

Why I Read by Janna Sallade

I had always hoped that I was a bookworm: the kind of soul who relished nothing more than to pick up a piece of literature and become submerged in another world. To me it sounded like magic. However, having great books that I could read did not make me a bookworm. Where was it that my mother always told me I would go by reading a book? I could never get to that place. She promised! Wherever it was, it was made vastly more magical by her description than by my failed attempts to actually enter the world she described. Eudora Welty describes the early development of her love for books in the essay “Listening” when she says, “I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them—with the books themselves, cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their smell and their weight and with the possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself” (49). A love for reading did not naturally spring up out of me as it did for Welty. In fact, for quite some time, I was frustrated by my futile efforts to understand the claims made by those who seemed to have found something I could not.

All my childhood, I wanted to experience what my favorite playmate, Emily, found equally, if not more, thrilling about Laura’s life in that little house on the prairie as the play we created together. She spent hours curled up in bed or on the couch listening to her mother read all kinds of stories. Not that she and I did not often push our old bikes up the steep hill of Farr Place with great expectations of the ride down that awaited us. Carefully situated on the seats we would then pull our feet up off the ground and fly screaming down the hill toward her house with euphoric satisfaction. It seemed we would never tire of thrusting our legs straight out to the sides and seeing how much air we could catch in our mouths on the way down. However, I usually managed to acquire more tangled hair than anything else. Many of my memories of our play time together involve the witches’ cauldron in the wooded area of Emily’s backyard. I wonder how many rocks, leaves, and twigs we dumped in there over the years. Never was it emptied out; rather, each of our unique recipes mingled its spices with the concoction preceding it.

Despite all the wild adventures we embarked on, there still remained that bookshelf in Emily’s room which held the power to persuade my companion into a seemingly mind-numbing solitude. I had the same bookshelf and books! What was I missing? I still wondered how a book and blanket in a quiet hole of the house could ever compare to the bikes and witches’ brew outside. Could those pages hold adventures as great as we had? Even so, could hearing about them from her mother possibly compare to experiencing such things with me? Yet often, Emily “the bookworm” would be busy. I came to understand that she and her mother were “lost in the best part of their book,” and she would call me back later.

I, too, wanted to get lost. I thought I might like to, but I never left behind the world where my dolls rested in a huge wicker basket enticing me with their myriad dresses and accessories. And there was the box of beads which was far more attractive than any book: that delightful box which held endless possibilities for design. I was delighted to feel like a crafty saleswoman as I ran my small jewelry business. Many hours were spent in the tree house Daddy built me which housed the weather worn box of all of my most precious treasures and served as a sanctuary from daily life. Another thrill of my childhood was baking. Pulling the kitchen stool out from where it rested against the sink, I would push it as close to Mom as I could manage. She measured; I poured. And the anticipation of getting to lick one of the mixing beaters always concluded our time together at the kitchen counter. Certainly the way I loved to spend my time was not unhealthy. It was not as though I replaced reading with the typical drowning in the television’s abyss or moping around the house in boredom. Rather, with as much excitement going on in my life, I just never wanted to withdraw from it all and read a book.

Then one day I found myself “lost” as they call it. My attention slipped away from tree forts, dolls, and mixing beaters, and turned to some new place. I didn’t recognize this barren winter wonderland scenery or understand why a lamp post was necessary in such a deserted place. I wore a full-length oversized fur coat and

felt very alone. Not sad, just alone. This new world's silence was so piercing that it made speaking nearly impossible. At our first meeting, Mr. Tumnus was quite a strange creature, and yet I felt excited and fearless about following him to his home and having tea with him. No one I had ever known lived in a dirt cave, but it all seemed so natural that no questions were asked. Life continued for quite some time in this manner until I was cruelly jolted back into the familiar when I heard my mother say, "Time for lights out. What do you think of your new book?" I didn't want to think about it! I wanted to go on living it as I had been for the past hour or so. My mother smiled at my indignation and mused about how she should have given me *The Chronicles of Narnia* sooner.

That night I dreamt about my new life. I imagined what I would say to Aslan about the White Witch and Mr. Tumnus. I worried about how Peter, Susan, and Edmund would feel about my new friends in Narnia. I fantasized about having supper once again at Mr. and Mrs. Beaver's lodge and warming myself by the roaring fire. As mother read, I usually chose to be Lucy. At times I would enjoy being Susan or even the White Witch if I was feeling particularly ornery that day. C. S. Lewis helped me to understand the mysteries within Emily's bookshelf. Each book was a world of its own.

Laura Ingalls Wilder and her life on the prairie provided Emily the opportunity to explore a new world. In the many books I have read since my experience with *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the characters have represented pieces of me and provided an occasion to see, use, and modify those pieces. Lewis's literature affected me in profound ways. Perhaps he never intended Peter to remind me of my older brother or for Mr. Tumnus to inspire me to be loyal and brave. Lewis had his own reasons for writing what he did, and yet the effects of his stories are far flung. Joan Didion has reflected upon her writing and feels that its details have helped her to hold onto herself and experiences which she feared might otherwise disappear from her memory. She says, "We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were" (36). Through her writing, she remembers the person she is and once was. The vivid details are not lost. Reading accomplishes a similar act of memory for me: I identify, associate, compare, and contrast myself with the characters. I plunge myself into the circumstances within the story. My current state of being is unraveled and then rewoven into the literature. I have found that magical place my mother promised I would find. I have found many magical places—some over and over again.

So I suppose I have experienced "getting lost" in a book. I have left behind the world of reality many times by way of another's writing. Yet, more memorable for me is not that which I have left behind and temporarily lost, but that which I have found and kept amidst the pages of the precious books I have read: Pieces of myself I had forgotten and pieces of myself I would like to change and grow. I have found adventure, challenge, love, adversity, and miracles. The alternate worlds and non-existent beings illustrated in literature have become not quite so alternate or non-existent to me, as they have aroused my emotions, altered my perspective, and changed my life many times over.

Works Cited

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