

# COMMONPLACE BOOKS

Sarah M Davies resurrects a method many authors have used in the past, which makes the most of reading actively as a writer

**D**o you make notes in books as you read them? Do you underline passages, write notes in the margins, fold pages down?

Maybe the very thought horrifies you. I'll admit it used to horrify me – until I got serious about active reading.

Active reading means you slow down and consciously engage with the text:

- Circling words and phrases you're unfamiliar with and will need to look up
- Underlining or highlighting passages you find useful and want to remember
- Scribbling notes in the margins or in the blank pages you find at the beginning and end of the book
- Asking questions, making connections and generally interacting with the ideas the author puts forward.

If marking up a book fills you with horror – or if it's one you've borrowed – you can use sticky notes or a notebook

**Milton, Woolf, Reagan and Gates have used a similar approach**

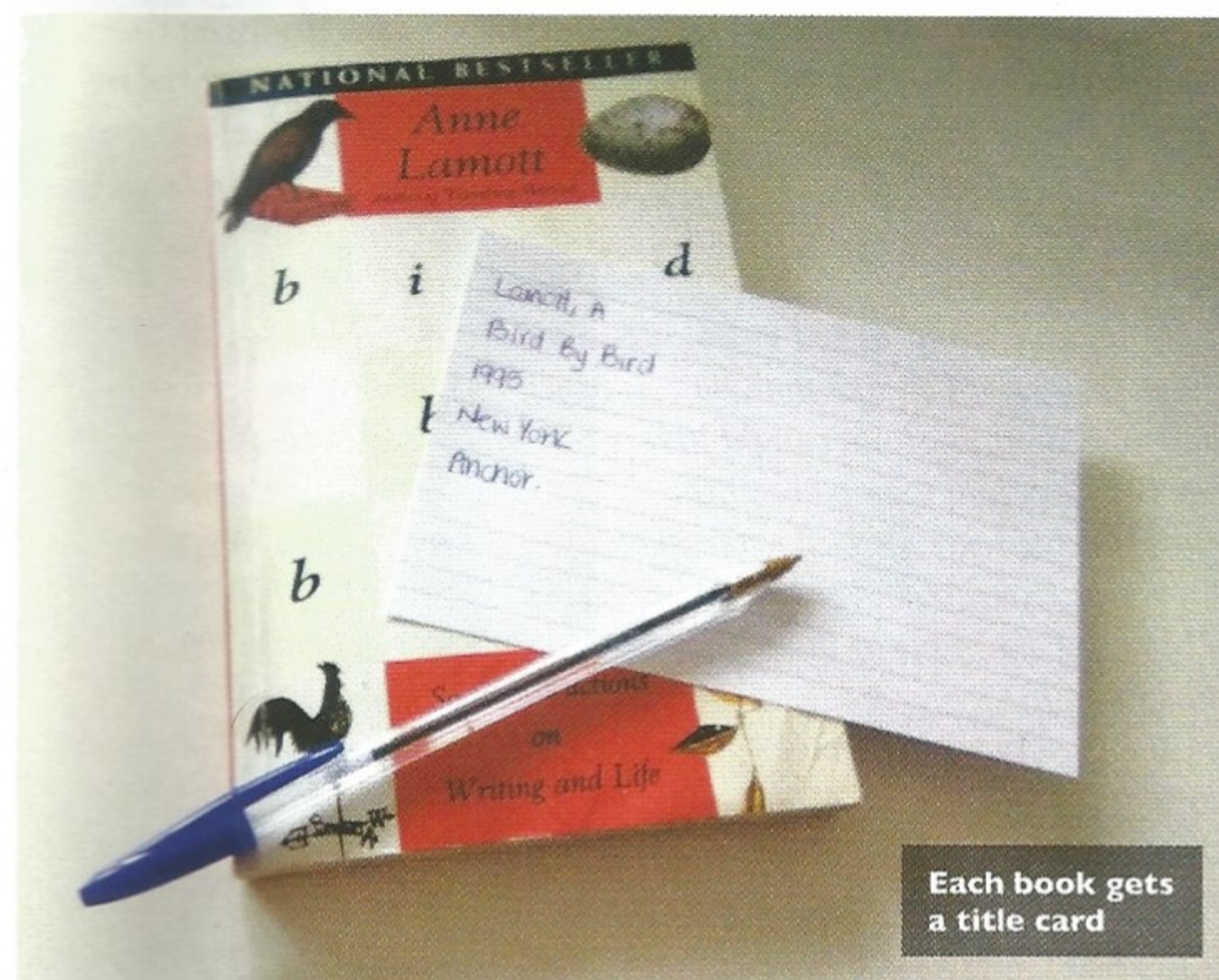
to enable this conversation with the text.

