How Fiction Works

When Howard’s heart stopped pumping none of his precious clocks so much as missed a beat.

Alice kept on ticking too, rather to her surprise.

A woman from the Co-op handled Howard’s instructions for his funeral. His coffin slid from chapel to furnace along chain-driven rollers accompanied by the second movement of the Haydn symphony Alice knew was called ‘the clock’. Howard often played it when he had repairs in hand. It was good music for ironing to, though Alice would stay in the kitchen lest she spoil his concentration.

Three months after the funeral, Alice applied to join the county library.

As she filled out the form, the librarian faced her across the counter and seemed to expect some sort of explanation.

“My late husband wasn’t much of a reader. Except for his magazines.”

The librarian’s expression turned instantly to one of sympathy, and Alice blushed.

“Rest assured, Mrs Stedman; we will keep you well supplied with good reads. Now that you’ve got more time on your hands.”

It was difficult to comprehend the nature of what precisely had moved from Howard’s hands to hers. For forty-nine years Howard’s fingers had teased a pulse back into the arteries of stopped clocks. Alice looked down at her own fingers while the librarian issued her card. They looked like they were made of wood.

She borrowed four books.

Back home, mealtimes came as fast with one as with two at the table. She dusted and vacuumed every day the same. And though she now bought milk by the half pint, she walked to the shop for it each morning as she had always done. But when it was time for bed the librarian’s words weighed heavily. Her wooden fingers shied from picking up the first of her books. Instead, she faced the wall clock above her dresser and thrust her index finger like a staff into the path of its pendulum. She slid into her side of the bed and felt the silence of Howard’s disquiet.

She took the top book from the pile on her bedside table and studied its cover: ***Strange Fits of Passion***by Anita Shreve. A picture of a woman facing away, her arms behind her back. *‘Touches the very deepest human emotions.’*

Alice did indeed feel touched. But the emotions stirred were unexpected. They were confusing, and not entirely positive. After some thought she reached across the empty space beside her and placed the book on Howard’s bedside table.

She took up the next: ***Light and Snow***. *‘A beautifully visualised novel of emotional discovery.’* Another for Howard; the decision more swiftly arrived at. And then a third. And finally, the fourth. She glanced timidly at the pile of books on Howard’s bedside table.

After two weeks, she exchanged the four books at the library. Howard was a deliberate man. He breathed restraint and if he was to make anything of his journey of emotional discovery he would need a steady supply of prompts. She was pleased to have chosen a prolific author whose novels came in a uniform edition. Howard would appreciate the outer sense of order and find it reassuring.

The library was not busy on her third visit and the librarian engaged her in conversation. Alice gathered that she was being encouraged to try a different author. And not necessarily just one author. She responded to the suggestion clumsily but on reflection appreciated the librarian’s concern. Why should Howard not experience a historical romance? A country house mystery? An espionage thriller?

The pile of four on Howard’s side of the bed would take him to previously unimagined places. It spoke of greater ambition with each of his wife’s fortnightly visits to the library.

Then Alice stumbled on a shelf which contained multiples of the same books. There were at least a dozen copies of a score of different titles. They must be special. Howard appreciated quality. Or perhaps they were merely popular. Howard had a snobbish streak and would resist going along with the crowd.

“Are you interested in joining our book group, Mrs Stedman? We meet on the first Wednesday of the month at five o’clock, when the library closes.”

“A book group?”

“Yes. These are sets for book groups. All the members read the same book and then they meet to discuss it. What they liked about it, where it led them. That kind of thing.”

Alice wanted to move out of the librarian’s reach, but one title held her attention: ***Pause Between Acts*** by Mavis Cheek. The cover showed red theatre curtains opening to reveal an empty chair. A chair waiting for who? For who to do what?

The librarian saw her hesitate and gave her a leaflet. “These are the titles for our library group for the next six months.”

Alice scanned to the bottom. They were not scheduled to read***Pause Between Acts.***

“The titles at the bottom are suggestions for individual members, to help them develop the ways they think critically about what they’re reading.”

***“How Fiction Works.”***

”That will really get you thinking. I’ll see if it’s on the shelves.” And as she swept away, Alice slipped a copy of ***Pause Between Acts*** under her arm along with her other choices.

Four books for Howard and now one for herself. At the check-out counter a junior member of staff processed each volume in turn while the librarian scrutinised the screen of her computer. She told Alice that ***How Fiction Works*** was available at a neighbouring library and that she had requested it on her behalf.

***Pause Between Acts*** disturbed Alice’s sleep. She lay beside her unopened book and stared at the bold print on the spine. It excited her. It frightened her. It suggested – no, it promised – a second act. She slept more deeply than she had for years, but suffered vivid dreams.

When the librarian telephoned to say that the book she had requested was now available for collection, Alice returned Howard’s volumes and did not replace them.

At the checkout counter, the librarian flicked to the opening page of Alice’s new book and read aloud, *“The house of fiction has many windows.”*

A window opening on the next act. Alice felt her fingers tremble and gripped her bag to steady them.

“It’s not a long book, but you might find it a little heavy-going in places. Take your time with it, Mrs Stedman.” The librarian put the book down on the counter, opened to the flyleaf, and dabbed the Library Service sticker with a date for return.

