

When your favorite writers can't sustain your fickle heart

As a child, I was a completist. Now even Barbara Kingsolver can't keep me.

By **Rebecca Steinitz** Globe Correspondent, Updated December 7, 2023, 10:37 a.m.



Author Barbara Kingsolver at the 2023 Women's Prize For Fiction Winner's ceremony in London. IAN WEST/ASSOCIATED PRESS

When A.S. Byatt died a couple of weeks ago, I remembered how much I loved her most famous novel, "Possession" — and realized I hadn't read her in years.

Byatt wasn't the first writer I adored and abandoned. I devoured Toni Morrison's first several books: started with "Song of Solomon," went back to "The Bluest Eye" and "Sula" (countless times), read "Tar Baby" and "Beloved" as soon as they came out. But after "Beloved," I never finished another of her novels.

I compulsively read Joan Didion as I was writing my undergraduate thesis, then didn't read her for 20 years. Nursing my first baby on the couch, I scarfed down Anne Tyler novels. When I finally got up from the couch, Tyler kept writing books and I stopped reading them.

And these are great writers! What's wrong with me?

I wasn't always a fickle reader. As a child, I was a hardcore completist. I gobbled up the Little House and All-of-a-Kind Family books, all of Louisa May Alcott, Enid Blyton's boarding school series, any Agatha Christie and Spenser mysteries I could get my hands on.

Of course, that's how lots of children read. What else explains the endlessly proliferating Magic Tree House Captain Underpants, and Diary of a Wimpy Kid series, not to mention the Warrior cats and Harry Potter empire?

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But there are plenty of adults who read every Richard Price crime novel (my husband!), every Jasmine Guillory romance (my daughter!), or anything Colson Whitehead writes, whether it's about teenagers at the beach, poker, an alternate history of the underground railroad, or Harlem criminals.

Books, like food(hence our eating metaphors for reading), can offer us the comfort of the same or the thrill of difference. While some people prefer one to the other, I am endlessly trying to navigate my desire for both, as evidenced by my own inconsistency.

Sometimes I give up a writer because they are always the same. Anne Tyler's quirky Baltimore family stories became all too familiar.

Sometimes I give up a writer when they change. Barbara Kingsolver's spare quiriness in "The Bean Trees" and "Animal Dreams" and "Pigs in Heaven" was everything to me, but when she started writing big and lush in "The Poisonwood Bible," and "Prodigal Summer," she lost me. That said, I was all in for big and lush with Michael Chabon — until I stopped reading him too.

Sometimes I want the thrill of something I've never encountered before, which is how I came to the marvelous Clare Keegan this spring. Then I read four of her books, and now I'm done.

Lately, though, I've read a series of unthrilling books. And now I'm wondering if it might just be time for another Anne Tyler novel.

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