Having engaged with a text in this deeper way than you would with recreational reading, you might want to leave your notes in the text or you might choose to transfer them into a notebook or a computer file.

But I'd like to suggest that you start a commonplace book.

## The history of the commonplace book

Commonplace books have been around forever (you may have heard of *Meditations* by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, from the 2nd century AD). Such books



Each book gets a title card

were particularly popular during the Renaissance and in the 19th century as a way of capturing and remembering quotes, poems, recipes, proverbs – anything of interest to the owner.

Sometimes on just one theme (I have one for recipes), often on many, commonplace books were very much the precursor of the modern computer database.

## Create your commonplace book

I love a notebook and have several on the go at any one time, but to create a really useful commonplace book you need some A6 index cards (that's 6 x 4in, or 15 x 10cm).

This system has been championed in recent years by authors Robert Greene and Ryan Holiday, but John Milton, Virginia Woolf, Ronald Reagan and Bill Gates, amongst others, have used a similar approach.

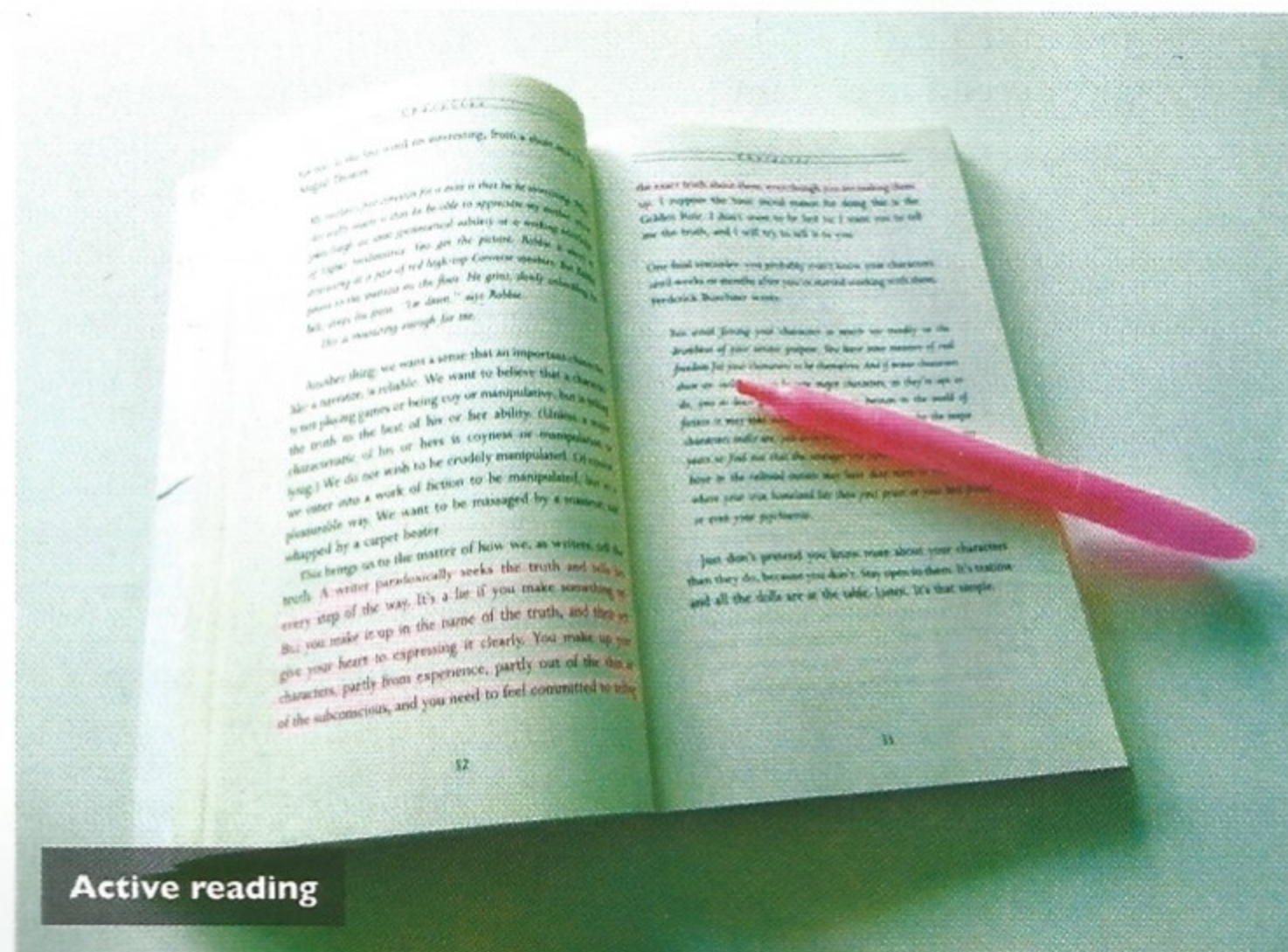
Sherlock Holmes is probably the most famous literary

