

## READ ON AT YOUR PERIL!

Newspapers and magazines today are very fond of articles encouraging us to give up various pleasurable activities in order to enhance our (or the planet's) expectation of life. I will assume that you have already made all the alterations in your life-style which have been recommended: that you no longer eat meat, butter, sugar or, indeed, anything but soya protein, drink only filtered and boiled spring water, cycle everywhere, ensure that all smokers in your neighbourhood, when emerging from their dens, carry the prescribed bell and intone "Unclean!" in sepulchral voices, and attend the ritual burnings of those who persist in using C.F.C. aerosols. But it now becomes my painful duty - no, why shouldn't I too relish being a kill-joy? - I now have the pleasing task of bringing into prominence a whole area which I believe all the pundits have so far missed. Indeed, it must be said that no article I have ever read even hints at the dangers involved. No medical man - sorry, person - has yet given it a name. Yet Book Dependency is probably at the root of much, if not most, of today's marital disharmony and family problems.

What is Book Dependency? Does it affect every literate individual? Clearly, this would be an exaggeration. There is a large body of people who treat book-reading as a purely social activity, reading an occasional novel recommended by a friend, and many more who are complete T.V. totallers. Even those who do read more than the odd Jackie Collins are often quite satisfied with a couple of evenings a week down at the local, and leave quite contentedly when the jocund red-faced librarian shouts, "Time, gentlemen, please!" But alas, for only too many, it does not stop at mere social reading. Gradually they begin buying. Furtively at first - nipping into the nearest Oxfam Shop and paying 30p for a battered paperback - then more openly, patronising W.H. Smith and by gradual degrees descending to Dillons, Waterstone's and other booksellers.

If it only halted there it would be serious enough. But of course, like all addictions, the more it is fed, the more it increases. The patient - for we must look upon these people with compassion, not contempt - finds that she (women, as with so many other psychological aberrations, seem to suffer more than men) can no longer be satisfied with books in print. She begins visiting second-hand bookshops. Initially she will "just pop in" when she happens to pass one, but, as the problem intensifies, she will make expeditions to these appalling places. She will become more specific in her demands. "Do you have any children's books?" will become "Have you anything by Dorita Fairlie Bruce?" When even this no longer gives her the kick she needs, she begins to send away for second-hand book-dealers' catalogues, frantically praying that the postman will deliver before she goes to work, calling the dealer at half-past six in the morning to reserve a particularly desirable copy of *Captain Anne*, and scouring *Book and Magazine Collector* in the vain hope that this time she will be the one to get that copy of the first edition of *The Senior Prefect* advertised by an ignorant (or sadistic?) dealer at £1.50.

After a while she may take the next step on the downward path. Like so many users, she will become a supplier to feed her habit. She tells herself it's just a once-off; she has so many duplicates, tatty editions replaced by newer ones, reprints by

firsts - surely it's her bounden duty to give others the chance (she argues) of experiencing these books? And the money will come in useful for repaying the second mortgage she had to take out to buy that copy of *The King's Curate*. But she cannot go back. She will begin buying books in order to re-sell them; advertising for books to sell; perusing other addicts' Wants Lists to try and find someone who might want one of the ten copies of the Spring edition of *Dimsie Moves Up* which she couldn't find the heart to leave in the Help-the-Aged Shops. She is a dealer.

By this time, she, like addicts of other substances, wants company in her misery. She is probably already in touch with other collectors - I do not apologise for the crude word - by letter and telephone; now she tries to meet them. Perhaps she joins a society for the appreciation of her favourite writer(s); writes an article for the society's magazine; anxiously compares her copy of *The Girls of St Bride's* with her hostess's at the annual get-together. Is it a first? Has it got a dust-wrapper? She is plunged into misery at the meagreness of her collection compared with that of practically everybody else she knows. Eventually she takes the final step. She founds a society and a magazine of her own, and starts writing articles for it; she may even admit to her partners in crime that she is making notes for a book.

