

Maria Popova: Books are the Original Internet by Unknown Yet

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Oscar Schwartz on Maria Popova

“Books are the original internet,” Maria Popova tells me with a grin. She is switched on, ballsy, irresistibly articulate, fully engaged. This is Maria’s gift. She talks about complex ideas in a way that transforms them into something I want to talk about with my friends. She makes big concepts relevant.

“My bookshelves are completely full, and I’m still buying new ones compulsively,” she adds. “They’re piling up around me!”

Undoubtedly, it is this gift that makes Maria’s blog, Brain Pickings, such a success. Her thirst for knowledge means that she looks past the trends and fads that flash brightly in cyberspace, but are then forgotten hours later. Instead, she blogs about small bits of genius and curiosity that have been forgotten; antique ideas, perhaps. She finds the pearls of human interest amid an ocean of information.

For Maria, the most important thing is that every blog post have some element of human wisdom, something both timely and timeless: an illustrated biography of Charles Darwin, John Steinbeck’s hand-written letters to his eldest son about falling in love, Susan Sontag’s musings on the essence of art.

I first came across Maria’s blog around a year ago. What has kept me going back to Brain Pickings, almost daily, is the feeling that I’m standing in front of a friend’s carefully compiled bookshelf, and she is telling me about her favourite books, holding them up, and breathlessly describing why she is inspired by them. Brain Pickings is an experience that feels personal and utterly human.

I’m not the only one who feels this way about Maria’s blog; the US Library of Congress is going to preserve Brain Pickings in its archive. Maria’s writing is already valued as a significant cultural artefact.

When I Skype Maria, it’s one of the last warm autumn days in Melbourne, and one of the last cold nights in Brooklyn. Maria’s face appears on my screen, beaming. She is standing up, looking down at her iPad, which is resting flat on her desk. It gives me the feeling that I’m looking up through the screen, all the way into her Brooklyn apartment. “I hope it’s OK with you that I’m standing up,” she says. “It’s just that I can never work sitting down. I can’t be that still. It makes me uncomfortable.”

“It’s so nice to see some sunlight,” she says. “It’s so dark and gloomy here in Brooklyn.

But I guess I shouldn't complain; I've been away travelling most of March. Early spring is my travel season..."

OSCAR SCHWARTZ: Where have you been travelling?

MARIA POPOVA: First I was at TED in California, and then I judged the South by Southwest film festival in Austin.

I visited Austin last year. It's a great town isn't it?

It's beautiful. Though when you're stuck in a dark movie theatre for most of the day, you don't really get to explore it.

Have you been before?

Many times. One of my close friends lives there. I also go every year for South by Southwest.

Lucky you!

I love it. It's a beautiful city and it smells divine all the time. It smells like, petunias.

Have you ever considered moving there?

No! If it were up to me I would never leave Brooklyn.

Really? What do you love about Brooklyn?

I think it's all about the community. It's a place where work life and social life kind of become one.

What do you mean by that?

Well, I don't draw a sharp line between work and life, if any line at all.

The notion of work/life balance has always been very strange for me. What I do is who I am.

So the people that I spend time with through my work are my closest friends now, and all of them are here in Brooklyn. Oh, and I also love that I can ride my bike everywhere.

Brooklyn isn't your home city though is it?

No. I was born in Sofia, Bulgaria. I've moved around a lot. Before Brooklyn I lived in two continents, in four or five different cities and in lots of different apartments. I guess I didn't really have a sense of "home" anywhere for quite a while. In Brooklyn, I feel at "home".

How old were you when you left Sofia?

I was 19. I came to the States for college.

Was studying in the States a goal of yours growing up?

When I was growing up it was pretty much a given that everyone wanted to leave. It was the escapist dream of postcommunism. I went to an American high school in Sofia. Most of my graduating class ended up coming here. We studied from American textbooks and we had American teachers.

So you were taught in English?

Of course. We were taught at a very high level, too. Some of our textbooks, especially in science and math, were college level. In our freshman year at high school we were studying college level physics!

Wow! Was it your choice to go to this school?

Yes, it was my decision. But whenever I think about how I ended up studying at that high school I'm always reminded of the power of choice, how every little decision sends you down a micro-path that weaves further and further away from every other possible micro-path.

And which path did you take?

