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THE CURSE OF READING AND FORGETTING

Recently, a colleague mentioned that she had been rereading Richard Hughes's "A High Wind in Jamaica," which was first published in 1929 and is about a group of creepy little kids who become the unwanted wards of sad, listless pirates. She praised it, and her recommendation sent me to Amazon. The title was familiar, as was the vibrant cover of the New York Review Books reissue. One cent and \$3.99 for shipping, and the book was on its way. A couple of weeks later, I opened to the first page and started reading. By the fifth page, I realized that I had read this novel before, and pretty recently, about three years ago, when another colleague had also praised it and lent me his copy.



The passage that tipped me off is about the children's pet cat, called Tabby, who has a penchant for "mortal sport" with snakes:

Once he got bitten, and they all wept bitterly, expecting to see a spectacular death-agon; but he just went off into the bush and probably ate something, for he came back in a few days quite cock-a-hoop and as ready to eat snakes as ever.

Tabby's name stood out, as did the creature's particular daring, and I had the strange sense of already knowing that the poor thing was doomed to a gruesome and shocking end: hunted and murdered by a pack of wild cats, some pages later—by which time I was marvelling both at the various peculiarities of the book and at my unsettling ability to forget them.

This passage is also characteristic of the novel more generally. Its detached and slightly sadistic sense of the animal world is a prelude to all kinds of violence and injury that befall the book's pets and wild things. The phrase "probably ate something" is oddly fuzzy, the kind of imprecise notion that a child might have about what cats do when they are unwatched. This kind of language communicates a lazy innocence mixed with vague malevolence that gives Hughes's sense of childhood its special character. "Cock-a-hoop" is a great old idiomatic phrase—meaning in this case exulting or boastful—just one of dozens of such sparklers that flash from the pages.

All of which is to say that "A High Wind in Jamaica" is remarkable in all kinds of ways—in its diction, its syntax, its characterization, its imagery, its psychological depth, and its narrative movement. It opens with a hurricane in Jamaica, which precipitates the decision by a colonial family to send its children to the safer haven of England for school. En route, they fall in with those pirates, captained by an odd Dutchman named Jonsen. The children are, mostly, better off for their adventure; Jonsen and his men, less so. The book deconstructs the pirate fable—but is still, at points, a ripping yarn itself—and, as Francine Prose notes in her introduction, it is an altogether more sophisticated and subtle version of "The Lord of the Flies," which was published twenty-five years later. It is, simply, entirely memorable, which makes the fact that I forgot it so thoroughly all the more difficult to account for.

It's a bit circular but I cannot recall forgetting another novel entirely—both the contents of the book and the act of reading it. Others may be out there, lurking, waiting to spring up and surprise and dishearten. But, looking at my bookshelves,

I am aware of another kind of forgetting—the spines look familiar; the names and titles bring to mind perhaps a character name, a turn of plot, often just a mood or feeling—but for the most part, the assembled books, and the hundreds of others that I’ve read and discarded, given away, or returned to libraries, represent a vast catalogue of forgetting.

This forgetting has serious consequences—but it has superficial ones as well, mostly having to do with vanity. It has led, at times, to a discomfiting situation, call it the Cocktail Party Trap (though this suggests that I go to many cocktail parties, which is itself a fib). Someone mentions a book with some cachet that I’ve read—a lesser-known work of a celebrated writer, say Eliot’s “Daniel Deronda,” to take an example from my shelf—and I smile knowingly, and maybe add, “It’s wonderful,” or some such thing. Great so far, I’m part of the in-crowd—and not lying; I did read it. But then there’s a moment of terror: What if the person summons up a question or comment with any kind of specificity at all? Basically, what if she aims to do anything other than merely brag about having read “Daniel Deronda”? *Uh-oh. It’s about cotton production, right? Maybe blurt something about that. No, wait, that’s Gaskell’s “North and South.”* I must either vaguely agree with what she says, hoping she isn’t somehow putting me on or lying herself, or else confess everything, with some version of the conversation killer: “I read that entire novel and now can tell you nothing of any consequence about it.” Or else slink away, muttering about needing to refill a drink.

