



Rereadings: Seventeen Writers Revisit Books They Love

Anne Fadiman (Editor)

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Is a book the same book—or a reader the same reader—the second time around? The seventeen authors in this witty and poignant collection of essays all agree on the answer: Never.

The editor of *Rereadings* is Anne Fadiman, and readers of her bestselling book *Ex Libris* will find this volume especially satisfying. Her chosen authors include Sven Birkerts, Allegra Goodman, Vivian Gornick, Patricia Hampl, Phillip Lopate, and Luc Sante; the objects of their literary affections range from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Sue Barton*, *Student Nurse*.

These essays are not conventional literary criticism; they are about relationships. *Rereadings* reveals at least as much about the reader as about the book: each is a miniature memoir that focuses on that most interesting of topics, the protean nature of love. And as every bibliophile knows, no love is more life-changing than the love of a book.

Rereadings: Seventeen Writers Revisit Books They Love Details

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Rachel Scott says

After languishing over the end of my 2018 Read Harder challenge, my last category was "essay anthology." I probably quit a dozen books; I found most popular anthologies are either wildly depressing, or mind-numbingly boring. When I found this, I was intrigued by the idea. In college, one of my professors told a story about how she discovered she was unable to reread *The Hunger Games* after she had children -- a series she had enjoyed for years. The idea of how your current state impacts reading and rereading? Fascinating.

Here's my main problem with the anthology: the majority of the writers **definitely** expect you to have read the poem / short story / novel they are referencing. And if you haven't, boo on you. You'll never understand the essay.

A few writers did a good job providing context (Arthur Krystal's "Kid Roberts and Me" and Katherine Ashenburg's "Three Doctors' Daughters" stand out), but the vast majority come across like certain classmates of mine while I was studying English: pomp, haughty, and *wanting* to make vague literary references you couldn't possibly understand.

But, at least it wasn't depressing.

David says

An interesting conceit: at the invitation of the editor, the wonderful Anne Fadiman, seventeen writers revisit books they had read in their youth and describe the results.

Unfortunately, the results are mixed, at best. Perhaps one would need to have read all 17 books in question to derive full value from this book. But that seems a little much to expect. Overall, I think I was disappointed in how poorly some of the authors managed to convey the original passion they had felt for their particular choice. Predictably enough, the chapters that interested me most were those pertaining to books I had read, particularly those concerning books which had also spoken to me, upon first reading.

My favorite chapter - the one about Salinger's "Franny and Zooey", an alltime favorite from my college years. I was relieved that it held up under the author's re-reading, and - when moved to read it again myself - that it did for me as well.

It probably deserves more than 3 stars, but its overall spottiness prevents me from giving it 4. So let's leave it at 3.5 and take the opportunity to plug (yet again) Fadiman's far superior original collection of her own writing, "Ex Libris", in which there is not a single bad essay.

Karren says

I agree with other reviewers in that the essays are (for the most part) only enjoyable if you're familiar with

the books the authors have read / re-read: I just wasn't interested in most of the ones I hadn't read, and so I skimmed or skipped almost all of them. Two that I think would be enjoyable to anyone are the essays, "My Life with a Field Guide" and "The Ice Palace." They were quite excellent and truly conveyed the passion of the author/reader.

Generally, I wouldn't recommend this to very many readers. I think the essays are very well suited to how they were originally published--as a column--rather than to an anthology. That being said, it might be interesting reading for high school or college literature / literacy educators as source material for enriching their courses.

For those who want to find/read a specific essay, the Essays / Authors / Books Reviewed are as follows:

David Samuels, "Marginal Notes on the Inner Lives of People with Cluttered Apartments in the East Seventies"

Franny and Zooey, by J. D. Salinger

Patricia Hampl, "Relics of Saint Katherine"

The *Journal*, *Letters*, and *Stories* of Katherine Mansfield

Sven Birkerts, "Love's Wound, Love's Salve"

Pan, by Knut Hamsun

Vijay Seshadri, "Whitman's Triumph"

Song of Myself, by Walt Whitman

Arthur Krystal, "Kid Roberts and Me"

The Leather Pushers, by H.C. Witwer

Diana Smith, "My Life with a Field Guide"

A Field Guide to Wildflowers: Northeastern and North-central North America, by Roger Tory Peterson and Margaret McKenny

Luc Sante, "A Companion of the Prophet"

Arthur Rimbaud: A Biography, by Enid Starkie

Katherine Ashenburg, "Three Doctors' Daughters"

The Sue Barton Books by Helen Dore Boylston

Jamie James, "You Shall Hear of Me"

Lord Jim, by Joseph Conrad

Vivian Gornick, "Love with a Capital L"

The Vagabond and *The Shackle*, by Colette

Michael Upchurch, "Stead Made Me Do It"

House of all Nations, by Christina Stead

Allegra Goodman, "Pemberley Previsited"