In Bulgaria, there are only a handful of elite schools, and all of them are foreign-language schools. They are very competitive. After seventh grade, we had to take a placement exam to apply for all of the elite foreign-language schools, except for the American school, which had its own. My best friend at the time really wanted to go the American school. I wanted to go to the German school, but my friend dragged me along to the American exam for moral support.

After I sat the exam I was sure that I totally flunked it. I hadn't done any preparation at all. Then right after the exam we went to summer camp together on the Black Sea. Every day at camp we would call our mothers on the pay phones to see if the results for the exams were in.

One day I came back from the beach to my room, and Johanna, my best friend, was sitting on her bed crying. Instantly I knew: Oh no, she's spoken to her mum and she didn't get in. Then I called my mum, but she wasn't there, so I called her work number. Her colleague answered the phone.

"Your mother's not in," she said, "but the exam results are. You came in third place for the American high school exam!" I just told her she was wrong, hung up the phone and went to see how Johanna was.

The next day I got a hold of my mother, and she confirmed that I had actually come third. At first I was like, "No! I'm going to go to the German school with Johanna." Jo told me I was being stupid, and that I should go to the American school.

I stayed at camp for another few days and then went home. My mother came to pick me up from the station. I had told her on the phone that I was going to go the German school, and she fully supported my decision, but as the train stopped I suddenly changed my

mind. I remember jumping off the train with my massively over packed suitcases and yelling, "I changed my mind, I changed my mind! Quick, let's go!" So we got in the car and Mum rushed me to the American school literally 20 minutes before it closed for registration.

That 20 minutes changed the course of my entire life.

We could have been reading Brain Pickings in German.

Yep, German! [Laughs] I wonder what the translation of Brain Pickings is in German?

Do you go back to Bulgaria to visit?

Occasionally. The last few visits have been for unfortunate reasons: deaths and immigration stuff. But I do get there about once a year. My whole family lives there.

All in Sofia?

Well, my dad's family is originally from Varna. I spent some time there as a child on vacation. It is my favourite city in Bulgaria. It's on the Black Sea coast. It has a beautiful big park, kind of like what Central Park is in New York, but on the seaside. My father's parents have an apartment there, which was where my dad and my uncle grew up. They ended up moving to Sofia, but kept the apartment. I'd go there for summer vacation.

Do you remain in contact with your childhood friends?

To be honest, not really. But I still see some of my friends from the American school. We had our own campus in Sofia, so it was all very self-contained and people formed very close groups and relationships. It was so academically intense that you kind of just spent all your time studying with your classmates; a lot of us emerged as lifelong friends.

One of my good friends from school ended up going to University of Pennsylvania, which is where I went to college too. Now she lives in New York. Though, New York being New York, we see each other twice a year.

It seems like there was a big focus on academic success growing up. Were you naturally a bookish kid?

I think memories of childhood—memory in general—is a very unreliable source. We do a lot of revisionism about our own lives. But with that caveat, I would say, yeah, I was quite academic. But maybe it was more that I was competitive than bookish. I really wanted to be, for lack of a better expression, better than the other kids. You know? [Laughs].

What was important for me, as a younger person, was figuring out ways to beat the school system at its own game and do really well in exams. I basically studied the mechanics of how tests work. I did all the reading, but I did it for the sake of feeling like I was doing well, rather than learning. And then there was a turning point, I can't remember exactly when it was. I stopped caring about grades and the external reinforcement. I became interested in learning. Maybe it was a form of rebelliousness, I don't know. I became interested in learning about things that I was not being taught in school. I did a lot of my own alternative reading, outside of the curriculum. And this

transition from worrying about external reinforcement to personal learning and curiosity is how Brain Pickings was born. It happened only years later, but that's where it all came from.

Was there a specific moment, or person, or book that sparked this rebellious learning, your turning point?

I don't believe in that "Eureka!" myth. Everything meaningful is incremental.

It's a false prophet, this notion of the turning point or epiphany. I think of it like the blossoming of a flower. We are always interested in the flower, but not the tedium of the blossoming. But that process from bud to blossom is when things really happen.

It may be less compelling. So all this goes to say, I don't have a single turning point. But there was a cumulative push.

So tell me about the process of blossoming.

When I arrived at UPenn in the US, I was at first very excited about what was on the curriculum. But once I was actually in those classes I found them completely un-compelling. I objected to the way they were conducted, the type of reading we were assigned. Basically, I felt really let down by the formal education package.

