describes how he'd spent the previous twelve months trying to get back into the habit of reading. Great minds think alike, eh? He got up early in the morning and would read for half an hour every day before the rest of his household wakened or the demands of work became incessant. It was habit-forming, and he explained how easy it was, with just thirty minutes set aside each day, to work his way through a whole raft of books. Nicholls explains:

'Just half an hour a day can change your life.' It's the sort of dubious claim you find in the back of a magazine, and I'm aware of a zealot's shrillness in all of this. I know that for every reader who has lost the habit or can't find the time, there are people who've never enjoyed reading and question the value of literature, either as entertainment or education, or believe that a love of books, and of fiction in particular, is sentimental or frivolous. Given an extra half-hour a day, I know that some people would much prefer to be jogging or bantering on social networks or simply sleeping some more. 'No one reaches the end of their life and wishes they'd spent more time on Twitter' is a claim I've heard before, but perhaps that won't always be the case.

But to allow the zealot his voice again, think of what you might be missing by not finding the time to read. Allowing for a

steady pace of a page a minute, you could easily take in a short story by Chekhov or Raymond Carver or Richard Yates every morning of next week.'

The article feels like a vindication of my reading resolution, while I can vouch for the quality of Richard Yates' short stories. His collection, *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*, is an example of American short-story writing at its very best, as is Raymond Carver's book, *Cathedral*. The article also gives me one or two hints for my own reading habits. I'm generally an early riser anyway, but now, instead of switching on the TV and staring at the 24-hour rolling news or sports channel, or catching up with whatever is on the Sky+ box, I sit for an hour or so in blissful silence, just one man and his book.

It also helps that *We Need To Talk About Kevin* is brilliant. I can't put it down. Shriver's novel tells the story of a mother trying to come to terms with the fact her son is responsible for a killing spree in an American school, and through a series of letters to her estranged husband she reflects on their relationship, how they brought up their son and what responsibility they have for his devastating actions. The book tackles issues of nature versus nurture, violence in western culture and the ready availability of weapons in American society, and is told so brilliantly that there is a need to share the book with others and discuss it with anyone who has read it. I can understand why Shriver's novel is a favourite with reading groups.

Not wanting to lose any momentum, I quickly move on to my next book – *The Plot Against America* by Philip Roth. I like the premise – what if Charles

Lindbergh had won the 1940 American presidential election, signed a peace pact with Nazi Germany and then, slowly and insidiously, started to turn America against its Jewish population? The story is told primarily through the eyes of a young Jewish boy in New York, and for three-quarters of the book, it is a captivating story. Then it seems to run out of steam and the ending, to me, feels rushed, as if Roth has lost interest and just wants to get the book finished. It's not an entirely satisfactory conclusion, though the book gets an overall thumbs-up. I have another couple of Roth novels, including the modestly-titled *The Great American Novel*, but reading *The Plot Against America* hasn't made me want to push everything else to one side and devour Roth's canon of work.

By the tenth day of January, I'm on to book No.5 and that's probably as much as I'd read in the three months leading up to Christmas. After a couple of American-based novels, I decide to get a bit closer to home and so opt for William McIlvanney's *Laidlaw*. I feel disappointed in myself as a reader, a writer, a Scot and a Glaswegian that I've never read any of McIlvanney's books. I could try and justify it in one of my general rants about the fact Scottish literature is not taught as widely in our schools as it should be, and there is a lack of awareness of such books. I actually don't know if that's true any more. It was in my day, but it's been a long time since I've been inside a classroom. I'm also forty-six-years-old, so whatever I may or may not have been taught in the dim and distant past, there's no excuse for not having rectified any gaps in my Scottish literary education in the intervening period.

Most importantly, there's no excuse for having

ignored what turns out to be a great book. Scottish crime writers are renowned the world over – think Ian Rankin, Denise Mina and Val McDermid, to name but three – and McIlvanney is often cited as the godfather of what is called ‘tartan noir’. Apparently he hates that title, although is probably more appreciative of McDermid’s description of him as ‘the Clark Gable of Scottish crime fiction’. Laidlaw is a captivating character, and it’s refreshing to read a book where I recognise the setting, even if it does involve a trip down memory lane to recall a Glasgow that doesn’t exist any longer.

