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What are you reading?

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words

My choice of reading matter usually follows a certain pattern: fiction with a strong storyline and well-drawn characters, grounded in a real-world context that I know little about. This context might be the Forbidden City in China as the last emperor's reign disintegrated (*Empress Orchid*, by Anchee Min), crime and power in Tudor London (*The Shardlake Series*, by C.J.Sansom), or the mechanics of the perfume industry in 18th-century Grasse in France (*Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, by Patrick Süskind). Just so long as I am entertained whilst also learning something new about the world.

However my reading habits have changed recently. I put this down to the opening of a small independent bookstore, a short bike ride along the coast from where I live. Not only do the staff make great coffee, and deliver it whilst customers are ensconced on a leather sofa in front of a fire in the upstairs of their little store, they also actively encourage browsing. That kind of coffee never comes cheap.

My recent purchases reflect having time to browse at leisure. They all have striking covers. On reflection, all of them embrace themes of identity, relationships, and transition. There is an unintended parallel between my choice of books and my life as a researcher, where my work focuses on these same three themes of identity, relationships, and transitions, albeit in a digital age.

"*Circe*", by Madeline Miller, reworks the Greek legend of the goddess Circe, daughter of the sun-god Helios. Immortal Circe's life spans millennia, encompassing change at a rate invisible to mere mortals: the ultimate in slow living. Over time, she transitions from rejected nymph, dismissed by her fellow divinities, to lonely outcast, to powerful sorceress in control of her own destiny. Whilst her story is told against a backdrop of egomaniacal deities to whom human life is fleeting and inconsequential, it is Circe's interactions with humans that catalyse change for her.

A more contemporary account of transitions comes in "*The Cost of Living*" by Deborah Levy. This autobiographical volume examines the author's journey from a way of living that is imbued with compromise and suppression of identity to a fuller, truer life. It reflects on changes in her intimate relationships, and in her perspective on herself. Along the way it draws on the work of other writers, including Simone de Beauvoir and Freud, providing pithy quotes that I'm sure to borrow for future papers.

My third recent read is "*I am I am I am*" by Maggie O Farrell. Another writer's autobiography, it is weirdly skewed to all the times that O'Farrell has nearly died, through illness, accident and happenstance. It's an oddly life-affirming book, taking us from her sickly childhood, through a series of near misses and deeply personal losses, to comparative health, maturity and motherhood. It's a book about all the layers of life experiences that go towards making us who we are as grown-ups, and how we are always growing towards being our ultimate selves, with multiple

instantiations along the way.

Across all of these books, the identities of the central characters evolve across the lifespan, catalysed by relationships and events. Perhaps that's what draws me to these stories. It's certainly what draws me to the research that I do. People continue to change and grow across their lives, and their technology needs change with them, keeping the research that I do endlessly interesting.