

...of the Book...

Helen B. Cannon

MY FRIEND'S TWO-YEAR-OLD LOVES THE STORIES IN BOOKS. He loves them so much that sometimes he takes a book from his mother's hands, places it on the floor, and tries to step into the story. All my life I have been doing that — trying to step into the books I read. Sometimes it is not even a matter of trying. I am sucked into a story, helpless as a fly in a drain.

One summer when our boys were small, I remember, we rented a cabin at Bear Lake for a couple of days. The cabin turned out to be a dirty, ramshackle affair, and we had rain the entire space of our beach vacation. But it was not these facts alone that made me irascible — it was the book I had stepped into. Henny Pollit, in Christina Stead's *The Man Who Loved Children*, was a discontented woman, trapped in her life, as I was trapped in that dingy, leaking cabin. My husband, Larry, found my anger inexplicable, not realizing that I had pulled him into the story with me — the kids too — and they were all paying for the abuse Henny took from life. Her loathing became my own, and that Bear Lake cabin, a Pollit-y universe.

Author Joan Didion says that she *writes* to find out what she knows. I *read* to find out what I know. Not only that, I read to determine how I see. When I was a child, I used to make visits with my parents to their south-central Utah home in Emery County. The trip from our home in Logan, the state's northern tip, to that desert region seemed very long. As I lay, carsick and drowsy, on the back seat of Daddy's 1942 Chevy, my parents' talk would drift back to me. From those snatches of overheard conversation, I gathered that the desert country to which we traveled was barren, dry, and empty — a dull expanse of sand, where even cedar, sage, and bunchgrass had no names or beauty. When we returned to our mountain-valley home, I mimicked their sighs of relief, grateful to be back in a green world. These sighs were echoes of those uttered by pioneer Saints, who looked upon desert as Old Testament wilderness from

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which they prayed to be delivered. At six I had heard enough pioneer stories to know that the main burden of the Saints was to make the desert blossom as a rose, not as a cactus.

Like early eastern artists who traveled West to paint but saw and painted only verdant, memory hills of home, my own visual palette allowed only green shades, never the vermilion or burnt-umber colors of desert country, not the black gloss of desert varnish on slickrock walls, not the gray-blue of sage, nor the creamy lace of Indian rice grass. Not until I was grown and had read Mary Austin's *Land of Little Rain* and Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Desert Year* did I open my eyes to desert beauties. Not until I walked through Arches with Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire* as my guide did I awaken from my stupor to see the crenellated splendor of cliff, the intensity and largeness of desert skies, the delicate color of tamarisk-lined banks.

If books opened my eyes to beauty, they also showed me the mundane to which I had been oblivious. On other childhood road trips with my parents, nothing seemed quite so grand as a motel room. I liked the turquoise chenille spreads, the calendar landscapes framed on the walls, the tiny Camay soaps, and in those days, the knotty-pine walls, diminutive kitchenettes, and Gideon Bibles on night tables. Even as I grew up and motels became more slick and generic, I still felt excited and pampered — intrigued by massage mattresses, “sanitized” toilet seats, and glitter-stuccoed ceilings. Was it Nabokov's *Lolita*, then that alerted me to the sleaziness of it all — the American landscape peppered with Nitey-Nite and Kozy Korner clones; Pine View Cabins, Komfy Nooks, Cliffview Inns, Bar Z Motor Courts, evolving beyond Humbert Humbert's worst nightmares, to the ubiquitous eighties' motel, with its color TV, shag rug, plastic tub, and heavily chlorinated pool. It is not entirely a case, then of *tabula rasa*, but of *tabula erasa*. Books erase old notions I've had; they are my taste makers.

Always the edges of my life have been fuzzy, bleeding into books as the books bled into my consciousness, so that I've never been able to tell where one stops and the other begins. Proust said that a good enough book makes its readers into people who believe in it because they can't help themselves. For me it is more than that. Like an onion with layers of skin, I seem to be made up of levels of book-induced awareness. Peel me back, and I fear you would find only a shriveled sheath of unbooked sensibilities.

