

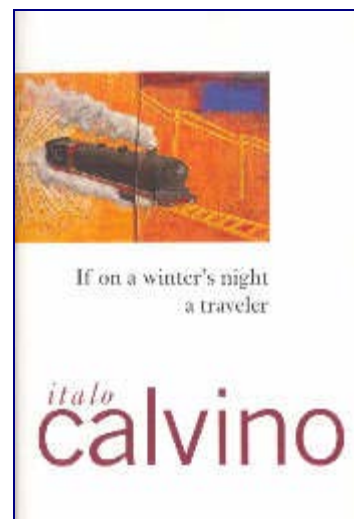
Site Map: [MAIN](#) / [A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2](#) [Webpage](#) [Printer Ready](#)



A READER'S JOURNAL

If on a winter's night a traveler
A Novel
by
Italo Calvino

Published by Harcourt, Inc in 1981
ARJ2 Chapter: An Evolution of Consciousness
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2013



Calling this book a novel would be like calling the first issue of *Mad* a comic book; yes, it looked like a comic book, but it was a meta-comment on the entire

world in which I lived, and it introduced me to satire. This book looks like a novel, but it sure doesn't read like a novel, but rather as a book about novels, a book about books, a book about reading, all that and even more. It is as if Calvino is saying, to paraphrase Browning,

***How do I read Thee?
Let me count the ways.***

And count, delineate, describe, expostulate, exemplify, remonstrate, and demonstrate, among other things is what Calvino does in this course of this book. Often he does it for us, sometimes for himself, and sometimes it's the main character in the book, Reader, doing it for Other Reader. Make no mistake, these are not the only characters, but only two of a multitude which seem to multiply with each new chapter.

When I was eighteen or so, I received a set of Yale Shakespeare books, forty small hardbacks, for joining the Book of the Month Club. Working the night shift in a Celotex Plant, I was assigned the hot and sweaty job of feeding bagasse boards into a furnace to be coated with black tar. So hot was the furnace that union rules required an hour break for every hour worked, which gave me time to tackle these books. One night reading *King Henry IV, Part I*, a curious thing happened, not to me, but to my book. Here, read for yourself what I read at the time, knowing little about Shakespeare:

[page 30] Hotspur
And if the devil come and roar for them
I will not send them. I will after straight
[page 31]
You and your fellows. I'd have it come to question.
If he distaste it, let him to my sister,
Whose mind and mine, I know, in that are one,
Not to be over-rul'd. . . .

There seemed to be a curious disconnect to me at this point, but it was Shakespeare and I was a beginning reader of his works, so I read on, turning the page and I read on page 32 the stage directions "Horns within. Enter Lear and Attendants". I glanced up to the top of page 32 and read in the header, *Page 32 The Tragedy of King Lear* — what the hell was going on? Flipping back, the left page header read, *Page 30*

The First Part of Henry the Fourth. Somehow my story of Henry IV had suddenly, on page 31, turned into the story of King Lear! Scanning ahead to page 63, I found the stage direction, *Enter Falstaff*, and flipped the page to find the header *Page 64 The First Part of Henry the Fourth*. As I discovered only years later, a complete signature for King Lear had been exchanged for the equivalent signature for Henry IV during binding of the signatures into this small hard-bound book.

In this novel, Calvino deals with the problem of reading books which suddenly turn into other books through various artifices, such as a binding mistake, a process I was unfortunately familiar with. For me, at the time, the binding problem was only a disappointment and a puzzlement, but Calvino turns it into unmitigated fun. Be forewarned, if you love books, you will likely love this book. If you want seamless stories with neat, satisfying endings, like a pleasant ride on a white bay on a bridal path, you need read no further, this book is definitely *not* for you; it more resembles a wild mustang with you holding tight onto its reins heading down a mountainside, throwing you off about ten times, and stopping to let you climb back on each time to continue the ride.

Riding Calvino begins with instructions on how to read, written by Calvino.

[page 3] You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a winter's night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice — they won't hear you otherwise — "I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!"

I'm serious. That is the way this novel starts. Its impact on you may be similar to the impact that reading that very first *Mad* comic book had on me back in 1952 on Avenue E in Westwego when it was handed to me by my friend Boo. Within seconds, I knew my world would never be the same thereafter. *Comic books can't do this stuff!* was my first thought. Maybe *Novelists can't do this stuff!* is going through your mind. Well, hold onto the reins, the ride is going to get rougher!

