



The Unpunished Vice: A Life of Reading

Edmund White

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A new memoir from acclaimed author Edmund White about his life as a reader.

Literary icon Edmund White made his name through his writing but remembers his life through the books he has read. For White, each momentous occasion came with a book to match: Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, which opened up the seemingly closed world of homosexuality while he was at boarding school in Michigan; the Ezra Pound poems adored by a lover he followed to New York; the biography of Stephen Crane that inspired one of White's novels. But it wasn't until heart surgery in 2014, when he temporarily lost his desire to read, that White realized the key role that reading played in his life: forming his tastes, shaping his memories, and amusing him through the best and worst life had to offer.

Blending memoir and literary criticism, *The Unpunished Vice* is a compendium of all the ways reading has shaped White's life and work. His larger-than-life presence on the literary scene lends itself to fascinating, intimate insights into the lives of some of the world's best-loved cultural figures. With characteristic wit and candor, he recalls reading Henry James to Peggy Guggenheim in her private gondola in Venice and phone calls at eight o'clock in the morning to Vladimir Nabokov--who once said that White was his favorite American writer.

Featuring writing that has appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and the *Paris Review*, among others, *The Unpunished Vice* is a wickedly smart and insightful account of a life in literature.

The Unpunished Vice: A Life of Reading Details

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From Reader Review *The Unpunished Vice*: A Life of Reading for online ebook

Matthew says

You went and got shit faced with friends at some noisy bar. You spent the night screaming nonsense. The next day, you have lost your voice and realize you have a lunch date with a great friend. So you pull it together and join your friend. For a delightful and scholarly one sided conversation about literature new and old. This book is that experience.

Ivan says

“There is no greater pleasure than to lie between clean sheets, listen to music, and read under a strong light,” says Edmund White. Well, he's right.

I'm finishing this memoir in which Mr White chronicles his life through the books he read (and wrote). Once in a while I found that I shared what he thought on particular books. He loves Marcel Proust and George Eliot, has a special fondness for Colette, and claims to have read *Anna Karenina* ten times! It's gleaming in witticism and wisdom that can only be pulled off by such a widely-read person.

Steve Turtell says

The Unpunished Vice is a detailed account of a life devoted to reading and writing. If you've enjoyed White's prior novels and memoirs, you'll probably enjoy this. If you are not familiar with his work, I suggest you ignore Jane Smiley's somewhat churlish review in the New York Times, because she misses the main appeal of the book. What is most evident, on page after page, is White's catholicity of taste, and his admirable generosity of spirit, which is attested to by the dozens if not hundreds of writers he has helped in nearly fifty years of teaching, reviewing and blurbing (he calls himself "a true blurb slut. It's a bit like being a loose woman; everyone mocks you for your liberality--and everyone wants at least one date with you.") He writes with affection and sympathetic attention about the writers that have meant the most to him, many of whom are unfamiliar to even gluttonous readers (I kept a written list as I read), and he is a committed re-reader, to me the surest evidence of a serious devotion to literature--it's often amazed me that people don't think that novels, poems, and plays can be enjoyed repeatedly just as much as favorite symphonies and songs. White's re-reading is impressive: *Nothing* by Henry Green and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* every year and he's read all of Proust five times.

I doubt most Goodreads's members will need to be told this, but describing the superiority of prose narrative (which, with its "endless grey columns of unillustrated print in a book" he calls "surely the least beguiling medium in the world") over films and television, White reminds us that "fiction maps out our sensibilities with the greatest detail and accuracy." His comment reminded me why, as visually delightful as they are, the famed Merchant-Ivory adaptations of E.M. Forster's novels, which rarely have an entire sentence let alone a paragraph or page describing his characters' houses, clothes, or furniture--nearly the entire appeal of period films--have never satisfied me. This is because, as White states: "Books, unlike movies, give us the thoughts of the characters. That's why books are essential: we live inside our heads."

The Unpunished Vice takes you inside White's head for 223 pages. It's like spending time in a well-stocked, idiosyncratic, personal library, with the best possible guide to the unfamiliar titles.