From McIlvanney’s Glasgow of the 1970s, which I know I will return to later, I move to twenty-first century Nova Scotia and *The Bishop’s Man* by Linden MacIntyre. This is a novel whose back-cover synopsis definitely caught my eye. It tells the story of a Catholic priest who, over many years, acts as a trouble-shooter for his bishop, heading to parishes where there are reports of scandal involving clergy and helping to cover it up, including claims of child abuse. Given the ongoing scandal of child abuse in the Catholic Church and its attempts to cover it up over many, many years, the subject matter is, sadly, topical.

It’s a difficult subject, as a Catholic, to come to terms with. The only phrase that keeps coming into my head is ‘There but for the grace of God...’ It could have happened in my parish, perhaps even to me, if a paedophile priest had been moved there to get away from a potential scandal elsewhere. It hasn’t undermined my core belief in God, but who couldn’t find their faith in the Catholic Church tottering, if not completely collapsing? It is against this backdrop that

I read *The Bishop's Man*, a powerful and moving story that gives an 'insider's view' of how the Church deals with its errant priests. I would recommend the book which, though only a work of fiction, contains enough truth within it to ensure I remain unsettled, uncomfortable and angry with my Church.

There is a strange dichotomy with social media. On the one hand, as David Nicholls points out, '... *no-one reaches the end of their life and wishes they'd spent more time on Twitter.*' Indeed, an hour on Twitter can pass by in the blink of an eye, where you have literally done nothing, and literally nothing in the world has happened, except that someone has cooked something tasty on *Masterchef* or there's been a goal in the Barnet versus Plymouth Argyle game. On the other hand, it's an important platform for any writer and provides a gateway to a wider audience. Indeed, you may even be reading these words through a link I've posted on Twitter or Facebook. And I do have Twitter to thank for my next book.

A friend of mine tweets randomly about the comedic genius of P.G. Wodehouse and his *Jeeves & Wooster*' series of books. I confess that I've never read P.G. Wodehouse. Not that I'm alone in this, and I hadn't really envisaged myself ever doing so. I don't think my life would be any better or worse either way, but the Wodehouse fan is someone whose taste and judgement I respect, and so I ask for a recommendation. I duly purchase *The Code of the Woosters*, and I couldn't have picked a book with a greater contrast to *The Bishop's Man*.

It is entertaining, in a farcical, upper-class twit sort of way, that veers between being funny and infuriating. The biggest drama of the book is about a

cow creamer which every character covets. I don't even know what a cow creamer is. *The Code of the Woosters* doesn't convert me to being a Wodehouse fanatic, although I may read more in the future, old chap.

While not necessarily a P.G. Wodehouse fan, I am most definitely a Molly Ringwald devotee. I was a teenager in the 1980s, for goodness sake, so how can I not be? *Pretty in Pink*. *The Breakfast Club*. Need I say more? I discover she's written a novel and so, intrigued at the thought of a celebrity actually writing something rather than taking a suitcase of cash to put their name to something trite – and that can be Cockney rhyming slang if you want – I buy the book.

When It Happens To You is a series of interconnected stories set in California, and it's deceptively captivating. Molly Ringwald can write. Should I be surprised? I don't know her so I have no idea as to her literary talents, or any other talents beyond an ability to put make-up on with the lipstick wedged in her cleavage, or to dance quite badly to *We Are Not Alone* by Karla DeVito. So I might have watched *The Breakfast Club* more than once. Having finished reading *When It Happens To You*, the book does leave me wanting to know more about the characters and what happens to them, which is a great skill in itself, just giving the reader a glimpse of a life at some random point and then leaving with a lot of loose ends behind. Frustratingly satisfying, I look forward to reading more of her novels in the future. I'm tempted, for about five minutes, to 'tweet' Molly Ringwald and let her know I like the book. I 'follow' her on Twitter. Sad but true. However, I decide against it. There is a fine line between admiration and

adulation, and at my age, it's best I don't risk crossing from one to the other. I opt to watch *Pretty in Pink* instead.

I've almost reached the end of January and I'm about to start my ninth book since *Boxing Day*. That, in itself, is an invigorating thought, and for my next book I decide to tackle my first Sherlock Holmes novel. I have a box-set of all Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmes books, and they have remained in pristine condition on my shelves since I bought them several years ago. The obvious choice is the first book in the series, *A Study In Scarlet*, which sees Holmes and Doctor Watson united for the first time. It's interesting, and easy to read, and clever enough. I believe there are better Sherlock Holmes books and I may investigate further, but for now it feels like I've ticked another 'should read' novelist off my list. I finish the Conan Doyle book on February 1, and allow myself a moment of self-congratulation. I've read nine books. That is a remarkable total, even if I say so myself, and so I begin February imbued with a new-found literary enthusiasm.