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Article

Currere of a reader

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Abstract

In an inquiry tied to reading, readers and books, I use *currere* to seek out (for the purpose of better discerning) the subjective formation of a reader, in this case, myself. My fourteen assembled *currere* writings represent works in progress, in part because they comprise part of an ongoing, and continually evolving, inquiry, one which I anticipate will eventually take the form of a book. However, in a very important sense, they provide the impetus and grounding for the project (theoretically) as well as my way of carrying myself, as researcher, in it (methodologically). Some of the fourteen writings have been prompted by the anticipated book project, anchored in curriculum theory (notably, the writings of William F. Pinar and Madeleine Grumet) while dipping my reader's foot in the deep and wide pool of literature surrounding reading, readers, books and bookishness. Other prompts came about through teaching, in which I regularly write in class along with students to prompts suggested by course readings—and where I often found myself writing in ways tied to this project. The essay sheds a certain light on a process (one, my own) of embarking on a subject that matters and finding my bearings in it through *currere*. The writings also point to a scholarly praxis: one grounded in a commitment towards a past and future that involves reading, readers and books; one that I could only think about by starting in a now framed by the present/presence offered through *currere* writing.

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Introduction

I am presently studying reading and readers, with a special interest in teachers as readers and, too, in the artifact of the book, because of how closely books (including the more modern "bookishness") tend to be entangled with readers—and not just for me, but historically (e.g., Bruns, 2011; Dames, 2023; Felski, 2020; Manguel, 2018; Saenger, 1997; Smyth, 2024; "bookishness" refers to evidence of readers' attachments to books shared online and through social media; see Pressman, 2020). This interest is not a new one of mine. If I am honest, it represents a lifelong interest: a subject that has been available for exploring, even implicit in the research and scholarship I have conducted over two decades but hiding in plain sight. Truth be told, I never dared to study the topic. It seemed oversaturated; it still does. What could I possibly contribute that might be considered worthwhile? And interesting? The audience might be small; the importance passing: Oh, not another book about reading! Despite

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these doubts, for the first time, it has been allowed to become a sustained focus of my academic study; what I mean is: I have allowed it. I am following the bent of my thinking (Felski, 2015). "We may still be unsure what move to make next but move we must, as we are swept up in time," William Pinar (2015) sagely reminds (p. 191). And my study has been broad because this is a huge field crossing several disciplines and I have let myself go, entirely: wandering everywhere that feels even remotely relevant. Mostly, though, it feels permissible because I am turning a corner, approaching an end; not *the* end, but a closing. When Jean-Paul Sartre was fifty-nine—nearing what he might have anticipated to be his older age; he would not leave this world until he was seventy-four—he published an autobiographical work called *The Words* (Sartre, 1981) which I first read about in those rambling books of Nicholas Basbanes, a modern raconteur of books and readers (in this case, Basbanes, 2005). I ordered Sartre's book, and saw that it was small, containing just two parts, the first called Reading, the other Writing. In it, he wrote of himself at age ten: "I began my life as I shall no doubt end it, amidst books" (Sartre, 1981, p. 40). When I read this about Sartre's experience, I immediately felt affirmed. I was also struck by the book's symmetry: a returning to where he began. It is what I see myself doing and what I have feel I have done all along in my research, which has found its footing by attending to auto/biographical connections and influences. The mode of return may be winding, however echoing a favourite passage from Grumet (2015) the process has entailed using "the past to reveal the present assumptions and future intentions of the story teller, an elaborate detour that travels through once upon a time in order to reach now" (p. 93).

This reading project in which I am engaged—an unfunded one, I might add, so entirely unfettered, as long as I can afford to make time for it—will take me a few years to complete, perhaps even many years. There are no lack of items to read. I have also taken to reading more books from beginning to end, even when I don't really need to; it has opened a door to really attending to the "reading a book" experience. There is a certain irony in writing about reading that has also not escaped my notice, because as long as I am reading, I am not writing, at least not in a sustained way. My deliberations are ongoing and presently, they feel interminable. How many books will I read before I start writing? I tell doctoral students to start writing as they read—in whatever form—but it is a hard lesson to apply; consistent with my formation, I need to reach a certain end (in reading) before being able to begin (writing). However, given my autobiographical grounding. There is an important exception and it is *currere*. It is where academic study started to take on a real presence, going back to my graduate work, and where later, I found a language and method to help articulate and further theorize what I believed to be phenomenologically necessary for consciousness. It is not surprising to me that as I work on the conceptualization of this book-to-come, I turn—or, more precisely, turn back—to *currere*, to probe (through study) the sound of myself (Pinar, 2023, p. 1): an "intensified engagement" by which, in remembering the past (my own, reading's own), the future might be discerned, one "focused on but not submerged in the present" (p. 3).

