

EXTRACT FROM NORA EPHRON'S BOOK : *I FEEL BAD ABOUT MY NECK*

I've just surfaced from spending several days in a state of rapture: I was reading a book. I loved this book. I loved every second of it. I was transported into its world. I was reminded of all sorts of things in my own life. I was in anguish over the fate of its characters. I felt alive and engaged and positively brilliant, bursting with ideas, brimming with memories of other books I've loved. I composed a dozen imaginary letters to the author, letters I'll never write, much less send—letters of praise, letters of entirely inappropriate personal information about my own experiences with the author's subject matter, even a letter of recrimination when one of the characters died and I was grief-stricken. But mostly I composed imaginary letters of gratitude: The state of rapture that occurs when I read a wonderful book is one of the main reasons I read, but it doesn't happen every time, or even every other time, and when it does, I'm truly beside myself with joy.

When I was a child, nearly every book sent me into something approaching bliss. Can I be romanticizing my early reading experiences? I don't think so. I can tick off so many books that I read and reread when I was growing up—foremost among them the Oz books, which I was obsessed with—but so many others that were favorites in the most compelling way. I wanted so badly to be Jane Banks, growing up in London with Mary Poppins for a nanny, or Homer Price, growing up in Centerburg with an uncle who owned a doughnut machine that wouldn't stop making doughnuts. Little Sara Crewe in Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic *A Little Princess* was my alter ego—not in any real way, you understand, as she was a much better-behaved child than I ever was, but I was so entranced by the story of the little rich girl who was sent up to the garret to be the scullery maid at the fancy boarding school where she'd been a pampered student before her father died. Oh, how I wanted to be an orphan! I read *The Nun's Story* and, oh, how I wanted to be a nun! I wanted to be shipwrecked on a desert island and stranded in Krakatoa! I wanted to be Ozma and Jo March and Anne Frank and Nancy Drew and Eloise and Anne of Green Gables—and what's more, I could be, at least in my imagination.

I did most of my reading as a child on my bed or else on a rattan sofa in the sunroom of the house I grew up in. Here's a strange thing: Whenever I read a book I love, I start to remember all the others that I fell in love with, and I can remember where I was living and the couch I was sitting on when I read them. After college, living in Greenwich Village, I sat on my brand-new wide-wale corduroy couch and read *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing, the extraordinary novel that changed my life and the lives of so many other young women in the 1960s. I have the paperback copy I read at the time, and it's dog-eared, epiphany after epiphany marked so that I could easily refer back to them. Does anyone read *The Golden Notebook* nowadays? I don't know, but back then, just before the second stage of the women's movement burst into being, I was electrified by Lessing's heroine, Anna, and her struggle to become a free woman. Work, friendship, love, sex, politics, psychoanalysis, writing—all the things that preoccupied me were Lessing's subjects, and I can remember how many times I put the book down, reeling from its brilliance and insights.

Cut to a few years later. The couch is covered with purple slipcovers, and I'm reading for pure pleasure—it's *The Godfather*, by Mario Puzo, a divine book that sweeps me off into a wave of romantic delirium. I want to be a mafioso! No, that's not quite right.

Okay then, I want to be a mafioso's wife! No, that's not quite right either. Okay then, I'd rather be married to Michael Corleone than married to the man I happen to be married to. Exclamation point.

A few years later, I'm divorced. No surprise. The couch and I have moved to a dark apartment in the West 50s. It's a summer weekend, I have nothing whatsoever to do, and I should be lonely but I'm not—I'm reading the collected works of Raymond Chandler. Six years later, another divorce: For weeks I've been unable to focus, to settle down, to read anything at all. A friend I'm staying with gives me the bound galleys of Smiley's People. I sink into bed and happily surrender to John le Carré. I love John le Carré, but I'm even more in love with his hero, George Smiley, the spy with the broken heart. I want George Smiley to get over his broken heart. I want him to get over his horrible ex-wife who betrayed him. I want George Smiley to fall in love. I want George Smiley to fall in love with me. George Smiley, come to think of it, is exactly the sort of person I ought to marry and never do. I make a mental note to write Le Carré a letter giving him the benefit of my wisdom on this score. And someday I will. I swear.

But meanwhile, my purple couch is lost in the divorce and I buy a new couch, a wonderful squishy thing covered with a warm, cozy fabric, with arms you can lie back on and cushions you can sink into. On it I read most of Anthony Trollope and all of Edith Wharton, both of whom are dead and can't be written to. Too bad: I'd like to tell them their books are as contemporary as they were when they were written. I read all of Jane Austen, six novels back-to-back, and spend days blissfully worrying over whether the lovers in each book will ever overcome the misunderstandings, objections, misapprehensions, character flaws, class distinctions, and all the other obstacles to love. I read these novels in a state of suspense so intense that you would never guess I have read them all at least 10 times before.

And finally, one day I read the book that is probably the most rapturous book of my adult life. On a chaise lounge at the beach on a beautiful summer day, I open Wilkie Collins's masterpiece, *The Woman in White*, probably the first great work of mystery fiction ever written (although that description hardly does it justice), and I am instantly lost to the world. Days pass as I savor every word. Each minute I spend away from the book pretending to be interested in everyday life is a misery. How could I have waited so long to read this book? When can I get back to it? Halfway through I return to New York to work, to mix a movie, and I sit in the mix studio unable to focus on anything but whether my favorite character in the book will survive. I will not be able to bear it if anything bad happens to my beloved Marian Halcombe. Every so often I look up from the book and see a roomful of people waiting for me to make a decision about whether the music is too soft or the thunder is too loud, and I can't believe they don't understand that what I'm doing is much more important—I'm reading the most wonderful book.

There's something called the rapture of the deep, and it refers to what happens when a deep-sea diver spends too much time at the bottom of the ocean and can't tell which way is up. When he surfaces he's liable to have a condition called the bends, where the body can't adapt to the oxygen levels in the atmosphere. All this happens to me when I resurface from a book. The book I'm currently resurfacing from—the one I mentioned at the beginning of this piece—is *The Amazing Adventures of*

Kavalier & Clay, by Michael Chabon. It's about two men who create comic book characters—but it's also about how artists create magical things from the events of everyday life. At one point the book's hero sees a roomful of moths, and then a huge luna moth sitting in a maple tree in Union Square Park; a few pages later, he reinvents what he's seen by creating a fabulous comic book heroine named Luna Moth. The moment Luna Moth flew into the novel was so breathtaking that I had to put down the book. I was almost dazed by the playfulness of the author and his ability to do something that has such a high degree of difficulty with such apparent ease. Chabon's novel takes place in New York City in the 1940s, and though I finished reading it more than a week ago, I'm still there. I'm smoking Camels, and Salvador Dali is at a party in the next room. Eventually, I'll have to start breathing the air in New York in 2002 again, but on the other hand, perhaps I won't have to. I'll find another book I love and disappear into it. Wish me luck.