Pride and Prejudice, by Jane Austen

Pico Iyer, "Lawrence by Lightning"
The Virgin and the Gipsy, by D. H. Lawrence

Barbara Sjöholm, "The Ice Palace"
The Snow Queen, by Hans Christian Andersen

Evelyn Toynton, "Revisiting Brideshead"
Brideshead Revisited, by Evelyn Waugh

Phillip Lopate, "The Pursuit of Worldliness"
The Charterhouse of Parma, by Stendahl

David Michaelis, "The Back of the Album"
The Beatles - Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band

Barbara says

This is a fascinating book for the well read. Since I'm not very well read, a lot of these essays were over my head...but they were interesting. Diana Kappel Smith's writing about *A Field Guide to Wildflowers* and David Michaelis's piece about Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band album cover connected the most with me. This book inspires rereadings.

Matt Murphy says

Enjoyable collection. Loved this bit from Arthur Krystal:

The pure joy of reading may never be regained, but if we're lucky, we can chance across one of those "good bad books" we read thirty or forty years ago and recall what it's like to be a child who reads. Such books are like old snapshots taken at the age when the baby fat is just swimming off the bone, when the personality is just beginning to acknowledge what it will find forever interesting, when the eyes begin to reveal for the first time the person who will be using them for the rest of his life.

Paul Bryant says

Tony Blair (thumbing through the contents): Hey, this one could be interesting. It's a series of essays about the delicate question of what it actually means to have read a book. Do you know what I mean?

A talking donkey : Wow, Tony Blair! What are you doing in one of PB's reviews?

Tony Blair: Er - haven't you seen the news lately? Don't donkeys watch TV any more? I'm supposed to be the middle east peace envoy and look at the place - look at it!

(Tony turns tv on to news channel - *blam! pow! Nato air strikes! Yemen! Syria! Palestine! Kerrrranng! Libya! Boom!*)

TB (shakes head wearily - some of his suntan falls off) : See what I mean?

Donkey : Man, that looks rough. Okay, so you can chill here in a review for a while if you want. (Aside : Man, who else is gonna pop up here? Goran Hadzic?)

A talking Badger (sotto voce) : Sorry, that reference is lost on me.

Donkey : So anyway, Tony, you were saying?

Tony Blair: Yes, well, you see you read books and they have this profound effect when you're young, and then what happens if you pluck up the nerve, you know, or get led down the primrose path of nostalgia, you know, and read the thing again when you're a grownup? Is it always a mistake? Is the thing you've been carrying in your head all these years really what's in the book? Or is it some weird construct that you yourself invented? Did you actually understand it when you were say 16 or 17? I mean, in my case, the answer's obviously yes, but for you it might be, well, you know, no. No offense and all.

Donkey: None taken. I remember crying my eyes out when I read *The Grapes of Wrath*. I was just a foal. Maybe if I read it now it would seem like some purple-prose tub-thumping socialist diatribe in the guise of a tale of such Brobdingnagian sentimentality that would even turn Dickens green.

Badger: And maybe not.

Donkey: True, true. Maybe not. Did you have a book that particularly floated your boat in your youth?

Badger: Well, we weren't big readers to be honest. We didn't have electricity.

Tony Blair : No electricity? What, your parents were hippies?

Badger : Nocturnal hunter-gatherers, really, more than hippies. But there was one book I remember...

Donkey: Which one?

Badger : It was called *The Little Prince*. Do you know it?

Tony Blair: Oh yes! I read that! What a beautiful fable!

Badger: I could practically recite it for you at one point. Er...

"I know a planet where there is a certain red-faced gentleman. He had never smelled a flower. He has never looked at a star. He has never loved any one. He has never done anything in his life but add up figures."

Tony Blair : Well well – I see now that this is a very prescient reference to Gordon Brown. I never noticed that when I was nine.

Badger : Do you remember this one?

“To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world...”

Tony Blair : Boo hoo! I remember! Boo hoo! (Tears are splashing down).

Donkey : Sounds like a load of donkey bollocks to me.

Tony Blair : Well you had to read it then! Not now, then!

Donkey : Well probably. Although whether you're nine or ninety, woffly hello-trees hello-sky proto-new age vapourising wrapped up in a sticky cocoon of cosiness that would warm the very cockles of the hardest of hearts and let the sunshine in and flood barren lives with a sense of limitless possibility.... Sorry, I've completely lost the thread of that sentence...

Tony Blair (trying to help) : Woffly, sticky cocoon.... Cockles...

Donkey : Oh yes! I was going to say.... Is still to my mind a cuter but no less meretricious version of jam yesterday, jam tomorrow but no jam today.

Badger : oh you're so cynical. This actually shocks me a little bit.

Tony Blair : Well he might be right.

Badger : oh and what do you know? Really, Mr Blair, do you know anything? Anything at all?

Tony (dabbing his eyes, rueful smile back in place): Well, I know people seem to find it very easy to criticise everything I do and say...