I have been using *currere* in research for some time, and several of my doctoral students have turned to it as well in their research, including my current students, who I meet regularly. We gather around a long table and share our writing. I feel the self-inflicted pressure, just like they do, to share something. I therefore started to share some incipient pieces tied to this reading project, curious items like one that, deflecting, I had called "An Introduction that is not an Introduction" but that included a projected table of contents for a future book proposal; I had called the first chapter, "*Currere* of a Reader." As we moved around the table, each giving feedback in turn, one of my students said that this sounded fascinating and she couldn't wait to read it, even as I owned: it might be a while. But then she also asked a very useful question,

one which has stayed with me. She asked: I wonder what it looks like, *currere* of a reader. I had to again confess that I wasn't sure, just as I was uncertain what form mine might eventually take. I have read several memoirs of readers and of reading, before and since, and there are many more for me yet to sample: it remains a highly popular subject, and they are embedded, too, in the writing of curriculum theorists: accounts of their formation as readers or writers. Too, reading itself—including the reading of books—is resuscitating itself, even though less than a decade ago, the demise of books was predicted and along with them, readers.

I opened a document and a folder, returning to *currere* as the only way through a quandary, here of how to begin and account for the why and 'for what purpose' of this inquiry. Assembled here, then, are various *currere* writings that comprise a kind of "constellation" of a reader's journey, of this reader; the notion of constellation comes from Walter Benjamin and refers to different moments that, brought into relation with one another, might generate significant interpenetrations of meaning (Benjamin, 2007; Rauch, 2000). I like (and echo) Grumet's (1991) apology for sharing seemingly commonplace memories, at the risk of boring the reader: "I imagine you have many like them and may be impatient with me for telling mine here" (p. 84). Perhaps they might be found uninteresting, especially in this digital age. Some might be considered as more compelling than others; others may not make the cut in a future work. Some writings are shorter, some longer. Some were produced by prompts I generated for myself as potential material for a 'currere of the reader' chapter. Others represent writing to prompts I have assigned in graduate classes, as I write alongside students, and where I notice myself turning to matters that directly or indirectly relate to this subject of *currere* of a reader. However, as Grumet further explains, "when these accounts are omitted from our scholarship, when we look elsewhere, anywhere, for our sources, reasons, and motives, we perpetuate and exaggerate our exile" (p. 84). She specifies: "We deny that whatever it is we fear we have lost ever existed, and in that denial we cut the ground right out from under us" (p. 84). I see these writings as data: as the necessary grounding of myself in a subject, whose importance to my life course I cannot deny. They are writings that I need to produce to able to better discern the lineaments of myself as reader and of the reader as a subject of academic and practical interest and praxis.

Currere Writings

Rewarded and Punished

Rewarded

In Grade 5, Miss D chose my story/composition, which was fairy-tale inspired, to place on the back bulletin board of the classroom for all to see. I was elated.

Punished

Also in Miss D's class, I got 'caught' for something egregious—going to the washroom without permission? I cannot recall—but keenly remembered my mortification at being placed with my back to the class, face to intersecting walls, pressed into a corner.

Inheritance

Why do I love tea so much? This feels like a cultural inheritance—an indirect one, because my parents also liked coffee, although they invariably drank tea in the mornings. Mornings were for tea. Maybe it is the tea pot that is the inheritance—although mine has a tea cosy, gifted to me by an observant friend. Surely too, though, it is tea with milk that is inherited; tea is not really tea without milk, which is why I tend to not drink herbal teas: absent in the household.

Reading and drinking tea (with milk) go together for me, blissfully occupying (when possible) entire mornings.

So I ask myself: Is my love of reading an inheritance or *sui generis*, springing from me alone? I wonder. I have typically thought the latter because of my strong gravitation towards books. However, my mother was an avid reader. She was also someone who loved to play with words. If my love of reading was innate, it was also nurtured.

Adolescent Reading

I have avoided my adolescent reading self: part of an exercise in denying my adolescence. I was shy but also brazen: brazen in a misguided sense. I wanted to try things—things that were not necessarily good for me, as is the case with many adolescents—and, as seems important at that time when appearance is everything, to be seen as someone who was willing to try things. However thankfully this desire, which was born in part out of resenting the shadows into which my shyness cast me, was held in check by my upbringing and education. I kept pushing the boundaries but only so far. My shyness felt like a prison, although retrospectively, it acted as a shield, preventing me from being placed in stickier situations.