Yet my consciousness is not entirely passive. Without books, I still would have grieved over my salesman father's death on Montana's icy highway. But Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* encapsulates my own father's tragedy, and as I touch the play, like a rosary bead, I tell out the sorrow.

Nobody dast blame this man. . . . Willie was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. . . . He's a man way out there in the blue, riding on a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back — that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. Nobody dast blame this man. A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory. (1949, 138)

I understand my father better through these lines; I grieve more deeply over his life and his death through them.

Admittedly I am a hoarder of the printed word, unable to part with books, reluctant to lend them, appalled at the thought of destroying or of throwing them away. My books may be dog-eared, underlined, patterned with my sophomoric marginalia, or stuffed with clippings and pressed flowers, but they remain on my shelves till they crumble to dust. I fully understand the reverence for books central to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, and as keeper of our books, I am zealous as that book's medieval librarian with his labyrinthine passages and secret doors to the illumined pages.

To lose a book is to lose part of myself, my character, my taste, my auxiliary memory bank, and certain precious friends. Colette and Sido, Clarissa Dalloway, and Emma Bovary — how can I part with them when they have so extended my awareness, heightened my understanding, tapped my joys, and accentuated my sorrows? These are friends almost as real and dear as my flesh and blood ones, usually more articulate, and sometimes more constant. Mrs. Ramsay is not ephemeral, though she dies in a single paragraph. I can bring her back by reading *To the Lighthouse* again and again.

I acknowledge books as transforming. Born in the Church, I remember the transformation to true personal belief that came when I first read the Book of Mormon. And whenever my conviction lags, I can go back to "that ancient record brought forth from the earth, as the voice of a people speaking from the dust." I can't conceive of my faith taking impetus or permanence from a video. Separated and made distinctive by The Book that set them apart, the Jews became known as "the People of the Book." In a similar way, Latter-day Saints, defined by their books of faith, are also a People of the Book. I would hate to think we could evolve into a People of the Video Presentation.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, having grown up with the Torah, once said that he thought of God as an "eternal *belle lettrist*," and that we are at once his immortal characters and readers. Yet I am realist enough to know that I could no more limit myself, say, to Book of Mormon reading than I could play a harp throughout eternity. I look at the Church section of our bookshelves, bulging with twenty years of *DIALOGUE*, with each *Sunstone* and *Exponent II* issue since the first, with Mormon fiction and history, biography and poetry, theology and criticism, and I realize that my testimony depends on more than scripture, just as my way of life is illumined by more than the "classics." I do not dismiss the prophet's injunction to read and reread the Book of Mormon, any more than I align myself with those who would eliminate the classics from the curriculum. Though I love reading Shakespeare and appreciate Homer (to name two of the most canonical of canonic authors), I reject the notion of being limited to any fixed canon — in either religious or secular reading. Tony Morrison's *Beloved* is more relevant for me, certainly, than Spencer's *Faerie Queene*. And the landmark "pink issue" of *DIALOGUE* was more a spiritual lifeline for me than a fifth reading of the Book of Mormon would have been at the time. To relinquish my range of reading would be to diminish my humanity and to smother my belief.

In fact, a plentitude of good books is the reward I receive in this life and the one I seek in the next — it is my way of touching eternity. Of course it is a book that inspires my closing image, and I smile and cry as I read again Virginia Woolf's words, hoping I can, by virtue of my bibliomania, bc among her number:

I have sometimes dreamt, at least, that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards — their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon perishable marble — the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy, when He sees us coming with our books under our arms, "Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them here. They have loved reading." (1932, 245)

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Women's moccasins, rose design, Hazel and Wallace Zundel (Clearfield, Utah), 4½"×9½"×3", buckskin, glass beads, 1982, (Utah) State Art Collection.