Something awful happened to me on the way to the PRIMS meeting...

... or What to read for entertainment when Your leg’s in traction.

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Published: August 24, 2005 Last updated: December 26, 2015

The author attempted to attend the January 2004 Private Market Sector meeting and managed to comply quite literally with cheerful admonitions to “break a leg” by stumbling down a perfect flight of stairs. She was then carted off to a distant hospital in what felt like a dogcart. This piece – a meandering, sort-of book review - was originally drafted while the author was still high on painkillers; any inaccuracies should be attributed to this fact.

Reading – my favorite activity. Lying with a broken leg in the emergency waiting room – an oxymoron? – all you want to read is the name of the hospital, a long compound moniker people insist on not spelling for you, though they're happy to recite it over and over again at top speed. When you finally get a glimpse of some of their stationery, the official name turns out to be “Santa Maria degli Angeli”, but the name people actually call it – the name of the district, it eventually turns out – is nowhere to be seen. This clue will surely help your Significant Other in his quest to join you.

The mental search for reading material does have the advantage of keeping your mind off the wrenching pain every time some nurse-in-training handles your leg – it's Friday night and experienced staff members are not on duty. You wait and wait for a painkiller until an intern turns up wielding a jumbo electric drill; then you discover he's not really planning a spot of DIY on a freezing Friday evening: that huge drill bit is actually meant for your own ankle. Fade to black – black mood, unfortunately, instead of a nice, merciful blackout. And the trainee nurse, wincing and looking away, isn't really helping much.

Up in your room, when the first dose of painkillers at last begins to kick in, the hours seem even longer than sixty minutes’ worth of EU customs talks. You realize the time has come to re-read War and Peace; however, since you just added Italian to your panoply of languages and you happen to be laid up in Italy, wouldn’t this be just the opportunity you were waiting for to read I Promessi Sposi?

Fortunately, a charitable colleague who lives "only" a couple of hours away from the hospital is far more sensible than you could be in your doped-up boredom, and brings you somewhat lighter reading, thus saving your sanity. You go for the Calvino books first – the third book is an Italian translation of a French novel, and We Read French In The Original.

(Actually, first you simply have to finish that trashy airport thriller you swore to yourself you wouldn’t buy on the trip out. Now aren't you glad you broke that oath?)
Calvino turns out to be a good choice after the evening painkiller dose; your brain’s too tired to handle all that beautiful but exacting concision, and it’s just minutes before you’re ready to put him down and conk out. A couple of days later, you know you’re in trouble when you’re wide awake and nauseous after a dose of Valium and find his sentences too convoluted.

Eventually, you decide to place some trust in your fellow language professionals: literary translators, the poor souls who don’t get to fly to Deeper Luxembourg on travel allowances. Out of your bedside table comes the Daniel Pennac novel in Italian. Here, at last, is just what the doctor ordered – an engaging story, somewhat reminiscent of the movie Delicatessen in mood and intelligent tenderness. You pick up some Italian drug slang – it’ll surely come in handy in conversations with your elderly hospital roommates. You wonder whether they might enjoy the opening scene of a strange old lady shooting a policeman.

A slightly exasperating treat is the mention of a “shoulder of lamb à la Montalbán”. Is it me, or does it seem to be compulsory for detective novels to go on and on about food these days? When it was just Vázquez Montalbán's Carvalho novels it was fun, and nostalgia for Catalan soul food heightened the pleasure of reading those mouth-watering descriptions back in your golden Brussels exile in the eighties. Camilleri has a similarly enjoyable Sicilian angle that can make you hanker after dishes you've never tried, and Donna Leon is good at weaving in the culinary interest with the rest of her character’s domestic arrangements so that it all hangs together. Patricia Cornwell, however, should lay off the food talk: it really doesn't go well with all the chopped-up body bits, which she seems to enjoy much more, anyway, and it comes across as an afterthought. End of digression. Pennac appears to share this suspicion of food in mystery novels, because the shoulder-of-lamb line is just a throwaway.

In the end, when your eyes are weary from the fluorescent lighting and your head’s all drowsy but you can’t sleep, and time drags on endlessly in between visiting hours, it all comes down to your mobile phone, and to the people who just ring and tell you to hang in there, the ones who SMS you to cheer you up – your very favorite reading material. You even forward some of the messages for their sheer funniness – though the drugs may have something to do with your hysterical laughter. Those friends are the ones that keep you from doing something crazy like... Oh, come off it, just what would you do? You can’t even shift your body a quarter of an inch to the left without screaming murder.

