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## *A READER'S JOURNAL*

### **Nothing Remains the Same Rereading and Remembering** by **Wendy Lesser**

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2008

My first reading of [Dr. Zhivago](#) was in 1958 at age 18 and before I re-read it in 2002, I had seen the movie several times. During my later reading, the scenes from David Lean's movie

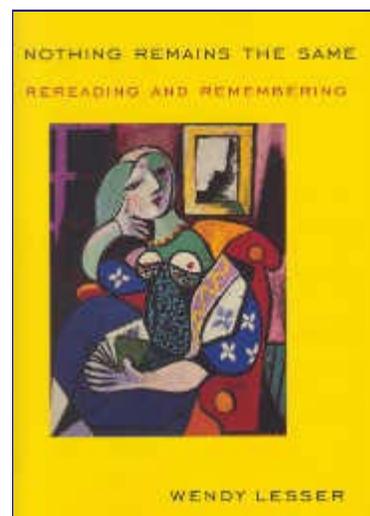
glowed in my mind when I came to them, and the scenes in the book missing from the movie appeared in a Lean form in my mind as I read them. Another encounter with re-reading came when I tackled "An Outline of Occult Science" early in my reading of Rudolf Steiner's works, and once again after having read over 70 of his books. By my second reading I realized how much of his later works were expansions on what he was laid down in this landmark book, and my reading of it was with renewed interest and enthusiasm. My first [review](#) in 1996 was one typewritten page in length and my second [reading](#) in 2003 generated 135 pages, and still has three small chapters remaining to be reviewed. From these and other personal experiences with re-reading the same book, I was aware that reading is like stepping in Heraclitus's river, nothing remains the same: the river has changed and the person stepping in the river has changed.

This is the subject of Wendy Lesser's book and here is the eponymous quote embedded in a letter from Mark Twain to William Dean Howells([1](#)).

**[page vii] People pretend that the Bible means the same to them at 50 that it did at all former milestones in their journey. I wonder how they lie so. It comes of practice, no doubt. They would not say that of Dickens's or Scott's books. *Nothing* remains the same. When a man goes back to look at the house of his childhood, it has always *shrunk*: there is not instance of such a house being as big as the picture in memory and imagination calls for. Shrunk how? Why, to its correct dimensions: the house hasn't altered, this is the first time it has been in focus.**

On the other hand, Henry James discusses how in the adventure of re-reading a beloved book, we may freshly encounter our young feelings. Thus "that old feeling" in the words of the popular lyric, "I saw you last night and got that *old* feeling," could as easily be written as "that *young* feeling."

**[page vi] The beauty of this adventure, that of seeing the dust blown off a relation that had been put away as on a shelf, almost out of reach, at the back of one's mind, consists in finding the most precious object not only fresh and intact, but with its firm lacquer still further figured, gilded and enriched. It is all over-scored with traces and impressions — vivid, definite, almost as valuable as itself — of the recognitions and agitations it originally produced in us. Our old — that is our young — feelings are very nearly what page after page most gives us.**



While reading this passage of James from his 1902 novel, it brought to mind the "precious object . . . figured, gilded and enriched" in his 1904 novel, "The Golden Bowl." The golden bowl of that novel was James' central metaphor for the relationship between his four main characters.

The first two times that author Lesser read James' "The Portrait of a Lady" she was close to the age of Isabel Archer. The second time she was twenty years older, and that made all the difference in how she read the book and the effect the reading had on her.

**[page 1, 2] But in your forties the journey begins to matter more than the arrival, and it is only in this frame of mind that you can do justice to Henry James. (I say this now, but just watch me: I'll be contradicting myself from the old-age home, deploring my puerile middle-aged delusions about James.) At forty-six, no longer in competition with Isabel, I could find her as charming as her author evidently did. Moreover, having *had* a life, with its own self-defined shape and structure, I was more sympathetic with Isabel's wish to acquire one. As a young person, I only wanted her to marry the lord and get it over with. Now I understood that nothing ends with such choices — there always additional choices to be made, if one's life is to remain interesting.**

What Lesser found from her most recent reading led her to write this book: "The idea that a simple rereading could also be a *new* reading struck with me with the force of a revelation." One can reread a book after a long passage of time and get an "old feeling" or a "young feeling" or even a *new* feeling. As we grow older, we add meanings to our life which were not there earlier. When we re-read a book we read years earlier, those new meanings highlight themselves by the effect that events in the book have on us which earlier, we would have ignored. If one has taken up keeping a parrot as a pet, the appearance of one in "The Parrot's Theorem" will have a different effect than it would have before. For example, in its issue after the great disaster, "Parrot Monthly" had as its headline, "Titanic Sunk. No Parrots Died!"

In this next passage, Lesser describes the way I have chosen to live my life. I keep constantly busy, but include reading as an essential part of how I keep busy. I never say, "I wish I had time to read X" because if X is important, I schedule it to be read. When Lesser's book arrived, I had bought it because she dealt with a way of reading books similar to my own, and I began reading it immediately. I was not disappointed. She describes her life much as I would mine. I work efficiently, report only to myself, and set my own priorities. I keep an open schedule so that if anyone calls to have lunch, I'm available. I have a deadline each month to meet, a self-imposed deadline, and one that I treat seriously. If I have an otherwise busy month outside of my writing, I work long hours to catch up. When I'm writing and reading, I take breaks to do things around the house. I act as gardener, maintenance man, computer geek, flower arranger, grocery buyer, doyletics researcher, photographer, college student, and chef, among other things. My personal goal is to buy *more* books every month than I can read in a month and live long enough to read them all!

**[page 3] Time is a gift, but it can be a suspect one, especially in a culture that values frenzy. When I began this book, almost everyone I knew seemed to be busier than I was. I supported myself, contributed my share to the upkeep of the household, and engaged in all the usual wifely and motherly duties and pleasures. But still I had time left to read. This was partly because I incorporated reading into my work life (I run a quarterly literary magazine), and partly because I work very efficiently (I run my *own* quarterly literary magazine, so there's no busywork whatsoever: no meetings, no memos, no last-minute commands from the higher-ups). I had constructed a life in which I could be energetic but also lazy; I could rush, but I would never be rushed. It was a perfect situation for someone who loved to read, but it was also an oddball role, outside the mainstream — even the mainstream of people who read and write for a living.**

After explaining that a book for rereading should be a "strong one" — one that can "hold up under the close scrutiny of a second look." In the next passage Lesser gives this book's theme in a nutshell:

**[page 5] I [hope] that each chapter would say something different — about the process of rereading, or the nature of growing older, or the quality of a work of art, or my own personality, or (preferably) all of the above. As both reader and writer I felt anxious to avoid mere repetition, which is not at all the same as rereading.**

Lesser points out that there is something vertiginous about rereading and to demonstrate it dramatically, she chooses to re-watch the Hitchcock movie, "Vertigo." She called "vertigo" the "best word to describe what I felt when I looked again at the books I had first read a long time ago." I had a similar feeling when I reread [The Fabulous Flight](#) by Robert Lawson. When I finally located the book I remembered only as "Gus and Me", I decided to buy a copy that was identical to the Westwego library copy that I held in my hands as a ten year old. Here I was at sixty-six years old rereading the identical book. It was a dizzying endeavor, added to by the fact that much of the book is spent with a miniature Peter riding on the back of his friend, Gus, the seagull. There I was riding along with Peter, the ten-year-old me in the cabin on the back of Gus as he flew over the Atlantic Ocean, flew over London, into a castle window, retrieved a deadly bomb, and dropped it to detonate harmlessly into the middle of the ocean. During my rereading of the first part of the adventure, I took the part of Peter's dad who built the miniature sailboat, cannons, and cabin for Gus's back for him. But once Peter got on Gus's back, I was back alongside Peter on his fabulous flight.

Another book about meeting one's younger self is Richard Bach's book, [Running From Safety](#) in which fifty-nine-year-old Richard meets nine-year-old Dickie who is scathingly mad at his older self for not keeping a promise he made him fifty years previous. The book was Richard's way of keeping the promise he made back then. Reading his book has this dizzying effect that Lesser finds in her rereading some strong book after a long period of time.

Some people spend their whole life perfecting their faults, someone once said. For those people, rereading will have little effect on them because they have changed so little that they will notice no difference. They live a sanity which is as sad as Don Quixote's madness. The rest of us are more like Sancho Panza, "sensible and silly" — we will notice the difference during rereading and feel a touch of vertigo. (Page 10)

Lesser shows a great respect for Cervantes's novel, "Don Quixote" as the progenitor of the novel as we know it today. One might say, "Every novelist rides on Don Quixote's horse."

**[page 12] The novel displays such an astonishing ability to anticipate its own future that one is almost tempted to give Cervantes credit for *everything* written after him.**

Lesser uses the metaphor of a book as a telescope through which one can peer back through the years to ourselves when we first read the book, and then notice how what we find in the book prefigures the person we eventually have become. I read as a pre-teen lots of biographies of famous people, mostly inventors, and for fiction, I selected mostly science fiction. The tales of Doctor Doolittle was my favorite. The Westwego library had a shelf full of the these books, each one with a new tale of the doctor who could talk to animals. As an adult I wrote a [novel](#) about how humans can talk to dolphins and other cetaceans. My science fiction reading led me to take a degree in physics so that I might learn how these amazing feats of space flight and technology portrayed by Heinlein, Bradbury, Anderson, del Ray, and others. As I look down the telescope to Peter and Gus's adventures, I realize that Peter was a small boy whose feats outpaced anyone's expectations for him. Everywhere we look through the telescope of books during rereading, we find our life preforming itself during those early readings. One might ask, "How could we have known to select those specific books?" Or, "How can we as human beings trust our own growth path to ours as youngsters?" It's a mystery.

For Lesser one of her important early books was *I Capture the Castle* — here's how she describes her rereading of the book and its main character Cassandra Mortmain.

**[page 34, 35] I loved the book at thirteen for reasons that couldn't possibly have been**

**apparent to me then, and now, looking back, I see exactly what they were. This is not because I have outgrown the book or have become more thoughtful than it is or have come to understand life better than it does, but because I now understand life in very much the way this book does. Peering back down the years through the telescope of *I Capture the Castle*, I see not only the girl who first read the book but also the woman she developed into, as if the book itself were in some way responsible for that development.**

It seems as though the only conclusion a "sensible and silly" person can reach is that we already know what we are to become and begin our preparation for the task when we first begin reading as a child. The only explanation is this: "It's a mystery." Perhaps it's both preparation and mystery. Cue *vertigo*.

Lesser strives to find one answer to the mystery she finds herself immersed within. She offers up questions, but none of them have satisfactory answers to her.

**[page 35] Did I, at thirteen, absorb the book so fully that it shaped my habits and superstitions as I grew older? Or was I drawn to Cassandra's personality precisely because it mirrored my own gradually emerging character? Or are her beliefs so widely held that *any* girl would have grown into them, in time?**

But there is more to the story. Cassandra was a girl whose life was shaped by what she read. Her story was read by Wendy Lesser and her life was shaped by what she read. Lesser's life began to unfold in ways in which Cassandra's life had unfolded. Does it begin to seem to you that life is indeed stranger than fiction?

**[page 36] If *I Capture the Castle* is about being a reader and becoming a writer, it is also about how an individual existence unfolds. Does a life develop like a novel, with a distinct trajectory and a satisfying finish, or is it more meandering and uncertain? Because she presents her story to us as a series of journal entries, Cassandra's narrative has it both ways. We are treated to a sequence of shapely incidents and temporary conclusions — there is suspense, and fulfillment of suspense — but the story remains, at its close, open-ended.**

No one who is, like Sancho Panza, "sensible and silly", in other words, "normal", will confuse a character in a novel for a real person.

**[page 43] But if you are someone who cares deeply about reading, you may find that you respond to the important books in your life, and especially to those early in your life, very much as you do to actual people. Sometimes you like them because they reflect exactly what you are at the moment you first encounter them, and sometime you like them for the opposite reason — because they touch something in you that is hidden, or because they forecast something that you will be but aren't yet. Do the books actually cause you to develop in this direction, or are they simply markers along an existing route? The question piques and tantalizes but, like all questions about how we turned into who we turned into, it has no firm answer.**

The question Lesser poses is an excellent two-part question, a forced-choice proposition, both of which I am tempted to answer with "Yes." Yes, books cause us to develop in a certain direction. Yes, books are markers along an existing route. How this happens is a mystery. The answer cannot be found in our two-valued Aristotelian logic of A and Not-A(2). The answers to real-life questions can be *Yes* or *No*, and that's *just two of the possibilities*.

In the final sentence of the page 43 passage, Lesser destroys the possibility of holding the question she poses as an unanswered question by flatly stating, "It has no firm answer." What a pity, it seems to me, for a writer to spend 43 pages building up to such a fine question, only to destroy its fruitfulness for producing an answer over time by zapping it with "no firm answer." [What is the power of an unanswered](#)

question? You never know until you find out. And you will never find out if you destroy the question with a blatant statement that *it has no answer* like Lesser did above. Holding unanswered questions are one of the most productive things one can do. Unanswered questions are like Richard Bach's "forever questions" in Running From Safety. He writes, "You don't want a million answers as much as you want a few *forever questions*. The questions are diamonds you hold in the light. Study a lifetime and you see different colors from the same jewel." (*italics mine*)

Study your lifetime by rereading books you read at an early age as Lesser did, but keep yourself open to holding unanswered questions about whether the books you read caused you to develop in the direction you took or whether the books were merely markers along an existing route. Rightly understood, they were both of those, and even more.

Lesser admits that her undergraduate self blasted away any unanswered questions by making up easy answers to questions she didn't couldn't find an adequate answer as seen from her current self. This process seems to be taught in schools at every level, up until now. Let us hope that with the advent of 21st Century Education, astute teachers will demonstrate the validity of the process of holding unanswered questions to their eager students. Lesser is talking about Pope's "Epistle IV" and Wordsworth's Immortality Ode below:

**[page 46] I hadn't a clue what those poems were about when I read them the first time. They meant nothing to my undergraduate self, who, balked by their apparent impenetrability, constructed meanings to substitute for those she couldn't find, thus obscuring the poems with the shadow of her own limitations. Yet now these two poems seem startlingly clear — so clear that, in retrospect, I find it hard to understand how I could so willfully have misunderstood them.**

What a beautiful way to describe the effect of refusing to hold an unanswered question: "It obscured the poems with the shadows of her own limitations." If we will, instead of casting the shadows of our own limitations upon some mystery of life, simply hold the mystery open to a future answer, we will have, in effect, placed markers along the existing road to a meaning that we didn't know existed, at the time. And holding onto the unanswered question after preliminary answers arise will help us develop deeper meanings with each passing year.

When we have not lived life fully, we derive meaning superficially which squeezes out of us the possibility for acquiring a deeper meaning. Lesser made errors of this sort with Wordsworth's Ode(3), and found her errors illumined by Calvin Trilling's essay, "The Immortality Ode." She gives us the pertinent excerpt from Trilling:

**[page 53] "And it seems to me that those critics who made the Ode refer to some particular and unique experience of Wordsworth's and who make it relate only to poetical powers have forgotten their own lives and in consequence conceive the Ode to be a lesser thing than it really is, for it is not about poetry, it is about life."**

Last night we watched "Miss Austen Regrets" on PBS which dealt with the likely events happening behind the scenes to lead the vivacious and intelligent Jane to remain unmarried all of her life. She had a couple of early invitations which she turned down, one which came with a stuffed shirt and a big house, the other with a lovely man and a vicarage. The first decision she never regretted, the second she did. Lesser notes the consequence of such decisions.

**[page 91] To choose a life by choosing another person is a very dangerous course of action, it is true, but to refrain from doing so out of fear of the consequences is more dangerous still. I didn't know, when I first met her, that this is what Isabel Archer was saying to me. It's only now that I no longer need her advice that I can hear it.**

Thoreau once commented in his Journal(4) that we only see the things that we expect to see or look for on our walks through the woods. The descriptive narratives of Thoreau are as valuable for the naturalist as Austen's novels are to the lovelorn. And yet there is a sense that in learning something new, as Lesser expresses it so aptly, that "we must know all about it before we start.(5)" Only after she had lived a life having but not understanding Isabel's advice could Lesser comprehend what it meant.

In her discussion of her rereading Dostoyevsky's novel, "The Idiot", Lesser reveals that the root of "idiot" is "a private person." This aspect of idiocy had never occurred to me before, and yet it is certainly true that an idiot is someone who has private reasons. If the idiot's reasons were public, we would understand them and remove the epithet idiot from our references to the person. In the film, "Rain Man", Raymond seems to be an idiot until we come to understand the reasons for his behavior. In "The Idiot", we readers must work ourselves through the paradox of the prince who is an idiot.

**[page 109] ("A private person," remember, is the root meaning of "idiot," but the prince, simply by virtue of *being* a prince, is the very opposite of what the Greeks meant by a private person.) We are all necessarily our public selves, caught in a particular world, and yet novels — especially Dostoyevsky's novels — find ways of releasing us, however momentarily, into something much more private and intimate.**

In her chapter, "A Small Masterpiece", Lesser discusses D. H. Lawrence's "The Rocking-Horse Winner", one great story in three volumes of lesser stories. In this next passage, she elaborates on the theme of this book which is a combination of autobiographical sketch and literary criticism blended together. She asks herself how her younger self could have found these three volumes to be a "seamlessly pleasurable experience".

**[page 115] How could I not sense the peaks and valleys in Lawrence's prose? How could I not recoil from his aggravating moments, which turn out to be so plentiful in these stories?**

**I have a number of explanations, and I suppose some of them would be considered extra-literary. But part of what I am trying to suggest, in writing a book that is both autobiographical and critical, is that even the extra-literary is literary. That is, to the extent that reading is life (not, god forbid, that life can be reduced to a "text," or that there is no difference between fact and fiction, or any other of those fashionable execrations; that's not what I'm talking about at all) — to the extent that what we read is an aspect of the life we have lived, and shapes our subsequent life, and becomes part of our memory of the past — to that extent, we should be willing to allow our personal and historical responses to flood in and out of the books we read. Our responses won't, after all, hurt the books; they won't change the essential, inalterable words on the page, or damage anyone else's readings of those books. So there's no harm in it. And there may be a great deal of benefit. But whether there's benefit or not, the bringing together of books and life is pretty much unavoidable, if you really want to immerse yourself in the pleasure of reading — and especially if you want to reread.**

In discussing *The Tempest* in the Chapter "Late Shakespeare", Lesser comments:

**[page 143] Only an actor who felt immune to the conjuring forces, or truly believed himself to be at the end of his career, could comfortably deliver Prospero's renunciatory lines, from "this rough magic / I abjure" through the closing soliloquy that begins "Now my charms are o'erthrown."**

Her comments reminded me of the great Hollywood actor, Charlton Heston, who used a passage of Prospero's words when he came to the end of his career. He gave a public announcement that his Alzheimer's progression made it necessary for him to say goodbye properly to his fans, so on August 9,

2002, he gave perhaps his greatest speech in a life of great speeches. He was playing Charlton Heston taking his final bow on the stage of life. He said in closing Prospero's words from *The Tempest, Act IV, 1*:

*Our revels now are ended: these our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and  
Are melted into air, into thin air;  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind: we are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.*

Charlton Heston in his long career played many great roles, including among others: Marc Antony, Ben Hur, Moses, and God, and he played Prospero for his final act. This next passage was written as though Lesser was thinking of Heston when she wrote it.

**[page 143] The actor not only needs to be very powerful and persuasive; he also needs to be a man of the theater, not just a movie star imported for this one occasion. And it's best if he is old enough to have a vast theatrical career behind him — preferably a career with which sticks in our memories, so that we at some level recall him in all those other roles as he is bidding adieu to this particular one.**

Lesser notes how Milton in his *Paradise Lost* continually wrote inverted sentences. She quotes Christopher Ricks who remarked, "When a sentence surges forward like that, the end of it seems less a destination than a destiny." This reminded me of the strange inverted way that Yoda in the Star Wars movies spoke. Perhaps, like Yoda, godlike we become. Our destiny each sentence forms.

Our author notes how easily authors like Austen, Milton or Dostoyevsky can shift in her evaluation over decades between her reading and rereading them. If dead authors can shift, what about the live authors who are still writing and changing?

**[page 177] And if the dead authors can shift around in my esteem, imagine how much more likely this is with living ones. It is safer reading the dead: they aren't so liable to rock the boat of their own reputation (thought Hemingway and Ellison, with their recently published unfinished manuscripts, have given it a good try). Conversely, it is can be more exciting to read the living, because you are still in the midst of a story; you don't yet know the shape of the whole career. To those of us who love suspense, as readers of Ian McEwan novels are bound to do, the openendedness is part of the allure. We can never be sure what he will do next.**

It was McEwan's novel *The Child in Time* which made Lesser into a "McEwan addict" (Page 178), and when her own son got lost in the San Francisco airport and she went into "frantic mode" — her favorite way of "dealing with a crisis" — she was dumbfounded that her husband scoffed at her kidnaping theory, saying merely their son would be found in time. She carefully pointed out that her husband had *never* read *The Child in Time!* (Page 179) Here we could see the influence one book could have upon her.

**[page 181] Still, as Randall Jarrell once said, a novel is a prose work of some length that has something wrong with it, and *The Child in Time* can still appeal to me even if the end is not fully satisfying. After all, I am no longer reading the book for suspense. What continues to work for me, I find, is the way in way McEwan's novel addresses our relationship to time. . . .**

**I had already noticed in 1992 that McEwan's is a world "in which time flows**

**backward and forward, with last things influencing the first as well as the last."**

One of the ways my wife and I have found that we can send a message back to our childhood is by having a conversation in real-time with the child-within-us, or rather by letting our inner child speak for us in the present. If one cannot do this readily, one would imagine that such messages can never be delivered. What we've found over several decades now is that our inner child is always present and reacts to whatever is going on in our adult world in exactly the way that children do to situations: by feeling. Through the medium of feelings our adult and child remain ever in lock-step communication, and if the adult is not aware of the communication, the result is a barren existence in which "undependable emotions" seem ever to arise. Our emotions are in truth very dependable, but only if one understands them as the result of communication across the permeable barrier of time by our feelings and emotions.

In *The Child in Time* Stephen and Charles Darke discuss the possibility of sending a message back to one's childhood.

**[page 183, 184] Charles talks seriously and Stephen thinks humorously about the idea of sending a message back to one's childhood, but the point is that such a message can be sent but never delivered. The communication is all one-way. We can recall and even address our child selves, but they can't hear us — can't alter their behavior to suit our present needs, can't be cheered up (or toned down) by what we've learned, can't react in any way to the adults we have become. . . . The wish to make that one-way message into a two-way connection is overwhelming.**

No doubt that is the case to one who holds the presuppositions of the past flowing constantly and irretrievably into the future as Stephen and Lesser do. But the truth about time is that the past lives in the present as much as the future does and each infuses the other with life inside of a human being who has not bought into the materialistic delusions about the one-way flow of time.

My wife and I read several times in the early 1980s the insightful novel by Jane Roberts *The Education of Oversoul 7*, and we were as influenced by that novel as Lesser was by Ian McEwan's novel *The Child in Time*. In *Oversoul 7* there are four characters which live at different time periods, separated by hundreds or thousands of years, and each appear as characters in each other's dreams. At one point the prehistory character makes a scratch on a tile on the floor of a tiled cave, and the other character thousands of years in the future notices the mark appear where there was none before. What others might see as random chance, the character sees as a meaningful connection of the past and the present which can flow both ways.

Lesser describes a similar event which occurs to Stephen when he goes back in time and spies through a window a young couple in a pub having an excited conversation. He waves at her as he realizes that he is watching his mother, as she looked before he was born.

**[page 184, 185] Much later in the novel, the middle-aged Stephen leads his ailing mother into a discussion of her past and , without prompting her with his own experience, gets her to talk about that moment in the pub. She and his father had apparently been discussing whether or not to get married; she was pregnant, but they had almost decided not to have the child. And then she saw a face at the window, "the face of a child, sort of floating there . . .," she tells Stephen. "It was looking right at me. Thinking about it over the years, I realize that it was probably the landlord's boy, or some kid off one of the local farms. But as far as I was concerned then, I was convinced, I just *knew* that I was looking at my own child. If you like, I was looking at you."**

The last book Lesser discusses is *A Hazard of New Fortunes* by William Dean Howells. She didn't think much of the book when she read it as an undergraduate, and thought, "He isn't Henry James." Thinking along the lines of "there is only one desirable way to be a novelist." (Page 202) She adds, "Henry James

himself knew better." Here is James letter to Howells in May 17, 1890:

**[page 202] the *Hazard* is simply prodigious . . . you have never yet done anything so roundly & totally good. . . . In fact your reservoir deluges me, altogether, with surprise as well as other sorts of effusion: by which I mean that though you do much to empty it you keep it remarkably full. I seem to myself, in comparison, to fill mine with a teaspoon & obtain but a trickle. However, I don't mean to compare myself with you or compare you, in the particular case, with anything but life . . . The novelist is a particular window, absolutely, & of worth in so far as he is one; and it's because you open so well & are hung so close over the street that *I* could hang out of it all day long.**

Anyone who writes a journal knows that if you have a truly busy and wonderful day that a part of you cringes at the thought of writing it up because it will take a large part of the next day. You can't write it up as you are having the experience, but it has to finish happening before there is anything to write about or any time in which to do the writing. The operant [rule](#) for me is "It always happens before you know it." Lesser notes this while watching the Hitchcock movie *Vertigo* which she wanted to write about in this book.

**[page 220, 221] I had all along planned to write about *Vertigo* for this book, and now here it was — my designated rereading, in the form of this spontaneous re-seeing. I thought of taking notes, and then thought better of it. With anything as fast-moving as a movie — for that matter, with anything at all that has its own pace, whether it's a dance performance or a lecture or a film — I can't have the full experience and record it at the same time. I wanted to immerse myself once again in *Vertigo*, have the intense version of the experience: that seemed more important than any details about color schemes (though the color schemes are breathtaking) or musical structure (though the music is essential to the mood of each scene) that I might hope to capture in notes. Besides, I had seen the movie so many times that I figured I could remember the crucial scraps of dialogue, if I needed them. So I just watched it. But I watched it in a state of alert readiness, looking in particular for anything new, anything I hadn't noticed before. And I also tried to watch it in a state of passive receptivity, which meant watching myself for my emotional response, observing how the movie had its effect on me this time around — because it is never the same twice.**

Watching a movie, like reading a book, is like stepping in a river: it's different water flowing around your foot, your foot is different (all new cells every 7 years), and you yourself are a different person: you have lived, grown, and changed since the last time you did this deed. Everything is in flux, as Heraclitus said, and he means us in particular, not just his famous ever-changing river. In the case of *Vertigo*, it is the ever-changing and yet remaining the same city of San Francisco. We bring the changed and unchanged parts of ourselves and it is the changed parts of ourselves which are able to see aspects of the movie or the book which were there before and we had missed. Movies and books are like faceted gems which we must rotate to grasp with our eyes some new sparkle of delight. In the process of living we change and produce a rotation without even planning it — suddenly you understand aspects of the movie or book you didn't before and you feel fulfilled after your contact with it. That feeling itself is a double sign that the film or movie is a strong one and that you are continuing to grow as a result of your latest contact with it.

If you have wondered why you reread books or re-watch movies, you will enjoy this book as Wendy Lesser shares her intimate reading and viewing self with you in a way that few writers have done and even fewer as well as she has.

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

**Footnote 1.** Lesser writes that Howells was probably the only writer who could "sincerely value" these

two diverse writers, Henry James and Mark Twain (Page 203). She emphasizes that by beginning her book with facing pages of quotes from each author on pages vi and vii.

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**Footnote 2.** Alfred Korzybski explained the importance of non-Aristotelian thinking in his landmark book [Science and Sanity](#) in 1933 which formed the foundation of the field of General Semantics.

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**Footnote 3.** Several years ago, I revisited Wordsworth's Ode and incorporated it in my essay, [The Childhood of Humanity](#) in a footnote here: [http://www.doyletics.com/childofh.htm#N\\_5](http://www.doyletics.com/childofh.htm#N_5) .

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**Footnote 4.** On September 9, 1859, he wrote, "How much more, then, it requires different intentions of the eye and the mind to attend to different departments of knowledge! How differently the poet and the naturalist look at objects! A man sees only what concerns him. A botanist absorbed in the pursuit of grasses does not distinguish the grandest pasture oaks. He as it were tramples down oaks unwittingly in his walk."

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**Footnote 5.** This the thought which I formulated in [Matherne's Rule #23](#): "When learning a new subject, it's best to know all about it before you start."

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