Donkey : well you make it so easy for them! Anyway, if you're going to stay in this review a bit longer, maybe you could tell us what George Bush was really like... did you really pray together? Did you? Did you really think God was telling you to invade Iraq? Go on, tell us, we won't breathe a word. No one would believe us anyway even if we did – he's a badger and I'm a donkey.

Tony Blair : No no, I don't think I should. Let's play Charades instead.

Badger and Donkey (both thinking: There goes a hundred grand from the Daily Mail) : Aw, c'mon....

Trin says

A collection of essays in which various authors and essayists discuss rereading their favorite works, from The Charterhouse of Parma to the back of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. I haven't read most of the works discussed in this book, so while I enjoyed all of the essays, some of them lost some resonance for me. I actually thought Fadiman's introduction, in which she discusses reading *The Horse and His Boy* with her

son was one of the most effective, perhaps because I feel a personal connection to any discussion about disenchantment with Narnia, but also because she emphasizes the difference between reading and rereading more strongly and concretely than many of the other essays.

All in all, this was an enjoyable collection, but unlike Fadiman's solo effort, the fantastic *Ex Libris*, one I'm glad I got from the library instead of purchasing; in other words, most likely not a book I will be rereading.

Joyce says

It's absurdly touching when people who obviously love books talk about books they loved early in life. This is a collection of seventeen short essays -- admirably equal in quality -- from the "Rereadings" column of *The American Spectator*. One of the recurring themes is how frequently the future writers tended to identify with the second-banana character, not the protagonist.

Rikke says

I loved the premise of this anthology; it is always a beautiful thing to witness someone talk about the books they love, the books they have found worthy of rereading over and over again. In some ways the books we reread tend to be the books we can't let go of; the books that have shaped us and still haunts us to this very day. After all, why else should we reread them?

While some of the essays in this anthology were beautifully done I also found myself skipping a few along the way. It grew very tiresome to read long reflections upon books I've never read myself by authors I've barely even heard of before. It was hard for me to relate to.

However, some of these essays were everything I had hoped for. The foreword by Anne Fadiman on reading "The Horse and His Boy" by C. S. Lewis aloud for her son, was really well done as it also rang true with the ambivalence I have developed for C. S. Lewis and his work. Patricia Hampl's essay about her love for Katherine Mansfield was extremely well done and it warmed my heart to find the easily overlooked Mansfield represented in Fadiman's anthology.

Diane Kappel Smith's essay on a field guide to wildflowers was surprisingly engaging as well, while Allegra Goodman's chapter on "Pride and Prejudice" turned out to be the jewel of the entire collection.

I was pleased to find a chapter on H. C. Andersen's "The Snow Queen", even with experts in Danish and comparisons between the English translation and the original Danish text. Evelyn Toynton's praise for "Brideshead Revisited" was equally beautiful and filled with valuable literary criticism.

All in all, I enjoyed seven out of seventeen essays, which isn't exactly an impressive percentage.

Jo Walton says

I loved this even when I totally disagreed with the readings or hated the books myself.

John Benson says

This book is a collection of 17 essays by authors who look back at a book that meant a great deal to them at an earlier time in their life. They describe the book, the context of why it meant so much for them then, and then what they feel now as they reread the book many years later. I read this along with Will Schwalbe's *BOOKS FOR LIVING*, and enjoyed how some of the material seemed to overlap between the books. I had read some of the books, but not all 17, but it was fun to hear the context of these books in light of these authors' lives, and then to hear how they react 10-30 years later to the same material. Very worth reading (and maybe re-reading).

Corey says

I think it is extremely important to note that Anne Fadiman is the editor of this book, not the author, and her preface/introduction was by far the best part of the book. There is something about her writing when she talks about books (reading, rereading, treasuring or otherwise) that is completely lacking in pretension and just comes across as an honest story about her and the book. The rest of the authors included in this book do not share her talent and are prone to egotistical romps through their reading adventures that simply seem snotty and, however eloquent, annoyingly academic. I am not an English major and no book before this one ever convinced me so thoroughly that I should not be one for all my love of books. I sincerely dislike literary criticism and this book is rife with it along with some seriously self-centered individuals. It's hard to write an essay that is basically all about you and your books and not make it seem egotistical but Anne Fadiman does it flawlessly and reading all the other essays in this collection only made me long for her words instead of any of theirs.

Max Nemtsov says

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Shiloah says

It was a great idea, but only 5 of the 17 essays were thoroughly enjoyable to me. I learned a lot, enjoyed the reminiscing and the writing, but so much was of worldly sentiment that I don't identify with. I especially loved the essay about the rereading of the Snow Queen.

Danica Lyming says

The introduction of this book is amazing. It made me go search Anne Fadiman so I could read more of her writing. It was like she was reading from my brain. The rest of the book was really hard to read as I haven't read the 17 books discussed. It was good for what it was, it just has a VERY limited audience that could actually relate to what they are reading. I did look up a couple of the other authors so I can read their work.
