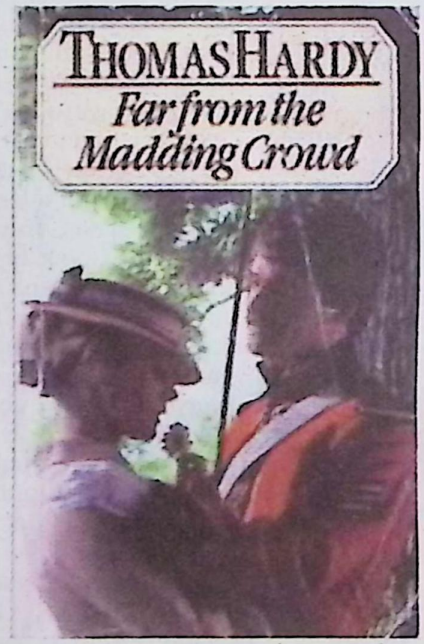
Reading for Pleasure

QAISRA SHAHRAZ

THIS year, the United Kingdom is celebrating the National Year of Reading, where is a focus on reading and books. Like many other authors and celebrities, I have been approached to write about my love of reading and favourite books; the aim of course being to encourage people, especially the young, to take up reading.

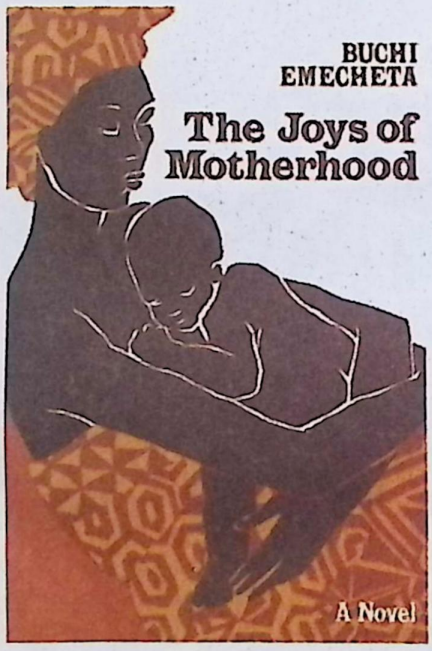
It is good to share with others what one has enjoyed reading and how one started on this most wonderful of all pastimes. My favourite book and the one I owe so much, both as a reader and as a novelist, has to be Thomas Hardy's Far From the Madding Crowd. At the age of fifteen, whilst doing my 'O' level English literature course, this novel became my debut into the world of adult literary fiction.



The poignant love story of Gabriel Oak, the wonderful, endearing rustic hero and Bathsheba Everdene, a fiery, feisty heroine beguiled and kindled teenage interest in love and human relationships. We went to see the film version of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, starring Alan Bates and Julie Christie as Gabriel and Bathsheba, at the local cinema with my classmates and teacher.

It was quite an interesting experience. The quaint rustic world of Dorset, in the South of England, of sweeping landscapes, with the wonderful accompanying music wooed our young minds. Hardy's world of nineteenth century England came alive before our eyes on the big screen. However, we were disappointed too; some of us quibbled over the differences in the book and the film, especially the wrong hair colouring! Bathsheba was supposed to be dark haired not fair haired. It destroyed the image we had of her in our heads! The book had fed our imagination, whilst the cinema simply dashed it away!

Of course I went onto to devour all of Hardy's other novels, yet I could never forgive him for killing off the hero in The Woodlanders. I now understand why one reader wrote to complain ,about me killing off someone important in my novel *Typhoon* he loved the novel but 'hated me for days' for that, he wrote. Hardy whetted my appetite for literature and I went onto to do an 'A' level course in it. It was then I discovered Jane Austen and George Eliot, both of them remain my favourite authors. George Eliot's famous novel Middlemarch, played a central part in my academic life for a number of years as I went onto to pursue it at a higher level at university, focussing on the life of the heroine, Dorothea Brooke and the provincial world at large.



I never forgot the tender story of Anne Eliot and Captain Wentworth of Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion*. Often voted as the favourite book by many readers in the United Kingdom, I too, never tire of watching many versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, on the TV or in the cinema and have entered into discussions as to who was the best Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett. Now as an adult and as a scriptwriter myself, I realise there is bound to be a big difference between the book and its interpretation in a film; after all they are different genres, with different demands and expectations.