“STOKE HEATH,” Alice read upside down.

“Yes, it’s another of our libraries.”

“That’s the borstal.”

The librarian ruffled the pages from front to back with her thumb and declared them all there. “Occasionally we find a few pages torn out. They use them to roll cigarettes.”

Alice stared at ‘STOKE HEATH’ again, stamped diagonally across the pages on the top, on the bottom, and on the side.

“The prison staff like us to stamp them on the outside so when they’re searching the cells they can tell at a glance that it’s one of ours.”

Alice’s fingers worked on her shopping bag, forcing open a fissure into which the librarian slipped the book.

When she got home she made herself a strong cup of tea.

She locked the front door. From under the kitchen sink she took a new pair of yellow rubber gloves and wriggled her fingers in. She lifted the book from her bag and set it down on an easy-to-wipe place mat on the dining room table.

***How Fiction Works*** declared itself in white letters on a block of black. Beneath, *James Wood* and ‘*the strongest literary critic we have’* in red. The words had been designed to look like they had been composed on a typewriter, with bits not inked uniformly. They were superimposed on faint grey type with corrections in handwriting and something scribbled out in pencil.

With yellow rubber fingertips she opened the book. The latest date stamp – hers – read 14 JAN 15. Before that, just three other dates: 27 MAR 08, 17 APR 08, 10 MAY 08.

One reader had borrowed it three times in a row. He must have been a bright young man who wanted to know how fiction works, even though he was locked up. Especially because he was locked up. Not so much a man as a boy, barely into Act One. He must have been lacking in confidence, that’s why he read slowly. Bullied at school most likely. And told he wasn’t very clever. But he’s got time now and the chance to turn a page.

Or maybe he was seeking solace; serving time for something he didn’t do. He fell in with the bad sort and was forced to go along. And then when things went wrong they blamed him – framed him, even -- because he was so used to being the victim he almost asked for it. In any case, now they were starting to realise he had something about him, something they didn’t have, something he was learning from the way fiction worked. She called him Thomas. Then she blushed. It was the name she had long ago picked out for if she had a boy of her own.

Alice carried ***How Fiction Works*** through to the front room and propped it up against the wall in the centre of the mantelpiece, replacing Howard’s prize carriage clock. The clock went under the kitchen sink where her rubber gloves had come from.

Periodically during those first few days Alice took her new library book from the front room mantel and carried it to the dining room where she set it down on the table mat. Each time, she carried her inspection a step further.

The pages felt primitively thick. Cheap paper. And they were off white. Unbleached. Thomas, from a rented flat on one of the old council estates, would have felt at home.

On page 42 there is a small brown smudge in the margin, mirrored on the opposite page. Tom is a sensitive boy, despite everything, and is prone to unexplained nosebleeds. Or he has absent-mindedly picked a scab while tackling one of the heavier passages – Tom is always picking up scrapes and scratches. On page 80 there is a paler but larger stain. Tom has fallen asleep, his head in his book on his hard, narrow bunk, and has drooled as he dreams of make-believe birthday parties, Easter parades, his mother’s arms.

At night Alice leaves ***How Fiction Works***in its place on the mantelpiece and each morning when she rises she checks in the front room that Thomas is still with her.

As the date stamped into the front of her book approaches, Alice becomes fretful. With daring that shocks her, she calls her library and asks if she should take the book to the library at the borstal to have her loan renewed.

“It’s called a Young Offenders’ Institute now, Mrs Stedman. And it’s combined with a prison for young adults. But we can extend your loan from here.”

Her hand is shaking once again as she takes down from the mantel the book that has lived on a prison shelf; that she shares with a young adult who has done hard, serious time.

Alice’s criminal has adult muscles. He sweats. He has needs and fears. He has anger. He lusts. He may be called Frankie but he doesn’t know yet who he is.

The brown stain on page 42 is someone else’s blood; someone threatened by the sight of her criminal with his head in a book. Frankie wouldn’t let anyone get in his way. There would be a fight: young men like him are like that. It is deliberate blood on the page.

The paler, cloudy stain on page 80 she will not name but she knows it is from Frankie’s own body, lonely on the narrow bed, dreaming, yearning. She flinches at her own audacity.

She renews her book a third time.

Alice is learning to live in a world where young men flex their muscles. Hormones pulse through their veins. Tempers flair. They act on impulse. And they break the law.

They get drunk. They deal drugs. They mug helpless people for small change and they rob post offices. They carry knives. They force themselves on women; hit women; rape women. There is no limit to the acts of selfishness they will commit in her house of fiction with many windows.

Alice comes to understand that she has always lived in a world where people commit selfish acts.

The next time she calls the library she is told that the rules allow only three renewals in a row and she must now return her book. There is a wilful silence during which Alice perceives another window opening -- a French window; the kind you can walk through.

She cannot bear the thought of returning her book, even for a day.

She has never lied in her life.

She hears Frankie’s plea, from the mantelshelf.

“Goodbye, Mrs Stedman.”

“But I’ve lost it,” Alice says just in time, her voice calm, her fingers still.