Ascoyne says

Best review on here - 'Sometimes interesting and sometimes not'.

Some interesting writers I've never come across before in here (and some I'd wish I hadn't come across at all) but a rather self indulgent name dropping exercise for Edmund White in establishing all the greats he has known. A few longer interesting essays on 'Pale Fire' and 'Anna Karenina'.

Trin says

Half of this book is White penning the most eloquent, charming reminiscences; half is Old Man Yells at Cloud-style ranting. (Millennials! TRIGGER WARNINGS!!!) But the good parts are very good -- full of delightful character sketches and astute literary analysis. White is such a name dropper, but he somehow gets away with it; he's truly grown into the role of the convivial old uncle like it's the one he was born to play.

And on top of all that: I think I genuinely got a bunch of good book recommendations from this.

Jodi Gallagher says

Quite simply dreadful.

Carole says

Edmund White, considered a literary icon, reminisces about his life, books, friends, lovers, and influences. At times quite absorbing, but too often bogged down in extensive details and ruminations about books or authors quite obscure and unknown to the average reader.

CaldoHendo says

I enjoyed White's gentle style but felt I would have got a lot more out of the book had I read all the other books he discusses. I thought I was well-read before but I now realise there are whole genres I've never even dipped a toe into.

willowdog says

I have been seduced by much of the writings of Edmund White. In this work of memoir and literary criticism, I sometimes feel I learn a little too much about White. (Could he be that pompous?) However, I enjoyed his observations of other writers especially Colette, Malaparte, and Cocteau. His observations are often tongue in cheek and hilarious. The hardest writings an author can compose is literary criticism. One needs such an in depth knowledge of other works. White has this. He was able to interest me in a number of authors in whom I had little knowledge. His revelations of the writings of Firbank and Tolstoy are spot on.

Laura says

TR A Boy's Own Story
TR The Beautiful Room Is Empty
TR Marcel Proust
TR Fanny
TR The Unpunished Vice: A Life of Reading
TR Rimbaud: The Double Life of a Rebel
TR The Burning Library

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/03/bo...>

Brad says

This seemed to stop being a memoir around the halfway mark, as if White wandered away from his own conceit, and became a compendium of introductions to the work of other writers. Still, it's full of great observations and readings, particularly of the under-sung Elizabeth Bowen and Rebecca West, and I'll always love him for turning me on (via City Boy) to my favourite writer Henry Green.

Jackie says

Well, yeah, it's an Edmund White essay collection, and even he knows it's name-droppy and erudite. Still, I enjoyed myself during this dinner party.

"...but youngsters can plunder a text and find what they want in the margins."

"At my age (seventy-eight), I realize that everyone or almost everyone except Hitler will be forgotten from this period; if a writer can shore up an eroding coastline for a decade or two, that's the only 'immortality' we'll ever know on this dying planet."

Marcus Hobson says

The subtitle of this book, 'A Life of Reading' tells you all you need to know about the subject matter. Most of Edmund White's life has been spent in close proximity to a book, either as a reader, a writer or as an acquaintance of writers and creative artists of all descriptions.

Some readers may find the style of this book a little too arrogant. But White knows his trade well, and he is full of interesting anecdotes. He has also been around for a good while and so he has met many of the great names in twentieth century literature. Some of what he says is witty and sometimes he goes out of his way to try to shock us in a world where shock is an increasingly rare commodity. I liked one of the quotes from the start of the book, "If I watch television, at the end of two hours I feel cheated and undernourished...; at the end of two hours of reading, my mind is racing and my spirit renewed."

We hear a good deal about White's own homosexuality and even an occasional heterosexual dalliance. His openness about this has led to one particular unforeseen consequence. "Almost every literary gay book gets sent to me for a blurb, and I've become a true "blurb-slut." It's a bit like being a loose woman; everyone mocks you for your liberality - and everyone wants at least one date with you."