Looking back, I feel as if I spent an inordinate amount of time during my adolescence worrying about things that now seem inconsequential: outward appearance and especially my hair. I chafed against restrictions. I lived with a constant feeling (when out in society) of social awkwardness: of not knowing where to position my body in time and space, of not knowing what to say except too late. I smiled, a behaviour that may have been genuine but at other times was clearly a cover. I remember clearly how I felt when a male student—his name and presence now long forgotten, save for this one interaction in Grade 7 English class when he turned to issue a withering reprimand. His exact words escape me but were something like: What are you smiling about? In other words: wipe that smile off your face. It stands out as one of the few confirmations of being noticed by others busy with other, more important preoccupations. Some time later, I was told different things about my smile: that it was enigmatic, making them wonder what interesting thoughts I was harbouring. In this light, I can see how my smile might have unsettled the unknown young man in English class. Here was I, thrust by the teacher's seating plan in a group that unaccountably included a nobody along with more popular and seemingly self-assured students, and they were all talking about something, and me clearly listening but not saying a word—and smiling. What was I (dangerously) *implying* that I was perceiving, by my enigmatic smile? Was I mocking them? Was I mocking him? And who knows, maybe unawares, I was…

I am dwelling too much on this preamble to get around to writing about my adolescent reading self. However, it provides context and background. We are mysteries to ourselves in many ways throughout life, however adolescence is a period when it seems to me that rather than explore those mysteries, I looked for myself in all the wrong places. Adolescence is

remembered with a sense of pain, of embarrassment. I was far, far away from being my best or a better self—however, certain consistent threads are apparent: this smile, and reading.

I read a lot during adolescence. I did not read the best things: a lot of pulp fiction—romance but also mystery and horror. I was drawn to reading about fringe figures, like Sybil with her multiple personalities, or the fanatical Charles Manson and how he managed to persuade young women to commit murder and remain faithful to him and his cause. There was a clear biographical and autobiographical slant to my reading interests, even then. I had access to such literature through the public library but also through the Book-of-the-Month club, which my mother embarked us both on. I can remember receiving the flyers in the mail and eagerly poring through the featured literature and backlists. I do the exact same still, but reading longer, scholarly-informed essays in the *New York Review of Books*. The Book-of-the-Month was tied with drinking overly-sweetened cups of Nescafe coffee. Learning how to sew, also over such coffees, became another shared project but reading—and a fascination with words-as yet; my mother revelled in puns—remained something we shared, although we lacked the language to know better how to develop the interest together so that it could grow into love and mutual respect.

I was never so pleased as a teenager as when I had my own desk: a triangular one built into the corner of the room by my father. Accompanying it was a low row of bookshelves, perhaps four feet in length, two or three shelves high. The Book of the Month books comprised my first collection: now lost. They likely became part of the garage sales at the sale of the house, fifteen years later. My mother hung onto some, a curated selection of my Book-of-the-Month books and hers. I have a dim memory of *Sybil* as a spectre on their bookshelves, this when the accumulated contents of their home finally disappeared: distributed for good.

Sybil cannot compare to Hannah Arendt's *Life of the Mind*, on the center shelf closest to my writing place and desk; on that shelf sits enduring books for me, intellectually: Arendt's works on political theory, H.-G. Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, Pinar's and Grumet's on curriculum theory. However, early on, I was clearly drawn to books on or related to personality, self-formation and trauma. Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* was a pivotal book for me, and shares with *Sybil* being more journalistic, its argument, on the banality of evil, an academic hit. The subject of evil has long fascinated me.

Maybe, then, this is why Arendt's book, re-read several times, lies not far in my mind from motivations that must have impelled me, during that inchoate and volatile period that I associate with my adolescence, to borrow Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*. It is the only book that I remember signing out from my high school library, although surely I perused others. In my mind's eye, the RVR library was small, unremarkable, designed more as afterthought than as a domain meant to entice adolescent minds. The library is indelibly associated in memory with mindless busywork of copying entries from encyclopedias—and which teacher imagined that this kind of activity was useful and instructive? I can't recall, but while we copied, he (and it was a he) probably socialized rather than supervised this organized plagiarism. I can still feel the ache in my hand. The long tables at which we slaved occupied the better part of the library, situated close to the Reference section: the encyclopedias. On the left side, more marginally located, were the stacks, and one day in Grade 7, I wandered through them and found Bradbury's book, with its alluring title.