Why did I decide to read this book? I had read two earlier books of Calvino, *t zero* and *Cosmicomics*, and when I read about this book, it "filled me with a sudden, inexplicable curiosity, not easily justified". Okay, I copied that expression from page 5 list of Calvino, but it's close enough to the truth of any item in the list, a list you may wish to peruse, dear Reader, and find it contains a whole bunch of categories of books you would like to acquire and maybe even read. Any owner of a large library, like I have, will know many of these urges.

Calvino takes you and me on a trip with his Reader who spots the display copy of *If on a winter's night a traveler* in the shop window and goes into the bookstore and is immediately assaulted by a plethora of books stimulating an onslaught of categories in the Reader's head (and ours) as he plows his way through the shop. (Reader is male, and Other Reader is female.)

[page 5] Following this visual trail, you have forced your way through the shop past the thick barricade of Books You Haven't Read, which were frowning at you from the tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you know you must never allow yourself to be awed, that among them there extend for acres and acres the Books You Needn't Read, the Books Made For Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong To The Category Of Books Read Before Being Written. And thus you pass the outer girdle of ramparts, but then you are attacked by the infantry of the Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered. With a rapid maneuver you bypass them and move into the phalanxes of the Books You Mean To Read But There Are Others You Must Read First, the Books Too Expensive Now And You'll Wait Till They're Remaindered, the Books ditto When They Come Out In Paperback, Books You Can Borrow From Somebody, Books That Everybody's Read So It's As If You Had Read

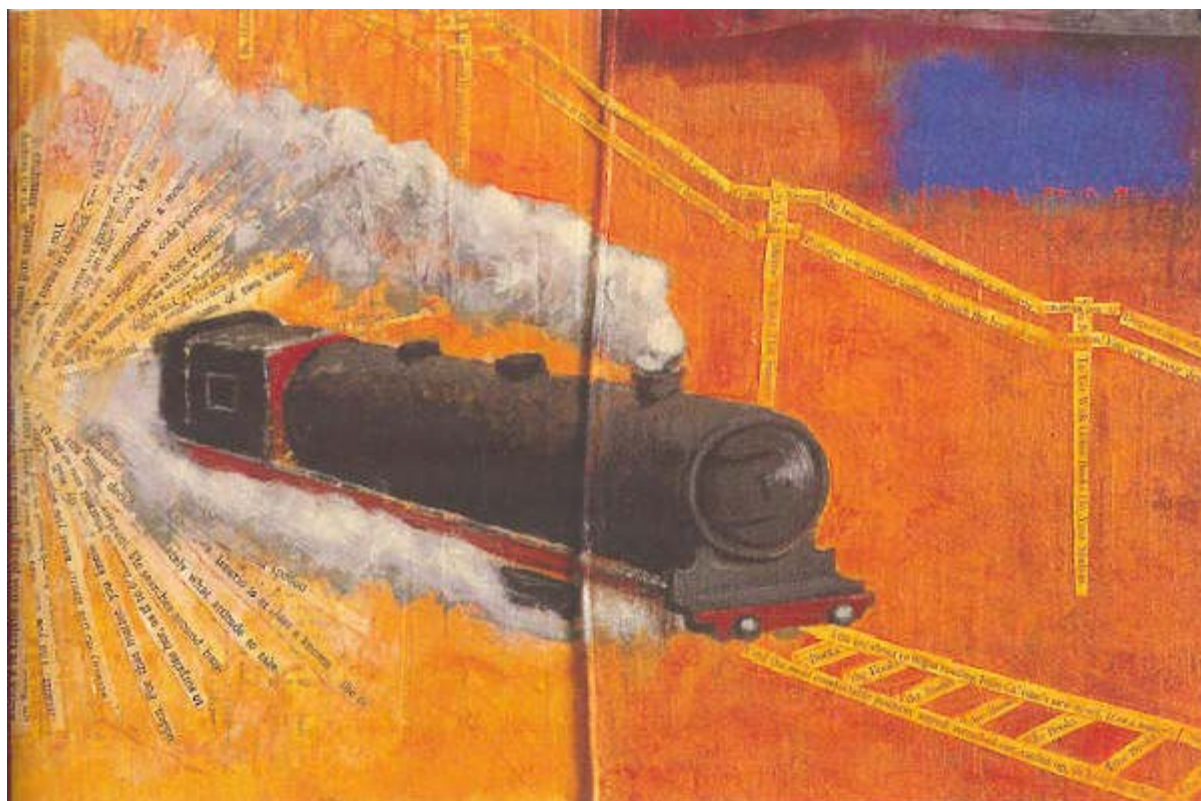
Them, Too. Eluding these assaults, you come up beneath the towers of the fortress, where other troops are holding out:

**the Books You've Been Planning To Read For Ages,
the Books You've Been Hunting For Years Without Success,
the Books Dealing With Something You're Working On At The Moment,
the Books You Want To Own So They'll Be Handy Just In Case,
the Books You Could Put Aside Maybe To Read This Summer,
the Books You Need To Go With Other Books On Your Shelves,
the Books That Fill You With Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity,
Not Easily Justified.**

Calvino describes you leaving with your new purchase, and goes through the various ways you might first open the book and read it. "Chapter [1]" begins on Page 3 as it is shown in quoted passage above, but wait, what is this that happens when you arrive at the next chapter which has simply the title of the book, "If on a winter's night a traveler", and not Chapter [2]. So what, you might say, I just want to read the book. Why should I bother to check the Table of Contents? Well, when you reach the next chapter, it is called "Chapter [2]" and it is followed by a chapter called "Outside the town of Malbork". So you're still not curious enough to read the Table of Contents? Go another chapter and you find "Chapter [3]" and now you check that infernal Table to find that every other chapter is numbered and every in-between one is a titled chapter. Why? It's a mystery, or rather a Mystery with a capital M.

Enough of this. How does the chapter "If on a winter's night a traveler" begin?

[page
10] The
novel
begins in
a
railway
station, a



locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph. In the odor of the station there is a passing whiff of station café odor. There is someone looking through the befogged glass, he opens the glass door of the bar, everything is misty, inside, too as if seen by nearsighted eyes, or eyes irritated by coal dust. The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences.

Whoa, Mustang! What is going on here? How can the steam and smoke of an old locomotive be obscuring the pages of the book in which they are mere inanimate objects being described? So you look at the cover art of the book and find an old locomotive chugging ahead making steam and smoke as it speeds forward from an outward raying, as being born from an explosion — wait, you look closer and see that its steam and smoke are obscuring the rays which contain words from the book, in fact, the tracks are also words from the book, as are the telegraph poles and wires it speeds along!

The Mustang awaits, so you jump back on and hold the reins. The man who entered, now at the bar, keeps going to make a call from the phone booth and his coin keeps plinking down, signaling no answer.

[page 11] I am the man who comes and goes between the bar and the telephone booth. Or, rather: that man is called "I" and you know nothing else about him, just as this station is called only "station" and beyond it there exists nothing except the unanswered signal of a telephone ringing in a dark room of a distant city.

This is an old bar with an equally old bar mirror, and this mirror is personified in this small passage.

[page 18] We are in a city in whose streets the same people often run into one another; the faces bear weight of habit which is communicated even to someone like me, who, though I have never been here before, realizes these are habitual faces, whose features the bar mirror has watched thicken or sag, whose expressions evening after evening have become wrinkled or puffy.

Now we encounter the printers' binding error, at the beginning of "Chapter [2]". The narrator tells us that you're reading along and you find that what you're reading sounds very familiar, like you've read it before. A signature error!

[page 25] Wait a minute! Look at the page number. Damn! From page 32 you've gone back to page 17! What you thought was a stylistic subtlety on the author's part is simply a printers' mistake: they have inserted the same pages twice(1).

Reader, Calvino's character, decides to return the book to the bookseller he bought it from, something I was unable to do with my mis-bound *Henry IV* volume, being unwilling to take on the Book-of-the-Month Club. Does he receive a correctly bound copy of *If on a winter's night a traveler*? No, he receives a curious explanation of what happened to the book he wanted to purchase and to read from the bookseller in the form of a newly arrived letter from the publisher.