At this point it may be helpful to give some of the more common forms of Book Dependency. There are literally thousands of variants, of course; and a single patient may suffer from several simultaneously. Indeed, it has been found that a patient unable to feed, for instance, her Bruce habit may well take a single dose of Needham, Darch or Antonia Forest and develop an entirely new addiction running in parallel with her original one. Some addicts of long standing have literally hundreds of habits to support simultaneously - it can be imagined at what cost. The list which follows, then, merely gives examples; it does not pretend to be exhaustive.

- Alcottolism - an addiction to New World family stories, other variants being Montgomeriosis, Coolidgismus and the comparatively rare Enrightis;
- Elinorexia nervosa - going without food and, indeed, everything else, to support one's habit of buying Brent-Dyers;
- Elseimer's Disease - a form of mental degeneration brought on by over-indulgence in reading about Abbeys and folk-dancing;
- Heroine addiction - a passion for following the fortunes of the incredibly daring, loyal and honourable stars of school stories;
- Valliantium dependancy - inability to resist the lure of Guides saving everyone in sight, or, in some cases, a compulsion to buy books about Biggles. Occasionally, in hopeless cases, the two may be combined, a condition known as Bilskitis;
- Opieate abuse - an irresistible tendency, found only in severe addicts of many years' standing, to research into the history of, initially, their own speciality and ultimately the history of children's books in general.

At this point, I realise that many of you must be wondering whether I am not simply exaggerating the problem. Surely the type

of dependancy I am describing is rare, even freakish? something which only happens to those poor unfortunate people one sees lurching around outside book fairs waving a tatty book in the air and shouting "It's a first!" I shall therefore summarise some case studies which may show the prevalence and virulence of the problem. All names have been changed to protect patients and their families.

Jenny came to me four years ago not knowing where to turn. Six months earlier, a friend had lent her a Richmal Crompton "just to read on the loo". She read it - and was hooked. When she came to me, she had just sold her husband's Rolex watch to get the money to buy *William and the Witch* and was planning a midnight raid on a dealer she knew of who was rumoured to have a copy of *William the Lawless* in his safe. What was the potency of the addiction which had driven this mild woman to crime?

Ruth is a mother of two small children whom she loves very much. Nevertheless, she risks losing them both. Her fifteen-month-old son tore the frontispiece out of her first edition of *The School at the Chalet* and scribbled felt-tip over the account of Grizel at the hairdresser. The resulting upset led her neighbour (an elderly deaf lady who lived 200 yards away) to call in the NSPCC worker, who was not amused when Ruth told him that she was thinking of forming a Society for the Protection of Chalet Books. Ruth must now find some way to reduce the level of her addiction. She is trying to give up reading while changing nappies, and has cancelled her subscription to *Book and Magazine Collector*. But it is a hard struggle. Furthermore, it appears that her children have been born addicted. Her elder child is hooked on *Thomas the Tank Engine*, and the younger, when not engaged in scribbling on books, continually pulls them from shelves and attempts to eat them. Prospects look bleak for Ruth and her family.

Miranda is a clergyman's wife whose conduct had been causing gossip in the parish for some time. Her volunteering to help at the Summer Fete was taken for granted, but it was thought rather odd that, collecting bric-a-brac around the area, she only seemed interested in the books. It was also noted that a sizeable proportion of the books collected never appeared on the stall. But the greatest scandal was caused when, on the day of the Fete itself, she snatched a book from a customer with the mysterious cry: "*Dorothy's Dilemma!* How could I have missed it?" The customer insisted that he had a right to the book, and tried to thrust ten pence into Miranda's hand; they were finally separated by the editor of the Parish Magazine, and the buyer made his escape clutching the book. Miranda now spends her time wandering round her cell (which she has christened, in one of her more lucid periods, "Castle Charming") and murmuring broken phrases in which you may occasionally hear names like "Deb", "Patience" or "Biddy". No-one has been able to interpret her ravings.

These women, and hundreds, perhaps thousands more like them, are beyond our help, although, with specialist care, some may eventually to be re-integrated into society. Meanwhile, be warned by their example. Most of them began as social readers, who could take it or leave it alone. Now they are social outcasts - hooked on books. Are you in danger? \*

\*A questionnaire designed to assess the degree of your book problem will be found in the next issue.