It was around that time TED released their first site with the TED talks online. It must have been 2004. I remember listening to my first TED talk. It was really short, really compelling, completely intriguing. I thought, This is the antithesis of my academic experience.

What was your academic experience?

The standard: sitting through an hour-long, boring lecture by a professor who was reading off a PowerPoint slide, and then doing as little reading as possible to get by in the exams. The TED talk did the complete opposite: it pulled me in with something really short and really punchy, and then it made me want to read as much around it as possible. It provoked the desire for further investigation. After I listened to the first talk I went out and bought all these books on the subject. And then I thought, If I want to have this really rewarding inner experience of knowledge, of education, I'll have to create it for myself. I can't sit idly in a lecture hall of 400 people with a professor who doesn't know my name. That's when things started to blossom.

So the blossoming coincided with your move from Bulgaria to Philadelphia. That must have been a complete change in lifestyle?

Yes, completely.

Was it a culture shock?

I wouldn't say shock. That's a bit of, "exoticisation" of the foreigner. I mean, I did go to an American high school and I spoke perfect English. There was also a lot of American culture imported to Bulgaria through movies, fashion and music, just like the rest of the world. But my knowledge of America was incomplete. The actual social fabric of human conversation-I didn't really get a sense of that. I guess there was an element of surprise and novelty, but more economic than cultural.

What do you mean by economic?

I went to UPenn. A lot of people who go there grow up with some sort of privilege. I felt, and this might sound contrived, but I felt like I didn't belong there.

What caused you to feel like that?

There was a sense of entitlement among many of the students that I just wasn't used to. That's not to say I think they were bad people. It's just that they were accustomed to a kind of life and a way of being in the world, of presenting themselves to the world, and claiming things in the world, that was so foreign to me to the point of being alienating. Of course, I was able to find very diverse groups of people, who didn't have a sense of entitlement, but that was the hardest part of moving to America for me.

It was during those early years that consuming stuff became a way for people to define their place in the world, what they stood for, who they were.

There had never been such access to stuff, to consumer goods.

Is that why you started working in advertising?

I was interested in the psychology and humanity of consumerism, how we construct ourselves through brands. The notion of a brand was, for a long time, a novelty to me. Up until the age of eight, I didn't even know what a brand was! Everything we bought was store brand.

So when I got to college, consumerism was what I was interested in. It was almost like an obsession. I collected articles about advertising agencies and I subscribed to their newsletters.

And then one day, in one of the newsletters, there was a small piece about a creative director from an agency that I really respected, called Crispin Porter and Bogusky, who had left to start his own agency in Philly with two other guys. The next day I just showed up at his new agency in Philly and I was like, "Umm, hi. I'm your new intern," and they said, "Okay. We need an intern." A few weeks later they hired me part time, and eventually talked me into quitting my other jobs and doing it full time. I was there for three years and ended up running strategy.

Did working in advertising change your perspective on consumer culture?

The people I worked with had good values. They had this rule that they would only do work with people who they would invite to their homes for dinner. I remember one time a really major tobacco company came to them and said, "We'll give you all of our business and you don't even have to make a pitch." The fact is, this client would have paid really good money at a time when we needed it. But they just said, "No. We're not selling tobacco."

At the same time, I also began to grow disillusioned with advertising, or maybe bored. I realised that it wasn't actually advertising that interested me, but the psychology behind it. My interests pivoted towards psychology, communications and writing.

Brain Pickings started as a newsletter you sent to colleagues at the advertising agency. What compelled you to start writing it?

Right from the start it was my own space to escape into, to explore. I was reading a lot at the time. I think part of the reason is because of the enormous intellectual debt I felt as someone who didn't grow up in the US. Every day, and still to this day, I discover people or ideas that are just taken as common knowledge here, but who I've never heard of. I guess I feel like I have to compensate for this, and it has driven me to overcompensate, and develop broad knowledge in certain areas.

Is it strange that Brain Pickings started as a place for personal exploration, and now it's a place that millions of people go to explore...

I think that people sometimes need a hook to the familiar in order to climb into the unfamiliar. I try to do that. I take ideas that others have heard of and let them become gateways into something deeper, for further personal exploration. I think people are drawn to Brain Pickings because it's a place where connections are made between seemingly unfamiliar things.

Is this what you mean when you say you believe in combinatorial creativity?