This embarrassing situation raises practical questions that also become ones about identity: Do I really like reading? Perhaps it is a failure of attention—there are times when I notice my own distraction while reading, and can, in a way, feel myself forgetting. There is a scarier question, one that might seem like asking if one is good at breathing, or walking. Am I actually quite bad at reading after all?

Perhaps, though there is comfort to be had. In April, on a post by Brad Leithauser (<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/04/when-words-that-shouldnt-last-last.html>) about the surprising durability of certain seemingly disposable words (involuntary memory, essentially), a reader left a quotation in the comments, which he attributed to the poet Siegfried Sassoon:

For it is humanly certain that most of us remember very little of what we have read. To open almost any book a second time is to be reminded that we had forgotten well-nigh everything that the writer told us. Parting from the narrator and his narrative, we retain only a fading impression; and he, as it were, takes the book away from us and tucks it under his arm.

“Humanly certain.” Well, that puts it to rest. The notion changes our view of agency a bit. Books aren’t just about us, as readers. They belong perhaps mainly to the writer, who along with his narrator, is a thief. I wonder what writers forget about their own books?

If we are cursed to forget much of what we read, there are still charms in the moments of reading a particular book in a particular place. What I remember most about Malamud’s short-story collection “The Magic Barrel” is the warm sunlight in the coffee shop on the consecutive Friday mornings I read it before high school. That is missing the more important points, but it is something. Reading has many facets, one of which might be the rather indescribable, and naturally fleeting, mix of thought and emotion and sensory manipulations that happen in the moment and then fade. How much of reading, then, is just a kind

of narcissism—a marker of who you were and what you were thinking when you encountered a text? Perhaps thinking of that book later, a trace of whatever admixture moved you while reading it will spark out of the brain's dark places.

Memory, however, is capricious and deeply unfair. It is why I can recall nothing about how a cell divides, or very little about “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” but can sing any number of television theme songs in the shower. (“Touch has a memory,” Keats wrote—but I can't find my copy of his complete poems to test the theory, and, anyway, I found that quote on Goodreads.) The words that researchers use about forgetting are all psychically hurtful for the layperson: interference, confusion, decay—they seem sinister and remind us of all the sad limitations of the human brain, and of an inevitable march toward another kind of forgetting, which comes with age, and what may be final forgetting, which is death. Yet those same researchers are also quick to reassure us. Everybody forgets. And forgetting may even be a key to memory itself—a psychobiological necessity rather than a character flaw. That could be, but I still wish I could remember who did what to whom in D. H. Lawrence's “Women in Love”—and the actual, rather than pompous and pretend, reasons why I've told people that I preferred “Sons and Lovers.” Or is it the other way around?

This may be a minor existential drama—and it might simply be resolved with practical application and a renewed sense of studiousness. There is ongoing dispute as to the ways in which memory might, in a general sense, be improvable. But certainly there are things that we can do to better remember the books we read—especially the ones that we want to remember (some novels, like some moments in life, are best forgotten).

A simple remedy to forgetfulness is to read novels more than once. A professor I had in college would often, to the point of irony, cite Nabokov's statement that there is no reading, only rereading. Yet he was teaching a class in modern fiction, and assigned books that are generally known as “slim” contemporary classics. They were short, and we were being tested on them—we'd be foolish to read them only once. I read them at least twice, and now remember them. But what about in real life, set loose from comprehension examinations and left mostly to our own devices and standards? Should we reread when there is a nearly endless shelf of books out there to read and a certainly not-endless amount of time in which to do it? Should I pull out my copy of Eudora Welty's “The Optimist's Daughter” to relearn its charms—or more truthfully, learn them for the first time—or should I accept the loss, and move on?

Part of my suspicion of rereading may come from a false sense of reading as conquest. As we polish off some classic text, we may pause a moment to think of ourselves, spear aloft, standing with one foot up on the flank of the slain beast. Another monster bagged. It would be somehow less heroic, as it were, to bend over and check the thing's pulse. But that, of course, is the stuff of reading—the going back, the poring over, the act of committing something from the experience, whether it be mood or fact, to memory. It is in the postmortem where we learn how a book really works. Maybe, then, for a forgetful reader like me, the great task, and the greatest enjoyment, would be to read a single novel over and over again. At some point, then, I would truly and honestly know it.

Illustration by Matthew Hollister.
