

## The covers we prefer to open behind closed doors

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You're consumed by the characters, the plot, the dialogue. You sneak a few paragraphs while the coffee's brewing or the kids are brushing their teeth. You just won't take this book on the bus -- or anywhere in public, for that matter.

Why? It's too embarrassing. It's your guilty literary pleasure. And according to a recent U.K. survey, you're in good, albeit private, company.

The survey, conducted for the 2006 Costa Book Awards, found that 85 per cent of respondents enjoy reading books by certain authors but feel embarrassed cracking them open in public. Horror master Stephen King was the most commonly cited guilty-pleasure writer. J.K. Rowling placed second and the ubiquitous Dan Brown shared the number three spot with John Grisham. Catherine Cookson and Danielle Steel tied for fourth, while Terry Pratchett came in fifth.

Armed with these stats, I was ready to "out" some book-world insiders. One of my favourite confessions came from Raincoast Books publicist Selina Rajani. "A few years ago, my boyfriend's mum forced upon me a copy of Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander*," she recalls. "I was skeptical. My style is more Thomas Pynchon and Haruki Murakami."

Although the book looked "very small and sparkly amid all the John Donne and modern Japanese fiction," Rajani peeled back the cover -- and promptly burned through the novel in two days. She eventually bought the entire series and attended a reading here by Gabaldon, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz.

One day, while talking books with a well-read friend, Rajani blurted, "Gabaldon! Gabaldon!" Her friend was silent for a second, then exclaimed, "Ooh! Jean Auel!" Their cards were on the table.

Kitty Lewis, general manager of Brick Books in London, Ont., also has an affinity for Gabaldon's works. "They're a great read -- about three inches thick and very romantic," she says. "Time travel and a tall, red-headed hero named Jamie from 1800s Scotland. Great stuff!"

Toronto literary agent Beverley Slopen argues that "when you work in book publishing, everything is permitted. There is no room for snobbery. It takes great

skill and talent to write a book that seduces a reader to keep turning the pages. Some of the best prose stylists are mystery writers, for instance."

Vancouver author Kevin Chong claims he has few literary indulgences. "I guess I'm still fond of Charles Bukowski's writing, which I got into in high school. He's somebody who's fairly popular but not considered very serious literature."

Karl Siegler, Vancouver-based president of Talonbooks, says: "I don't read for pleasure because, to me, the best reading is pleasure. The kinds of authors I like to read most are like the ones I publish: writers who do things with language that no one has done before, and who surprise you with their facility, their intellect and their craft."

Of the seven authors crowned in the survey, Siegler says: "I enjoyed reading their many sources far more than what they made of them in the reduction vats of their pulped imaginations."

Guilty or not, millions are devouring the same sentences you enjoy behind closed doors. The key word is definitely "pleasure."

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Novelist Lori Lansens is the first Canadian to make the potentially lucrative Richard & Judy Book Club shortlist. Her 2005 novel, *The Girls*, about conjoined twins, joins seven other titles to be featured in week-long segments on the popular British Channel 4 TV show, including *Half of a Yellow Sun*, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *Restless*, by William Boyd. The married hosts have become hugely influential in Britain, recommending 21 of the top 100 books sold in the country in 2006.

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