The book lists 27 previous books by Edmund White, and these include novels, essays, and memories, as well as biographies of writers such as Jean Genet, Marcel Proust and Arthur Rimbaud. Some of the titles also take in White's homosexuality, such as 'Travels in Gay America'. White spent some year living in France, and Paris in particular, which may have become a little clichéd after writers such as Hemingway, Henry Miller and James Slater. But White has a genuine love for the country and also its literature. He makes one very astute observation, when his very worldly agent says that he doesn't know any of the names White mentions in a book about Paris; "The English Channel is one of the widest bodies of water in the world." For my own experience the two cultures stop at the coast and eye each other suspiciously.

This is a very readable and enjoyable book. There are good recommendations on every page and because White is so infectious with his enthusiasm, you feel compelled to go and search out the books he compliments. For myself, I dug out the copies of *Angelo* and *The Horseman on the Roof* both by Jean Giono, whom White rates very highly but feels his time has not yet come.

Gerhard says

Minus one star for the rather peremptory conclusion, in which Edmund White abruptly ends the conversation with his Reader, as if his attention had suddenly been distracted, or as if he had a more pressing engagement offering better deployment of his faculties and discernment. Up to this point, the book is an unalloyed delight: a shaggy-dog-friendly account of the writerly life, and the importance of books and reading.

I had no idea that White was recuperating from open-heart surgery when he wrote the luminous *Our Young Man*, for me one of his best books to date. I also had no idea that his 25-year-younger husband (White himself is in his deep 70s) had a such a major role in editing this book.

With White distracted by his illness and not at top writerly form as a result, the text required a lot of finessing. Which raises an interesting question or issue about the provenance of a text, and the veracity of an author's claim to sole proprietorship.

In terms of White's illness, and how this results in a deep reflection upon his life to date, and what gives him meaning and joy despite his brush with death, this book reminded me of *On Writing*. In that book, Stephen King recounts his difficult road to recovery from an unfortunate hit-and-run accident.

Unlike King, however, White does not dispense writing advice or tips. He does make mention of the challenges associated with teaching creative writing – especially how there always seems to be one

exceptional novel that refutes any 'rule' he might convey to his students.

Other than that, White invites the reader on a rambling, sometimes lewd, often very funny, always deeply impassioned, account of which books and writers have made a lasting impact on him, and how ageing has affected both the reading and writing process. There is a poignancy and energy to these reflections that is very engaging and enjoyable, and an accompanying frankness that is quite disarming.

White even refers to Goodreads and how he doesn't understand what modern readers want, especially with reference to a writer like Stendhal. As to his claim that Anna Karenina is the 'greatest novel ever'?

It is clear that the kind of broad classical reading/education that White was exposed to is really not the norm anymore. The fact that average readers turn to literature as a form of escape or distraction from their daily work and family/community context means inevitably that Tolstoy is certainly not on their reading radar.

Some reviewers have commented that White's tone in this book is condescending and/or precious. Yes, there is a certain element of elitism here, and White cannot resist occasionally preaching at the poor reader from atop his gilded soapbox. But this is still a privileged glimpse into the mind and life of a truly great contemporary writer.

Queerly Reads says

Reading is a hobby that never grows stale—and an unpunished vice.

Edmund White was a pioneer author of gay lit and of memoirs, writing his partly fictitious, partly autobiographical *A Boy's Own Story*, and its three sequels, which chronicle the AIDs era, in a time when "nobodies," as he says, did not write memoirs. He also co-wrote *The Joy of Gay Sex*. His work predated and helped make room for the popularization of autofiction, m/m romance, and the acceptance of certain LGBT works in the Big 5 publishing world. He has firmly earned his place in the queer canon, if such a thing exists.

The Unpunished Vice: A Life of Reading is a fun hodgepodge of anecdotes from his life; where he was when he was reading certain books and writing others; where his favorite writers were when they were writing theirs; what they were reading, and eating, and with whom they were sleeping; recounts of plots and a smidgen of literary interpretation and text analysis; some spare thoughts on his husband and students. Nearly everyone gets a mention, from Sigmund Freud to Susan Sontag to Ocean Vuong.