Yes, but I didn't coin the term. I don't know who did, but it is exactly what I believe. It's an idea that has been articulated by many people over the millennia. It's just how ideas work: there are existing pieces that just click together and make something new. Nothing comes from thin air.

That's true. But with access to the internet there is just so much information—people, ideas, facts—it can be overwhelming. How do you cope with the barrage of information?

To paraphrase Rainer Maria Rilke, that's the beauty and the terror, right? I know that Brain Pickings is completely subjective, and that's a blessing and a curse. My only litmus test is that an idea has to be more than just entertaining, it has to stay with you longer than just the initial "whoa" moment.

Basically, it has to leave traces of something inside you. Once you're done reading it, watching it, whatever—it has to have augmented your understanding of the world.

How do you know other people are going to be interested in the same things as you?

At the end of the day, that's not my primary concern. I post the ideas that reflect what I'm interested in, that augment how I see the world. I see myself as recording the process of my own education rather than sharing ideas. Brain Pickings is first and foremost for my own enhancement. That being said, it makes me so happy to see that other people find stimulation in it, find some way in which it opens up their lives. That's not the reason why I do it, though.

You must take inspiration from the fact that Brain Pickings inspires others.

Of course! I get a lot of positive emails. It's really lovely. I remember one specifically. This man told me that he and his wife were living in different cities across America because of work. Every morning one of them would send the other an article from Brain Pickings and every evening the other would send something else, and then they would talk about it over the phone. I find that so lovely. Every time I receive an email like this, my hope that

we are all connected, that we share a common humanity, is reinvigorated. In order for someone to take a moment out of their day to inject a moment of joy into someone else's—that's an incredible gift. I'm grateful for it every day.

Being online, you also open yourself up to negative responses. How do you deal with criticism?

It's hard. Dealing with it is about integrating my emotional reaction to criticism with my intellectual reaction to it. You can intellectually dismiss a piece of criticism as not valid or true, or whatever. But you'll still have emotional burn from it. Learning to integrate these responses is challenging, but it's also a practice. It's a skill. I just do it. There's no other way.

Do you try to maintain a space outside of Brain Pickings that is just for you? A Maria Popova that exists only offline?

No. My life is integrated. Almost everyone who is really important to me in analogue life—from my best friends to my partner—I've met directly or indirectly through my work. I wouldn't be able to do Brain Pickings if I felt like it divided me from myself.

What does help, though, is a consistent routine. I wake up early every morning, and go to gym. At gym I do my long form reading on the elliptical. I go home and start writing: three blogs posts a day, every day, tweets, Tumblr posts. And then in the evening sometimes I go see friends, but sometimes I just like to write more.

And while it's a strict routine, it is broken, in a way, by the notion of flow. For me, flow is a state when you lose track of time. You forget that you're hungry or thirsty. This losing track of time is so common for me. The other day I was reading F. Scott Fitzgerald's letters and the next thing I know it was three hours later, and I have no idea how that happened. But flow is never a waste of time. It's the most important part of my day.

When you're reading, are you reading online content?

Mainly books.

Books?

Yes, books!

People forget that books are the original internet.

Every footnote, every citation, every reference is essentially a hyperlink to another idea. Have a look at my apartment! [Maria picks up her iPad and scans the room.]

Whoa! I like books too, but that's a lot of books.

I know. It's pathological. I don't know where to put them! And these are just the books that I've ordered in the last couple of weeks. I have nowhere to put them. One book always leads to the next. There's no end to it.

So I'm guessing that most of the content we read on Brain Pickings comes straight from these books?

I have an issue with people referring to the posts on my site as content. I feel like it commodifies knowledge to a degree that troubles me. I'm just as interested in the mind that holds the idea as the idea itself.

My philosophy is this: There's information, which is just noise. There's knowledge, which is your understanding of that information. And then, there's wisdom, which is your ability to apply that knowledge to how you live your life. Readers should move along this path.

Then the reader of Brain Pickings should be an involved reader, right? An active learner?

Definitely. But it isn't easy, because the basic architecture of the internet is based around novelty. The newest thing always rises to the top. Think about a Twitter feed, for instance. That leads us to believe that all the issues that we're thinking about, no one has ever thought about before: immigration, education reform, gay rights, nutrition. But, you go and read Balzac's letters and you'll find he discusses all of these things. In fact, everything you need to know about literature, love and life can be found in Letters of Anaïs Nin and Henry Miller. The book is 80 years old now.