[page 28] 'In the distribution of the latest works on our list a part of the edition of the volume *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino has proved defective and must be withdrawn from circulation. Through an error of the bindery, the printed signatures of that book became mixed with those of another new publication, the Polish novel *Outside the town of Malbork* by Tazio Bazakal. With profound apologies for the unfortunate incident, the publisher will replace the spoiled copies at the earliest possible moment.'

But poor Reader has been besieged with information, like that old railroad train on the cover art, and a new reality is exploding into his ken and knocking him off-base, so he ponders his next move.

[page 28] Hold on a minute. Concentrate. Take all the information that has poured down on you at once and put it in order. A Polish novel. Then the book you began reading with such involvement wasn't the book you thought but was a Polish novel instead. That is the book you are now so anxious to procure. Don't let them fool you. Explain clearly the situation. "No, actually I don't really give a damn about that Calvino any more. I started with the Polish one and it's the Polish one I want to go with. Do you have this Bazakal book?"

The bookseller points Reader to a young lady who had a similar problem with her Calvino: she also got the Bazakal book, so Reader walks over to meet Other Reader, who, he discovers has never read Bazakal before, either. They meet, exchange phone numbers, and Reader heads for home to read his new book, only to discover that its pages are uncut. This has happened to me, but usually it's only a few uncut pages due some pages missing the slicing ram of the bindery. Easily taken care of with a sharp knife. So Reader cuts the book open only to be surprised by Bazakal's book, *Outside the town of Malbork*:

[page 33] Then from the very first page you realize that the novel you are holding has nothing to with the one you were reading yesterday.

So I, the me writing this review, turn to page 34 to find a chapter titled, *Outside the town of Malbork* ! This is the part where I spent a lot of time inspecting the book and its curious chapter arrangement which alternated between *[number]* and *Chapter Title*. This continues on to the end of the book, the pattern breaking only at "Chapter [11]" and "Chapter [12]".

In each numbered chapter, something happens to the book Reader is reading or to Reader himself, so that he is unable to continue reading the story he was engrossed in, and he is somehow introduced to, stumbles upon, or gets interested in a lost book newly arisen from the ashes, like *Without fear of wind or vertigo*.

[page 76] You immediately realize that you are listening to something that has no possible connection with *Leaning from the steep slope* or *Outside the town of Malbork* or even with *If on a winter's night a traveler*. You exchange a quick glance, you and Ludmilla(2), or rather, two glances: first questioning, then agreeing. Whatever it may be, this is a novel where, once you have got into it, you want to go forward, without stopping.

At one point in *Without fear of wind or vertigo* Reader imagines himself and Ludmilla flying as if "suspended over a precipice. . ."

[page 82] Perhaps it is this story that is a bridge over the void, and as it advances it flings forward news and sensations and emotions to create a ground of upsets both collective and individual in the midst of which a path can be opened while we remain in the dark about many circumstances both historical and geographical.

If this seems to be talking about the latest Breaking News on FOX or CNN, it may be a coincidence, or perhaps it is *synchronicity*, that is, a coincidence with a pedigree or royal title.

As Reader discovers a French book, *Looks down in the gathering shadow*, he is shown a letter and told to read it:

[page 101] "What does the name of an author on the jacket matter? Let us move forward in thought to three thousand years from now. Who knows which books from our period will be saved, and who knows which authors' names will be remembered? Some books will remain famous but will be considered anonymous works, as for us the epic of Gilgamesh; other authors' names will still be well known, but none of their works will survive, as was the case with Socrates; or perhaps all the surviving books will be attributed to a single, mysterious author, like Homer."

This is a meditation for any Reader or Writer to undertake. It's like we writers(3) are each but lowly bricklayers adding one brick to a large construction, say, in the early days of construction, where we can only see a wall as high as our shoulders. If asked, what can we say we are doing? One worker might say, "I am just laying bricks." The next worker in line might say, "I am building a great cathedral." The first

worker will feel distraught after reading the above passage [page 101]; the second worker will feel pride and accomplishment. Is it not an individual choice how we can feel? Even the prisoner bound in chains in a deep dungeon has a choice as to how they feel about their lot: they can feel trapped or fly on the wings of angels over the prison's walls in their imagination.

In Ludmilla's apartment, the Reader meets a friend of hers who makes books. That is, he uses books as raw material for his artworks.

