

What do you read on the road?

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My copy of Zadie Smith's *Autograph Man* is special for a number of reasons. Firstly, it's the only one of my favourite author's books that I haven't read in its entirety. Second—and more important—ly, it was signed by Zadie Smith herself after I spoke to her for two life-changing minutes at a book reading session at Shakespeare and Company, Paris. Yet what makes the copy more memorable for me are the grains of sand buried deep in the creases of its spine, a minuscule smudge of sunscreen on one of the page's margins, and the top left corner of page 200 and something folded down to serve as a bookmark. It was upon arriving at this page that I'd closed the book and rested it on the beach in Marseille. I'd captured the image—blazing red book cover against glittering, pale brown sand—put my phone down, and walked over to take my second ever swim in the cerulean Mediterranean waters. So started my first ever vacation with friends, last summer: fresh seafood, literary discussions, starlit walks by the water and pre-bedtime face masks as we hopped from Nice to Marseilles and back to Paris on the humid, stuffy French railway. *Autograph Man* lay forgotten in the depths of my turquoise tote bag. I haven't gone back to it since, but it remains to this day a memento of my week in the Côte d'Azur.

Historically, out in the West, the premise of the vacation read stems from the urbanisation and industrialisation that characterised the 19th century. As Donna Harrington-Lueker shares in her recently released *Books for Idle Hours*, the makeover of the print media at the time offered more advertisements for summer accessories and resort getaways, the latter made accessible by the steamship and railroad. More and more people were flocking to the countryside to escape from city life. The book industry, bolstered meanwhile by the fall in production costs, met this upsurge of a holiday culture by publishing sensational fiction for the middle classes. The books were light and cheap, and so easy to carry (and often discard) over single train journeys. The stories within them encouraged and paid homage to this reading culture, portraying heroines who leafed through romance and travel books often. While this trend birthed the ubiquitous presence of WH Smith stores selling cheap novels across train stations in England, in America, publishers started branding books as "summer novels"

and compiling older titles into "summer reading lists". Soon, such vacation reads came to be considered "an acceptable middle-class pleasure", according to Harrington-Lueker.

The legacy of this reading trend still thrives. Come May and June every year, publishing houses release an outpour of "beach/summer reads". Bookstore windows and

email inboxes (if you're a nerd like me) are swept by book covers sporting variations of sunny beaches and titles screaming in colourful fonts. The publishing cycle here in Bangladesh doesn't quite follow the same yearly pattern—here, books appear in gusts either in February during the Ekushey Boi Mela, or in November following the popularity of the Dhaka

Lit Fest. And so, our own reading lists are often coloured by the "summer lists" released by Western publishers this time of year. It forces us, often, to pigeon-hole the 'vacation read' into the "light read/ love story/ set on a beach" genre, which isn't really a genre at all. But talk to any number of readers about what reading on a holiday means, and you'll discover

that the definition shifts as easily as the sand on a beach.

To my uncle on his honeymoon, it was a way of "re-moulding his reality": "One of the best moments of my life was finishing *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* during my 21-day honeymoon trip to the Japamala beach on Tioman Island. The crashing waves, the wind, the pages fluttering and words pouring in through my eyes. I remember turning the final page...reading the last paragraph with a meditative gaze...slowly looking up to the body of restlessness ahead of me. My feelings made manifest with every ebb and flow, and yet somehow still trapped comfortably in the Steig fiction. Honeymoon consummated: check."

My editor tells me she picks books that are set in the place she's travelling to: "So I'll probably take *The Buddha of Suburbia* for London, so I can go over the places mentioned in the book and get a bearing of the city before I visit." A colleague who spends his days editing newspaper supplements tells me history books relax him while on vacation: "You finally have the time to think about every day matters and take a long walk." And another colleague admits to having issued a Kindle from her college library for "research" before embarking on four consecutive train rides between Chittagong and Dhaka for a wedding. She spent the journey reading all four *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels. The journey became memorable to her because the books saved her from much boredom while travelling alone, because it was the first time she read on a Kindle, and also because it was her first time trying out EL James' notoriously famous series.

For all these people, the nature of their vacation reads engaged in an interesting dialogue with the spaces around them.

What could be a bigger mismatch than a psychological thriller and a honeymoon on a balmy Malaysian beach? *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* might have reflected the disquiet of the South China Sea to my uncle, the reader, but it would also have thrown into sharp focus the respective ambiances of the two worlds he was inhabiting at the time of reading it. The nature, the qualities, the feel of each would have been accentuated, the differences tethered by the shared unrest of the water and the novel. For my colleague, the contrast between the world of *Fifty Shades* and a tiresome train ride and wedding offered her the gift of humour.



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