I liked his old fuddy-duddy thoughts, which I found quite funny, such as this description of his 21st century students: "If they're not chaste, wearing 'purity rings,' or part of the nightly 'hookup culture,' they're sort of unisex pals, dressed alike, not coquettish nor seductive but just 'good guys' trudging about wearing matching jeans and haircuts, some 60 percent claiming (in theory if not in gritty practice) they're 'bisexual.'"

My Kindle note for this was: "omg he's so old." Although he's close-minded in certain generational ways, I like that he is such an open and unrepentant pervert that the youth seems to be utterly dull in his eyes; you get the impression that nothing could scandalize him.

I also like some of his very wise thoughts. He talks about how texts become sometimes unreadably problematic when we are older, but when you are young you can somehow "plunder a text and find what you want in the margins." It was very touching when he talked about growing up gay in the Midwest. After he

was nonconsensually outed to his father by his mother, a psychologist who referred to his sexual preferences as “object choice difficulties,” his father subjected him to “the yard work cure.” He was meant to be turned straight by hours of meaningless physical labor at his father’s house, saying, “My only consolation was that I somehow got my hands on Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, which I’d read in my bedroom for hours at night.”

He also mentioned the gay writing scene of the 70s, which in some ways reminds me of the queerlit Internet scene of today:

“I belonged to a gay writers’ group, which for awhile we considered calling the All-Praise Club. We were attempting to get gay lit off the ground in spite of great resistance from editors. We need affirmation, not hostile criticism.”

“Gay readers felt on intimate terms with gay writers.”

“It was thrilling to be a gay writer in the late 1970s ... I remember saying to someone at the time, ‘I may never be so well known as John Updike, but to my few readers I’m indispensable.’”

He discussed how reading changed him from “a Cincinnatian” to an “earthling.” I too feel as though reading has made me a citizen of the world, and this has also been reflected in my travels. Like White, I lived in Paris, although for significantly less time than him; today I am an expat in Japan.

His spare thoughts on Japanese literature were subsequently quite funny to me, such as when he goes on and on about Pound being a wonderful translator (Pound did not know Chinese or Japanese; his “translations” were not translations at all, and we have outgrown them). Also when he pats himself on the back for learning to look up Chinese characters in a dictionary while he was in school; I guess this is an accomplishment if your life is as thoroughly Western as White’s. It was funny because he is perhaps intimidating in certain regards, as well-read as he is, so when he admitted to these vast ignorances, it seemed like such a discrepancy.

Of course, this is not to say that Edmund White is braggish or narrow-minded; he is refreshingly humble, writing, “just by dint of reading (no matter how slowly and without discipline) for many decades, I give the illusion of being well-read.” Of *Anna Karenina* he writes, “I’ve read it ten times, though I’m none the wiser for it.”

His relationships to intelligence, elitism, and classism are interesting to me. He never shuns genre fiction without self-consciousness and an awareness of his own ignorance regarding the subject, but he still shuns it. He admits that literature today is fresh and full of diverse voices, but he scarcely discusses them. He says, “People interested in putting together a very restrictive canon of great books don’t really like reading; true readers ... are always sniffing out more and more titles.” Even so, his book choices felt stiflingly white to me, although I don’t think he was at all unaware of it, bringing up writers of color whenever contemporary literature was mentioned. He seems very aware that writers of color now dominate the scene; when he discusses how strikingly original fiction continues to be, and how we are revolutionizing the craft of writing over and over again, it is obvious that that is whom he refers to. I wish he had discussed it at more length.

Edmund White had a heart attack in 2014, and it was unclear whether he would ever write again. He writes in this memoir of becoming uninterested in reading or writing for the first time in his life, although he eventually recovered enough to write *Our Young Man*, a book I detested and could not finish. So I was glad to be reading this new memoir, something I thoroughly enjoyed, proving that White has not lost his stuff.