character to use commonplace books. Watson references this in many of his cases, although rather than cards Holmes uses notebooks identified by year.

So, having read your book and made notes, set it aside for at least a week. This allows your brain a chance to process the material and gives you a bit of distance for connections to be made and thoughts to crystallise about what the most important takeaways are for you.

When you return to the book, have a pile of index cards with you. You are going to write one quotation, thought or note on each card. Flick through the book until you come to your first interaction with the text, then take an index card.

- In the bottom right corner of each card write the author's name and the title of the book.
- In the top left write the theme or themes of the quotation or thought that you're going to write.



Active reading



■ Write the note you want to keep on the card and note the page number underneath.

Move through the book using a new card for each interaction. Once you've finished, make a title card with the name of the book, author, publication date, etc.

### The importance of handwriting

You may think that copying out notes and quotes will be time-consuming, and simply repeats something you've already done. And you'd be right; it is both of those things. But there are good reasons for doing it.

First, it's easier to remember something if it's written down and you can review it often. You remember not just the information on the card, but also the connections you've made to it through other reading and experiences.

Second, writing it down makes you engage with it, which helps the hippocampus – part of the brain involved in learning – to analyse the

Writing it down helps the hippocampus analyse and assign information

information and assign it to your long-term memory.

Taking notes enables you to remember more of the important information rather than just the generalities, and even if, inevitably, you forget part of it, you've written it down and stored it in an accessible place.

### Storing your cards

There are several ways to store your cards, the most simple being to collect all the cards relating to one book, create a title card containing all the referencing details for the book, put a couple of elastic bands around them and store them in an old shoe box or a plastic tub.

Whilst certainly simple and cheap, this method doesn't make the best use of the notes you're taking.

An alternative is to **file them alphabetically**.

Purchase a set of alphabet tabs and a large box designed for storing index cards and simply arrange the cards alphabetically by principal theme. This way you can easily flip through your collection and see what you have.

It's also possible to **file them by theme**. This method works best if you know there are certain themes you are passionate about researching and writing about. It's the way I choose to organise my cards.

Purchase a case and boxes designed for storing photos,



assign each one a theme or themes and file the cards accordingly. I also have an 'index' box where I file the title cards with all the reference details for each book.

### Using your commonplace book

By now you will have realised that this is a labour-intensive project. And it's also clear that you're going to end up with a *lot* of index cards. So what do you do with them once you have them?

For starters, you can use them to **plan the structure of your book**. Whether you're writing a book, article or essay, you can take a selection of cards containing your thoughts and the quotations from books you've read or research you've undertaken, and shuffle them into an interesting structural path through your argument.

Having all your key points on cards is going to make it easy to carry around your reference material for the individual chapters or segments of your work-in-progress as you draft it.

Your commonplace book is also ideal for **revisiting material you've read before**. Your index cards for a particular book will not only help to refresh your memory of the main arguments of the text, but also reignite your engagement with the material and reawaken some of your

previous thoughts on it.

They will also provide **inspiration for new work**.

Reading through your cards relating to a particular topic or theme may help to spark your imagination and generate ideas for your next blog post, article or book.

### Whatever you do, make sure you use it!

There's no point in creating a commonplace book unless you use it. Make a conscious decision to look at part of your collection once a week and note down 10 ideas that you could develop.

Not all the ideas will be great, but at least some will have the potential for development – and your commonplace book means you've already made a start on the research.

### In conclusion...

I hope this article encourages you to explore the possibility of starting your own commonplace book. Although it is time-consuming at the start, you do soon get used to thinking about what you want to remember from what you're reading. You get quicker at producing the cards. And you end up with a wonderful database of knowledge you can draw on for your writing practice and enjoyment.

Who knows, you might even find the inspiration for an article like this one...

creativity, curiosity

creativity takes courage

"living a life that is driven more strongly by curiosity than by fear." p9

Elizabeth Gilbert  
Big Magic

How Sarah lays out her index cards