[page 149] "I make things with books. I make objects. Yes, artworks: statues, pictures, whatever you want to call them. I even had a show. I fix the books with mastic, and they stay as they were. Shut, or open, or else I give them forms, I carve them, I make holes in them. A book is a good material to work with; you can make all sorts of things with it."

Later we are not surprised that the very book, that Reader was so intent on finding, ends up with its only copy being chopped and frozen into an artwork of this friend of Ludmilla. This leads him to be ensnared *In a network of lines that intersect*, a chapter title which might bring up in your mind the idea of a kaleidoscope or the "polydyptic theater", in which about sixty little mirrors line the inside of a large box which can transform a bough into a forest, a miniature lead soldier into an army, a booklet into a library." Seems innocuous enough, until one connects the work of the masters of the economic engine known as "derivatives" which led to near total economic collapse in 2008 as portrayed in the 2011 movie, "Too Big To Fail," which by dint of one of those coincidences with a pedigree, I had watched the night before I read this next passage. It seems that what Italo Calvino was writing about in the mid-1970s (in this book) was already coming into being in the levels of higher finance, a house of cards, a kaleidoscope of lines that intersect, but which can all collapse if the prices of housing were ever to go down, which they did, precipitously in the 1980s, exactly as the price of tulips went down a century or so earlier. This time it was the taxpayers, not the investors who took it in the shorts!

[page 162, 163] The businessmen to whom, before meetings, I show the collection glance with superficial curiosity at these bizarre apparatuses. They don't know that I have built my financial empire on the very principle of kaleidoscopes and catoptric instruments, multiplying, as if in a play of mirrors, companies without capital, enlarging credit, making disastrous deficits vanish in the dead corners of illusory perspectives. My secret, the secret of my uninterrupted financial victories in a period that has witnessed so many crises and market crashes and bankruptcies, has always been this: that I never thought directly of money, business, profits, but only of the angles of refraction established among shining surfaces variously inclined. . . . I am a man with many enemies, whom I must constantly elude. When they think they have overtaken me, they will strike only a glass surface on which one of the many reflections of my ubiquitous presence appears and vanishes. I am also a man who pursues his numerous enemies, looming over them and advancing in invincible phalanxes and blocking their path whichever way they turn. In a catoptric world enemies can equally believe that they are surrounding me from every side, but I alone know the arrangement of the mirrors and can put myself out of their reach, while they end up jostling and seizing one another.

I would like my story to express all this through details of financial operations, sudden dramatic shifts at board meetings, telephone calls from brokers in panic, and then also bits of the map of the city, insurance policies,

From the text of this novel, one can discern that real Mega-banks, -financial institutions, and -AIG (the ultimate insurance company) were operating in this kaleidoscopic world of illusions which all came collapsing down and all had to be shored up by the Red Queen in Washington, D. C. to prevent another Great Depression. This all happened within the memory of anyone old enough to be reading these words!

Let us go to another prediction, if you can call the above a prediction, to another prediction by Calvino, that of the Internet and eBook technology. With the Internet someone could be reading this review [I am](#)

writing on the polished surface of a laptop or pad. Or I have already published my review to the Internet, she is reading it, and I am making a change which then instantly appears on her flat screen. As I make changes to my writing, a process I call playing with sentences, I often wonder about the possibility that this Other Reader is out there wondering how the text she was reading suddenly got changed when she returned and refreshed her screen. This was unimaginable back in the 1970s, and it is reality today.

[page 170] At times I am gripped by an absurd desire: that the sentence I am about to write be the one the woman is reading at that same moment. The idea mesmerizes me so much that I convince myself it is true: I write the sentence hastily, get up, go to the window, train my spyglass to check the effect of my sentence in her gaze, in the curl of her lips, in the cigarette she lights, in the shifts of her body in the deck chair, in her legs, which she crosses or extends.

At times it seems to me that the distance between my writing and her reading is unbridgeable, that whatever I write bears the stamp of artifice and incongruity; if what I am writing were to appear on the polished surface of the page she is reading, it would rasp like a fingernail on a pane, and she would fling the book away with horror.

Calvino's parable of the two writers, the tormented and the productive writers, should be read in its entirety. It sounds like a Woody Allen movie. One writes in the morning, one in the afternoon, and living across from each other in a small valley, they observe the other writer when they are not writing. They suddenly desire to write the way the other writer writes and do so, creating a novel which they send to woman who is often seen by them reading in the bottom of the valley in a deck chair. The young woman reads the two novels and invites the two men to call on her, only to say to them, "What kind of a joke is it? You have given me two copies of the same novel!" Then Calvino gives us six alternate version of the same story. (Page 172 to 179)

The copyist, a defunct occupation, provides another amazing insight of Calvino's. The copyist lives to read while writing, never having to face a lack of words as his pen moves, such as afflicts many authors, the dreaded writer's block. (Page 178)

On a carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon, Calvino gives us a tantalizingly sexual episode, as if as a anodyne to relieve the distress of too many words and philosophical concepts in his recent chapters. The scene consists of a Japanese mother Myagi, her husband Mr. Okeda, their daughter, Makiko, and a desire sparked by the two women in the narrator of this chapter.

[page 208] Desire that her silk robe, loosened or waiting to be loosened, now heightened and rewarded as in an explicit offer, so that with Makiko's apparition in my eyes and Madame Miyagi's contact on my skin I was about to be overcome by voluptuousness.

Madame Miyagi must have become clearly aware of this, for, grasping my back, she pulled me down with her on the mat and with rapid twitches of her whole person she slipped her moist and prehensile sex under mine, which without a false move was swallowed as if by a sucker, while her thin naked legs clutched my hips. She was of a sharp agility, Madame Miyagi: her feet in their white cotton socks crossed at my sacroiliac, holding me as if in a vise.

My appeal to Makiko had not gone unheard. Behind the paper panel of the sliding door there was the outline of the girl, kneeling on the mat, moving her head forward, and now from the doorway her face appeared, contracted in a breathless expression, her lips parted, her eyes widened, following her mother's and my starts with attraction and disgust. But she was not alone: beyond the corridor, in the opening of another door, a man's form was standing motionless. I have no idea how long Mr. Okeda had been there. He was staring hard, not at his wife and me but at his daughter watching us. In his cold pupil, in the firm twist of his lips, was reflected Madame Miyagi's orgasm reflected in her daughter's gaze.

The scientist Kekule's day dream of the molecules comprising the compound of benzene moving around like a snake which finally grabs its own tail in its mouth to create the completed ring structure of what we now know as benzene. With Kekule's insight, the unique properties of benzene and its derivative compounds became capable of being understood by chemists. Like Kekule, I puzzled over the curious double-bond nature of the chapters of this book, every other one a number with a named title in between. What could this all mean? I pondered for several days as I read the book. On the day before I completed this book, I wondered in a day-dream reverie if it might be possible to make one sentence of the various named chapter titles. The book was not with me and I forgot about the idea. My idea of arranging the titles into one sentence has its roots in my eighth-grade English class when my teacher Mrs. Dixon gave each an assignment to write a sentence with each of the 17 words in the textbook exercise. I decided to attempt to make one complete sentence with all 17 words and succeeded. A similar opportunity came to me recently when I wrote one sentence using all the *empty boxcar* words my friend Jeff March had recommended to be avoided by readers of this EditPros Newsletter.

When I came upon this passage, I realized that I had sussed out Calvino's grand scheme for tying the book together masterfully in his ending chapter.

[page 258] "If on a winter's night a traveler, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlace, in a network of lines that intersect, on the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around an empty grave — What story down there awaits its end?"

Keeping in mind the readers who want the happy ending, Calvino has Reader marry Ludmilla and the two of them are in a big bed reading. Ludmilla closes her book and turns off her light to go to sleep, asking, "Aren't you tired of reading?" and Reader answers, "Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino." (Page 260).

And so have I finished writing my review of *If on a winter's night a traveler* by Italo Calvino, and so have you finished reading it, now.

~^~

----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. Note that signature mistake in my two Shakespeare volumes involved 32-page signatures being swapped between *Henry IV* and *Lear*. Yesterday I got down my copy of *King Lear* to see if perhaps the missing signature of *Henry IV* might appear in *Lear*. Unfortunately, it didn't. If it had, I could have bound the two volumes with a rubber band so that I or a future reader could read both books in their entirety, by simply switching between books at pages 31 and 62.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

~~~~~

**Footnote 2.** Ludmilla has by this point been introduced as the Other Reader.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

~~~~~

Footnote 3. In my experience, there are two kinds of people: writers and wannabe writers.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 3.](#)

~~~~~

