

MADAME BOVARY, MULTILINGUALISM, AND THE GOLDFISH REVENGE



a different way of seeing

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Inspired by Bertha, heroine for those who dare to be free

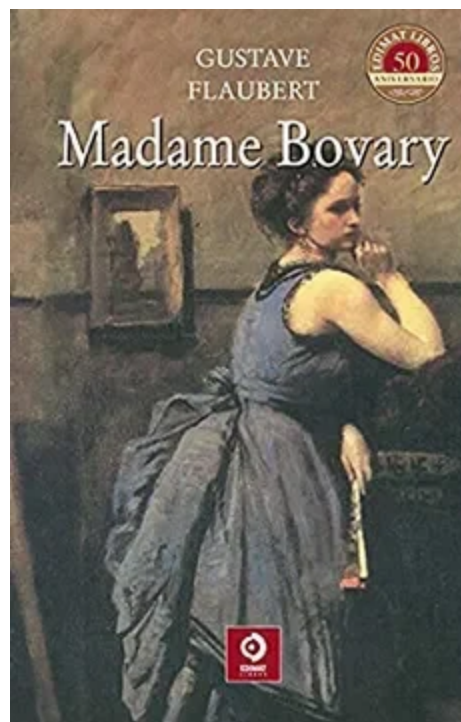
September 2026 - Volume 2, Issue #09

If the goldfish revenge is the part that caught your attention 😊, it's in the non-fiction corner at the end. Before that I'll be telling you about *Madame Bovary*, which I just finished and multilingualism. *Madame Bovary* stands out as one of those touchstone novels in realism; I'm not a literature scholar so I don't know why but I'll give you my impression.

By now, I will have three YouTube videos published [on my channel](#) **Bertha's Books - it's all about the books**. I am, to my surprise, rather enjoying it. Thank you ever so much for commenting or liking, I really appreciate the support. I tried to resist reminding listeners in the videos to like, share, comment, or whatever else you need to do to get some silly YouTube algorithm going, but I swallowed my pride and did it! For those who like horror, and there seems to be a sizeable number, the third video covers four horror books.

Madame Bovary

On the lists of the great classics, Madame Bovary always features somewhere. Apparently, it's one of the novels, perhaps *the* novel, that heralded a sub-genre of non-romanticized realism. Flaubert's story is about flawed characters and even if you don't know the book (which I didn't when I read it) you would probably agree. In fact, I'd even say Madame Bovary (Emma) isn't particularly likeable—at least not in the beginning. But still intriguing.



The story is about Emma, wife of country doctor Charles Bovary. She quickly finds him dull and seems a lot of highbrow commentators agree. But I'm not so sure. He loves her more than anything and risks everything for her even though she is clearly not good for him; she has multiple lovers, wastes their money like there's no tomorrow and treats him rather shabbily. (You never learn why he is so infatuated with her, but I have a feeling there's an interesting backstory there. I mean, haven't you ever been infatuated with someone? Why?) There's one part where she and a pretty awful, opportunistic pharmacist (Homais) convince him to perform experimental surgery to correct a stableman's club foot. Emma hopes to gain fame and money by having a celebrated doctor husband and Homais hopes, by association, to advance his social ambitions. Charles tries everything to get out of it knowing he's not sufficiently skilled, but they hound him and he eventually agrees, mostly to please Emma. As you probably guess, it all goes horribly wrong. The guy gets gangrene and Charles ends up amputating the limb. The legal town folk and the victim are more than miffed and to calm things over Charles buys him a wooden leg (it doesn't fit so he has to buy another one, which made me laugh out loud).

As the story progressed, I shelved my unwarranted judgments about Emma. She was just as willing as Charles to risk everything for happiness by planning to run off with one of her lovers, an odious playboy called Rudolphe who dumps her at the last moment. Her passions are real and hurtful to others, sure, but you can't fault her search for true love. And spoiler alert—oh boy, the ending is heart wrenching.

The novel is a gem. I'm thrilled I read it. The writing is wonderful and the characters are enthralling. It also made me confirm a decision I made about reading a few years ago. I enjoy reading modern fiction, but what sometimes happens is I get part way through a novel and then realise just how iffy it is, so stop and start another one only for the same thing to happen. Besides being more circumspect about my choices, I decided to always have a classic on the go at the same time. Even if it's not massively entertaining, it's at least good literature and I learn from the writing craft.

Multilingualism

Living in a bilingual household I developed an interest in what it really means to have more than one mother tongue. For fun, I also did a TEFL diploma (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) to learn about language acquisition and am currently teaching some foreign students English. It's been a revelation, so I did a little reading around what the academics say and, my word, it's instructive. It seems that acquiring language as a child is quite different to acquiring it as an adult, but don't let this discourage you. I started French as a middle schooler and have become relatively fluent now and I can promise you that speaking a second language (any language) opens another world for you. Literally and cognitively. In fact, I've been so surprised by what I've seen that I decided to start Spanish this month. But I digress.

When you learn a language as an adult, you will experience the satisfaction, but it will take a lot longer for the benefits of experiencing the world through a different language to filter through. It does happen though, especially if you immerse yourself in the culture of the new language. As a child it's very different. It seems, children acquire language by experiencing the world connecting words and phrases with positions in time and space rather than conscious effort. It means they get to experience the world through that language and if they acquire two, then they experience the world from two different, albeit overlapping, perspectives. This is the gist of what I think some language theorists say. Here's a simple example.

In English if you miss someone you love, you say: *I miss you*. In French you say quite the opposite but mean the same thing. The literal (incorrect) translation of French for *I miss you* is actually *you miss me* (*tu me manques*). It swops the subject and object around but the feeling you get, the experience of saying it is the same; at least if you learnt it as a child. When you learn the language as an adult and you consciously translate *I miss you* to the correct French version *you miss me*, it's just not the same. Fascinating, isn't it? Imagine all the nuances and windows into reality you have when you learn more than

one language from birth. It's thrilling and the effect it has on the developing brain has proven benefits. I don't want children to lose that gift and have become a big believer in mother language retention. Viva International Mother Language Day (February, 21)!



Non-fiction Corner: About That Goldfish

That two second rule that applies to goldfish that I said I was going to tell you about in August is, I discovered, a myth. Goldfish it turns out, have excellent memories, I suspect better than mine when it comes to some things. Check out this video:



So, here's another anecdote about goldfish that I want to share, one that is true.

I had two goldfish as a kid: I and J. There was a particularly delinquent child who lived nearby and insisted on visiting until one day, acting on a dare by one of his equally delinquent friends, he swallowed J, or was it I? Either way, I was devastated. It was also one of the few times I punched someone in the jaw, but that's beside the point. I was delighted to hear that he was admitted to hospital a day later with some or other bowel issue. Good on you goldfish I say.

The real victim in this story, however, was the surviving goldfish. Since I learnt they have long memories, imagine the nightmares he must have had. Also, he looked terribly depressed after losing his friend and I euthanised him. I couldn't work out how best to do it. I am not by nature a violent man (despite punching that boy) and could not bring myself to smash him on the head like the vet suggested. So, I took him out the water and in a teary departure, held his gills closed until he stopped wriggling and then I buried him in the garden. At the time, it seemed like the most humane thing to do. Maybe it was, because having learnt about goldfish memory, this below seems rather cruel.



In October...

...I'll be telling you about Huckleberry Finn and Mark Twain, and in the non-fiction corner: if you could be anything (as in profession), what would you choose? I'll tell you mine but would love to hear yours.

Until then, warm greetings and be free to be.

Bertha and me.

Pierre



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