

Reader Residue (December 2017)

As a young Naval officer in the 1950s, stationed in Key West, Florida, my father wasn't home much at all. The near primitive Key West was hard enough on my mother, but my father's long deployments at sea made it unbearable. Quite often, she returned with her two daughters to her family in Baltimore. Shopping in her favorite department store became her solace.

Accompanied by our grandmother and great-aunt Nanny, Debbie and I dutifully followed my mother as she expanded her wardrobe. Nanny soon grew bored and whisked her two grandnieces to the confectioner's department, where she bought a pound of nonpareils, "for tonight's dessert." My mouth watered as the clerk filled the tissue-lined cardboard box with the wafer chocolates dotted with tiny white candy balls and sealed the box with soft white twine.

Tucking the box under her arm, Nanny announced, "And now, for each of you, a book." I believed the book department held all the books in the world. What I first loved about them was their smell of newness, the slight whiff of wood mixed with a tinge of ink oil. It was not long before I discovered the Nancy Drew books, and my second love emerged—that I could get lost in and become a character. As my father transferred from submarine to submarine and climbed the officer ranks, my mother insisted that her wardrobe reflect those promotions. Thank goodness for her ball gowns! My little home library grew.

The time came when Mother shopped while Debbie and I were in school. Twice weekly class trips to the school library took the place of the department stores. I nearly weep now when I remember how my heart pounded as the hour drew nearer on library days! The choices were enormous, and I was allowed three books each visit, six books per week! In third grade, I sought out the thickest of them, checked out and read *Les Misérables*—the context a stumbling block, but not my worry because the librarian told me I could *re-new* it!

As exciting as new-fallen snow and Christmas lights shining in the darkness are the feature ads that read "Ten Best Books of the Year"—or Twenty or Fifty. I make lists of what I haven't read and imagine, with vacation days ahead of me, storming into our town's indie bookstore or public library, holding forth a Santa-like sack, and singing out "Fill it full!" I delight that book towers will form by my nighttime reading table.

Book towers assure months of reading. They protect me from that startling hollow moment when I reach "The End" and must bid goodbye to the characters who have become real. What is so generous about a good book, though, whether owned or a library-loaned, is that I can *re-read* it.

About every five years, I re-read *Jane Eyre*. I do so, in part, to re-visit her terse declaration of freedom to choose—"Reader, I married him." The books I can't revisit, for they bring tears to this mother's eyes, are those we once read to our tiny sons. Thankfully, some are nearly memorized, and I recall the comforting narratives, such as the one about about Max, who has returned from where the wild things are to his very own room—"where he found his supper waiting for him and it was still hot."

I confess that because I carry the label of English major, I fret that I will be caught carrying a book that some might call non-scholarly. I feel the need to create justification for the book before I haul it out in public. But now, honestly, who cares? And if he or she cares, who cares? Hats off to author Jennifer Weiner, who said, “Read without apology!” Exclamation mine.

The most delicious time to read is after the day, when I crawl into bed with a single responsibility—to fall asleep. My heart cries out, “All alone, with but a book to read” with the same fervency as were uttered the words from Alex Haley’s *Roots*: “Kunta Kinte, I found you!” The kindness of books, though, is this: They give of themselves at any time, in spite of, or perhaps because of distraction, discomfort, and chaos. A flight from National Airport to Denver on an Easter Sunday, my abundant tears for the dear friend I left behind, my two row buddies slowly encroaching on my tiny space, the cabin air of the packed plane swampish. I usually can’t read for an entire plane trip, but I started Kent Meyers’ *The River Warren*. It held me until we landed. It saved me.

They not only save me, sometimes books actually choose me. When I fell into a book store shelf, and Kathleen Norris’ *Amazing Grace* fell hard on my right shoulder. Scott Saunders’ *Writing From the Center* refused to return to its display perch after I had knocked it off, so in embarrassment I checked it out. Elisabeth Tova Bailey’s *The Sound of a Small Snail Eating* was tiny. I needed a tiny book for a trip. It kept staring at me. I wasn’t even fond of snails. I am now. All three of these books changed my life, guided me as a writer.

I refuse to call any book an absolute favorite. I find the question unfair. A truly special book, though, gives off what I call reader residue. Its art, tone, and voice stay with me forever, like a voice whispering in my ear, “Remember me.” In recalling it, I smell it, feel it, hear it. Its sentient quality is a permanent part of my life.

I leave you with a bit of my reader residue, as potent as a nonpareil at the day’s end.

Garth Stein’s *The Art of Racing in the Rain*
Elizabeth Farnsworth’s *A Train Through Time*
Rachel Joyce’s *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry*
Mary Oliver’s *Upstream*
Ann Patchett’s *State of Wonder*