Time for surgery. Informed consent forms are all the rage these days and you’re almost – not quite – looking forward to reading yours, after all the risks and benefits have been duly discussed by your surgeon and anesthesiologist. But you are not expected to read, just sign, and do it fast because everybody’s very busy – aren’t you the one who’s been begging for her operation for the past five days? Fortunately for your pride, you’re more or less aware of the risks involved in a spinal block – not that it ever gets discussed in the medical conferences you’ve interpreted, but news items about US malpractice lawsuits do make their way to Europe – so you can sign in hasty good conscience while speculating whether you might ask for general anesthesia, never mind the risk.

Oceano Mare, supplied by a second visitor, is another excellent choice; neither heavy-handed nor too understated, full of life, well written and lovingly narrated, it's just the ticket when you've had your operation and are looking forward to a long recovery period. The plot summary was not very appealing so you were reluctant to pick it up, but that’s typical of Baricco in your experience: mini-plots propel the narrative-oriented reader along what appears to be a somewhat flat, boring surface, and in the end you find its overall texture quite interesting.

Traveling home with a recently broken and operated leg is something worth avoiding (perhaps one should add that Antarctica is not a popular beach holiday destination). If you ever have to do it, get gripping books and, above all, make sure you’re loaded to the gills with painkillers before you leave.
the hospital – especially if your insurance company insists on carting you across the Apennines in freezing weather so that you can fly with their airline of choice. Skip a meal if you have to, but don't leave without that jab.

Finally, for convalescent reading, please allow me to recommend Dante’s *Inferno*. Nothing beats schadenfreude for good cheer when you’re bored and in pain, and all those graphic torture scenes come into their own when the slightest feathery touch on your forefoot produces a yelp that can be heard from across town. The hendecasyllabic meter (yes, I looked up the spelling) is actually soothing. Don’t forget to get a good version with plenty of notes if it's your first reading, or you’ll feel like a 21st-century teenager watching *Spitting Image* reruns.

I would like to end this piece by thanking all the colleagues who helped in myriad ways. With all its faults, AIIC does have a little of that old trade guild spirit; you call for help and complete strangers come through, merely on the strength of your shared profession. A heartfelt thanks to all.

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**Credits**

*Milk of human kindness supplied on location by:*

- **Significant Other** (who caught a flight and stayed for nine days, when he hadn’t even wanted to go to Florence for that weekend)
- **Itziar Rey** (who also provided a radio, books, key vocabulary and lots of conversation)
- **Mary Dolan** (who also bought me an excellent pair of warm socks and some lovely bath oil – the cue for my Blanche Dubois line about the kindness of strangers)
- **Maria Fitzgibbon** (who was ill and couldn’t visit, but ran interference with the hospital bureaucrats – give me Cereals Committee statistics at top speed any day rather than real-life red tape over the phone with no documents in sight)
- **Mireille Gastaldi**
- **Angela Keil**
- **The Orthopaedics nursing team and Dr. Rigoli** at Santa Maria Annunziata Hospital in Ponte A Niccheri, Bagno a Ripoli (Firenze).
- **Hotel La Residenza** staff and management (who also supplied the cutlery, towels and toiletries you’re supposed to bring with you if you plan to break a leg in Italy)

*Love and encouragement purveyed and professional organising drudgery handled from Barcelona by:*

- **Catherine Gris**
- **Pilar García-Crecente**
- **Virginia Skrobisch** (who now has to cope with a huge but stress-inducing client as a result)
- All the other **members of AIB**, who felt dreadfully guilty about my fall because I was in Florence partly on behalf of AIB.

*Support and repartee “texted” remotely, sometimes at great expense, by:*

- **Bernard Miller** (winner of the “Funniest SMS” award)
- **Alberto Langone** (runner-up)
- **Sue Hilton**
- **Hugo Pooley**
- **Monica Meinecke**
Books

The books read in hospital and during early convalescence (except for the trashy novel) are listed below. No actual books were dog-eared, cracked along the spine, highlighter-marked or otherwise defaced in the writing of this article.


Other authors and books mentioned with love or appreciation: Manuel Vázquez Montalbán (sorely missed), Donna Leon, Andrea Camilleri, and Lev Tolstoy.

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Recommended citation format: