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A READER'S JOURNAL

On Rereading

by

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2014



This book poses a challenge for me. I cannot write about it without recalling the 2002 book

[*Nothing Remains the Same -- Rereading and Remembering*](#) by Wendy Lesser which I reviewed in 2008. I ended my review saying, "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." Let's see how Spacks stacks up more or less against Lesser.

Spacks suggests on page 3 in her opening chapter "Always A Stranger," quoting Verlyn Kilinkenborg, "The characters remain the same, and the words never change, but the reader always does." We are, in effect, to paraphrase the title of Robert Heinlein's classic novel, "A Stranger in a Familiar Land." She proceeds to reread "Hansel and Gretel" and reports being surprised by the witch licking her lips at the prospect of eating *siblings on shingles*, i. e., of eating creamed kids on toast, perhaps, and remarks, "Only a tiny detail, that, but one that complicates the story's flavor and makes it memorable in a new way."

For myself, I have little inclination or time to reread books I have read earlier, although it has happened when I bought an original copy of Heinlein's [*Space Cadet*](#) in hardcover at a school book sale. The temptation was too great, so I reread it to find that he predicted cell phones back in this 1948 novel. To me as a kid of 10 when I read it, this was science fiction and today you can see maids walking on the street to minimum wage housekeeping jobs talking with a cell phone to their ear.

[page 4] The dynamic tension between stability and change lies at the heart of rereading. Every renewed exchange between book and reader contains elements of both, and both provide pleasure. Our psychic needs vary, and reread books answer different needs at different times. Seeking solace we return to a treasured children's book.

My adventures were anything but solace when I reread [*The Fabulous Flight*](#) by Robert Lawson. As I said in my Lesser review, "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." It was a quantum of adventure not a quantum of solace. Yes, I was different some fifty years later, as I took the part of Peter's dad at the time he was building the miniature cabin for Peter to ride safely in on his seagull Gus's back.

As an adult I was introduced to *The Hobbit* and *Atlas Shrugged* by my co-worker, Fred Gude. I read them

both back then in 1968, and *Atlas Shrugged* I reread thrice later. The last time it was during a trip to our cabin in the hills of Arkansas one early March. On the drive up, my wife was driving as I began reading the book to myself. "Read it aloud," Del suggested. So I did. When I took over driving, she continued with the reading aloud. We were maybe a third of the way through the book after our 10 hours drive. Some friends joined us for the week, and when they heard what we were doing, they wanted to continue the reading, one person doing the reading aloud as the rest of us colored mandalas on the table in the living room. We made it through the entire book by week's end. The twenty years that passed between my first and fourth reading was filled with much study of the real meaning of freedom and it was great to relate my new understandings to Ayn Rand's early thoughts on freedom.

Nowadays I write a review of each book when I finish reading it, thus I now have reviews of the Heinlein, Lawson, and Rand books, including a short review of *Atlas Shrugged*. There is another book which I first read in 1958 when it came in as a Book-of-the-Month selection. I loved the book, but kept getting lost in the various Russian surnames for the same person, Yuri Zhivago at times was called Yuri Andreivich, and Lara Strelnikov switched with Lara Andrepovna. Watching David Lean's magnificent portrayal of Pasternak's novel led me to acquire and read the book again around 1993, after which I wrote a short review of it [here](#). By this time, I had learned the rules for forming the polite surnames using the father's name followed by -vich for males and -povna for females, all of which made my reading more enjoyable. Around 1995 my reviews became longer because I was a full-time writer and I could afford the luxury of going through the book, reading my marginalia and the text surrounding them to use as fodder for sharing my own thoughts which each marked passage triggered. This could qualify as a rereading, maybe not a full Reading No. 2, but at least a Reading 1.5 perhaps. This kind of rereading, coming within a day or two of completing the book is likely to find me unchanged from the first reading, except by the thoughts I was led to by my first reading. We are changed by what we read, and doing a quick reread so soon after the first read is a way of finding this out.

[page 12] In rereading, the interchange of external and internal that I have sketched becomes complicated by the past, and by memory. Feelings from the past lie in wait for the reader in the present, so that feeling becomes insistently the purpose of reading. New feelings may intensify or conflict with the old ones; new judgments may attempt to deny old feelings. The subjective reality of the book being read for the second or fifth or tenth time assumes more than ordinary power.

Her passage, "feelings from the past lie in wait for the reader in the present" caught my attention. I have learned to understand feelings from the future also come to us in the present, that we can, as a human capability, remember the future, but only if we become sensitive to and aware of our feelings. Rightly understood, time waves from the future arrive in us as feelings, feelings we may discount as coming from the future if we do not consider that to be a human possibility, up until now. See Matherne's Rule: [Remember the Future](#).

As I read her Page 12 passage, I couldn't help recall our teenage son who watched the movie "Grease" during its first run at the movies, 33 times! Surely feeling was insistently the purpose of his many re-watchings of this movie. It has since become for me one of those movies which rocks on, one which if I stumble upon it on a TV channel, I may watch the rest of it, each time with old feelings rekindled and some new insights which pop up also.

[page 19] Then there is rereading of Jane Austen, a special case, as I realized sharply in conversation with a friend who claimed that she hated to reread. When I pointed out that I have known her to reread Jane Austen, she looked surprised. "Everyone rereads Jane Austen," she said.

When you have experienced barbarity in the extreme, reading Jane Austen can be a lifelong cure as she represents the civility that sometimes gets lost in civilization.

[page 55] Back in New Haven, where I lived at the time, I met other rereaders of Austen: a group composed of female Holocaust survivors. They convened at regular intervals, year after year, to read Jane Austen aloud to one another. When they finished a novel, they'd go on to the next one; when they finished them all, they'd start over. Why Austen? I asked one of them. Because, my informant said, she represents civilization.

The author reminded me of a wonderful childhood story from grade school, "The Story of Ferdinand" by Munro Leaf with drawings by Robert Lawson. A novel in miniature, its plot is a hero goes on a journey. Ferdinand is a bull who enjoys flowers and one day he is stung by a bee and runs furiously around the meadow where some scouts for the bull ring in Madrid were. They see this ferocious bull and take him to fight in the bull ring, but Ferdinand simply sits and smells the flowers of the lovely señoritas in the stands and our hero is soon returned home to his meadow to sit and smell the flowers.

[page 37] A bullfight hardly seems more sinister than a bee sting, and someone who doesn't want to fight doesn't have to. Surely the wish that life might be less difficult crosses every mind: *Ferdinand* fulfills that wish. It also reminds us of a time when we didn't even know that life was hard.

The best chapter of this book for me was "A Civilized World" in which Spacks deals with Jane Austen's novel. She featured a long passage from *Pride and Prejudice* which involves Elizabeth rereading several times a letter from Darcy which first infuriates her, and with each rereading she fills in missing pieces and begins to comprehend Darcy's meaning.

[page 56, 57] The most familiar of Austen's novels itself testifies to rereading's power and importance. At the center of *Pride and Prejudice* lies an extended scene of rereading. Elizabeth Bennet, initially outraged by a letter from Darcy that purports to explain and justify behavior she abhors, finds herself compelled to read it again and again, almost against her will. (After her first reading, she puts the letter "hastily away, protesting that she would not regard it, at she would never look in it again," yet "in half a minute the letter was unfolded again.") Every time she reads it, its meanings change. At first she rejects its explanations as self-interested, a rrogant, and false. In rereading, she checks each of Darcy's claims against her factual knowledge. She consults her memory--and her memory, prodded by Darcy's words, provides information previously forgotten. Evaluating the letter's assertions in relation to her sense of logic and probability, she considers the problem of interpretation in new terms. She wanders the lane for two hours, reading and pondering, "giving way to every variety of thought; reconsidering events, determining probabilities, and reconciling herself as well as she could, to a change so sudden and so important."

The sudden and important change occurs only as a result of Elizabeth's willingness to engage with the crucial text again and again. Gradually she realizes what she could not absorb at first; gradually she takes in what she feels reluctant to accept; gradually she comes to acknowledge how wrong she has been. The rereading of the letter becomes an adventure in self-knowledge.

Here we have Jane Austen's account of the importance of rereading, especially of important messages that could have life-changing consequences. If Elizabeth had remained focused only upon the first part of the letter, the upsetting part, she and Darcy would have never found happiness together.

Spacks gives this aim for her book:

[page 21] As a book about rereading, this is, as I have suggested, most essentially a treatment of reading: indeed, a defense of reading. It attempts to demonstrate how reading gets inside your head and what it does when it gets there.

What does reading do inside of your head when it gets there, and more importantly what do you do with

what it does when it gets there? Elizabeth did some important: she decided to reread the letter, again and again, till she was satisfied that what she did with the letter was what Darcy wanted the letter to do when it got inside her head. What books have you read which deserve another reading? — If a book was good the first time you read it, give it a rereading by a new, older, and wiser you, give yourself a chance to form a new opinion, to receive a new message, and to deepen your understanding of the book, all the while re-experiencing the good feelings once again.

