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The eudaemonist

by [Ben Downing](#)

Like pleasure itself, books on pleasure seem to come and go, briefly blossoming in the small upland meadows of literature before being tenderly dried, pressed, and stashed away by connoisseurs of belles-lettres in choice nooks of their libraries. Off the top of my head (no doubt many more exist), there's Rose Macaulay's *Personal Pleasures*, Jan Morris's *Pleasures of a Tangled Life*, and Barbara Holland's *Endangered Pleasures*. The keynote of these books is a kind of capering lightness; each dedicates some of its short chapters to universal pleasures—food, travel, and so forth—and some to pleasures more offbeat or perverse, such as “Taking Umbrage” (Macaulay), “Jewish Friends” (Morris), or “Using People” (Holland).

Willard Spiegelman's excellent *Seven Pleasures* represents both a continuation of and a divergence from this nice little tradition. The lightness persists, but Spiegelman dwells on fewer pleasures at greater length, and on the telling similarities between them. “Apollo, not Dionysus, is my god of choice,” he announces. Not for him (at least on the page) extreme or hedonistic pleasures such as sadomasochism or paragliding, or even barbecue. “Reading,” “Walking,” “Looking,” “Dancing,” “Listening,” “Swimming,” and “Writing”: these are his austere chapter titles.

Except for dancing (strictly ballroom), one thing these activities have in common is, Spiegelman points out, their solitary nature. Though anything but a loner, he clearly relishes having time to himself, and he uses it to pursue what the book's subtitle terms “ordinary happiness,” which for him is very much a question of *mens sana in corpore sano*. It's not just a matter, as he sees it, of stimulating the former and keeping the latter fit, but of noticing the subtle ways in which mind and body affect and sometimes enhance each other. Consider reading: “The greatest readers,” he remarks, “have always resorted to physical language to describe the pleasures—and pains—of this most solitary and contemplative act.” (Kafka's “a book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us” is one example he cites.) Or, from the opposite angle, consider walking. Spiegelman is hardly the first to meditate on the special relationship between walking and thinking, but he brings fresh observation to it, as well as some delightful, out-of-the-way quotes, for instance this on the poet Howard Nemerov, courtesy of his philosopher colleague Richard Watson: “Nemerov used to walk home from the university with my wife Pat . . . and not say a word till they parted, when he always said ‘whup whup, always a pleasure,’ and shambled off.”

For Spiegelman, an activity that exerts an even more pronounced effect on thought is swimming; he finds that “the sensory transformation inherent in water” causes his mind to function with a beguiling abstractness. In fact, the chapter on swimming is perhaps the most engrossing of the book, if only because Spiegelman must, as it were, argue upstream—the sort of monotonous lap-swimming he does isn't most people's idea of a good time. As he notes, compared to sports like boxing and

baseball, swimming has gotten short shrift from recent writers. There was, however, something of an earlier golden age: “With Byron swimming really enters English literature. The nineteenth century is full of swimming writers, most notably Clough and Swinburne, the latter of whom preferred dangerous coasts.” Spiegelman also serves up some appealing tidbits on the history of swimming. We’re informed, for instance, that at the first modern Olympics, in Athens in 1896, the races were held in the Piraeus harbor:

The only American entrant was not used to cold water, having spent his time in pools; he dove in, screamed, and went back to the float he’d just jumped from. Most of the men were naked, except one Hungarian and the delicate American.

Meanwhile, our image of the mighty Elizabethans is brought down a peg on learning that “they preferred a doggy paddle.”

No literary dogpaddling for Spiegelman, whose elegant, unhurried style is the equivalent of a very smooth breaststroke. A book on pleasure is under an especially strong obligation to give pleasure itself, and Spiegelman handily meets the imperative. The essays that make it up, somewhat reminiscent in their manner of Joseph Epstein’s, display a tight yet casual weave of observation and supporting anecdote or quotation. (One cavil, though: a few too many of the quotes are either chestnuts—surely Johnson’s “The prospect of hanging . . .” should be given a rest—or are drawn from Spiegelman’s pet writers, such as Wordsworth and Wallace Stevens.)

Yet for all the enjoyment it affords, *Seven Pleasures* is, like the water off Piraeus, curiously bracing. Because, ultimately, this is a book about discipline. What Spiegelman advocates is never the passive reception of dumb animal pleasure (not that he’s against it) but rather the engaged, intelligent, even methodical honing of senses and skills; as he puts it in his introduction, “more than a gift, happiness is also a custom, something that can be cultivated.” The author of a critical study called *The Didactic Muse*, Spiegelman here takes on something like that very guise: after reading *Seven Pleasures*, one feels rather chasteningly schooled, but also inspired to try and get the most out of the equipment at hand—the delicately linked mind and body, that is. I think of the wonderful old term “eudaemonics,” which Jeremy Bentham defined as “the art of applying life to the maximization of wellbeing.” Spiegelman is nothing if not a eudaemonist, and he makes us want to be one too.

Ben Downing's biography of Janet Ross is forthcoming from Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

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