So even though you write on the internet you think people should read more books?

Definitely. I try to make Brain Pickings a place that gently nudges people along the pathway to more knowledge and wisdom. So while books take time and commitment to read, there's something really valuable that happens when we do.

We remind ourselves that the issues facing our world are very human, and that other humans have thought about them before, and have sometimes thought about them much better.

I try to resurface timeless human wisdom.

Do you just use the internet as distribution for Brain Pickings? I mean, I mainly use the internet as a discovery tool.

That's true. Part of the value of the internet is certainly its discovery value, letting us access things. I find all my books online, and then I buy them online, from the comfort of my home.

But what I really worry about is this culture of: "If it's not on Google it doesn't exist".

And I worry about it because the internet is really just a transient technology. We don't know what's going to happen in a few generations. What if it doesn't exist in the way it currently does? Preserving all of our information in it, hoping that it will forever contain our knowledge, is dangerous.

But it's such an efficient way of storing information.

Yes and no. Brain Pickings is only seven years old. It's a baby. And even so, sometimes I go back into my archive and I find a lot of dead links. Link rot: it's a problem. It's like a citation just disappearing from a book! Your reference is gone.

What can you do about link rot?

It's a tough one. It reminds me of something that happened a few months ago, something

really exciting. The Library of Congress in America emailed me and told me that it wants to preserve Brain Pickings in its archive. I was so excited. But then I thought, Wait a minute. What does that actually mean?

I remembered one of my jobs at university was helping a non-fiction author who was writing a book about the late 1800s in the southern states of America. Some of the research I did for him involved looking at microfilm. Microfilm is a completely outdated form of technology now. I wondered, Is the internet going to be the microfilm of 100 years from now on which someone reads Brain Pickings? I think that as long as we remain aware that the internet is a transient technology—if we use it to enrich our lives—that's great. But if we put too much faith in the fact that the internet will remain unchanged, that it will preserve our wisdom—that seems like a dangerous assumption.

It's true. Things do seem to move extraordinarily fast. It's almost impossible to imagine how we'll be receiving our information 100 years from now.

That's right. But humans are so good at adapting themselves; like my grandmother. She's a great lady, 76, who only discovered the internet a few years ago. But now she obsessively reads Brain Pickings through Google translate, she monitors my Twitter followers (I don't even do that). And she skypes me to tell me how many people are following me.

Are you close with her?

Yes, in a specific way. She was the intellectual of the family. It was her library in Bulgaria that got me to be curious in the first place. She has a lot of these leather-bound, multi-volume encyclopedias and atlases. I think that's where my love of maps comes from. She is still extremely intellectual. She regularly, inadvertently shames me by referencing a book that I haven't read.

Do you see yourself as similar to her?

There are some similarities between us. I always find myself wondering what she would have become had she had the internet at her fingertips when she was my age. She is a sponge for knowledge, and so curious. She did have a great career. She was a civic engineer working with architects. But even so I can only imagine... She's only been on the internet two-and-a-half years and she's already figured everything out. She was 73 when she started. Imagine learning it all from scratch at 73? Simple things like what a browser does, what a URL is? Everything we take for granted.

She sounds like a mentor, in a way.

She is a grounding point for me. She reminds me of what I take for granted. Even just me looking at you on the screen now, thousands of miles away: for me, that's the most natural thing, but for her...it must be weird!

Does she like Brain Pickings?

She reads it obsessively.

It's pretty amazing that it is able to appeal to your 76-year-old grandmother from Bulgaria, and me, a 24-year-old Australian.

I think we are drawn to anything that compels us to step outside our comfort zones, intellectually, creatively, socially, morally. We are drawn to things that broaden us.

Sometimes I think to myself: Who the hell am I to tell people how to broaden their comfort zones?

But I don't think I am being forceful. Maybe I'm just creating a haven for people, a place where they can begin discovery for themselves, find things on the fringes of what they know and then expand those fringes, a little bit more, then a little bit more, and grow.

Postscript: We were delighted to be able to chat to Maria again during the 2014 Melbourne Writers Festival, as part of our Caravan Conversations series. Brain Pickings Maria Popova explained over a cuppa why she thinks the notion of work/life balance is toxic...and limitations aid creativity. Mentioned in the video: Six-Word Memoirs.

Why Maria Popova loves limitations from Dumbo Feather on Vimeo.