I feel very uncharitable toward my adolescent self, not very forgiving of my transgressions. Who I was then remains opaque, even painfully uninteresting to me, at least until later, in Grades 10 and 11, when I had access to more advanced courses in English and French and I seemed to grow up a little bit more. A distinct sense of self was starting then to emerge, or re-emerge: the self of which I have clearer glimmers in my memories of elementary school and early childhood.

For the first time in my life, in my 64th year, I have re-read Bradbury's book, having bought it several months earlier while perusing the shelves of a favourite bookstore. What impelled me to buy it drove me, perversely it seemed, to pack it among my library of summer vacation books. What a strange choice for summer holiday reading! I removed it once, replacing it with another book, but then restored it to its original place. 'Horror and Halloween' reads the classification on the book label. Opening the book, it smells beautiful; aromatic in the way that books do, some in particular. Books have different smells, which have to do with the kind of paper used in printing. In reading books about books, I have learned about printing practices: use of an exquisite or reader-friendly font; pages inscribed on paper of a certain material, texture or weight, details of which used to be given on the copyright page. As I open this portal to my past, I wonder what the book I borrowed from the library smelled like.

I remember well the phrase—something wicked this way comes. I remember it as being on the first page, in the opening line. (One of my strategies for whether I buy or borrow books is to read the opening sentence or paragraph). But the phrase is not there. It doesn't actually occur until at least halfways through the book. I also remember the book as beginning with the lightning rod seller and the arrival late at night of a circus. It almost does. The first chapter—short—introduces the two main protagonists: two boys, one called William Halloway and the other, strikingly, called Jim Nightshade. That phrase and the inaccurately remembered opening (the seller and the circus) apparently comprised the sole remnants of the book in my mind but powerful remnants they are. Resonant; why?

It wasn't the first book I read from my travelling summer library. I waited until the time seemed right, which it did the day after settling into a little house in Durrell/Twillingate perched on a rock facing a cove which, in the distance, opened to a much larger space: the Atlantic Ocean. I woke up to wind and rain. There was a storm—or, if that seems too strong of a word, especially if one is a Newfoundlander (which I am not), then the weather was very rainy, very windy. I tried opening one of the doors and a powerful gust of wind almost claimed it. Yes, it was blustery and it was dark, even though it was daytime. The grey clouds, which were numerous, pressed in, even as, with the white-capped waves, they moved with alacrity. For always, there was the wild howl of ocean wind and water, entering this protected cove—today rendered more vulnerable—exactly how the lightning rod man and circus entered William's and Jim's little town, their haven. Reading such a book on such a morning while sitting in the window armchair I had claimed (my companion took the couch and coffee table on which to spread out his camera and accessories), I was in a state of bliss. I remember this word as tied to this experience, because I included it in a text to my son, writing: here is bliss. Beside me a hot cup of tea and in my hands Bradbury's book, which I opened and began to read, pausing at intervals (which came frequently; there are 54 chapters: shorter rather than longer) and in the intervals, gazing out at the dark melee before returning to the one in which the boys were quickly, and in a mix of awareness and unawareness (like adolescence itself) becoming entangled. The fury of the weather outside, if not something wicked, imparted something akin to the book's subject: encountering something wild, intense, dangerous,

beyond one's control.

And as I read, I slipped into a younger self: an adolescent self that now amazed me in having the foresight and perspicuity to select this book, out of all of the others, in Secondary Cycle 1 (Grade 7), my first high school year, on the brink of an experience I prefer now to forget, consigned to its own dark place. In a place (school)—a physical place; a memory place—that seems tainted in my mind by the depths of my adolescent confusion, the book is as a beacon in the dark, despite—no, because of—its title. As the only high school book that (in memory) I chose myself, as part of my own curriculum, it bears the mark of myself on and in it. And in reading—re-reading—it, I entered (by the only way possible) that not-so-past but still-remote-to-me self that read the book then. Uncharitably, I had wondered, for instance, if I had read beyond the first line(s) and I was moved to discover that I had. Enthralled now by the story—I couldn't put the book down—as I imagine I was then too, knowing my reading behaviours, and enthralled more by the fact that I could not remember what happened and how it ended, I began to recognize signs that I had read it in its entirety. These were felt signs: no details (beyond that of the lightning seller, the two boys [vaguely], the carousel) but they were visceral and real. And upon finishing a book that is all about facing horror (rather than being subject to it), I knew I had carried this book with me, all these years, as a beacon, inside. It wasn't strong enough (much like Jim in the story) to lead me away from places that unaccountably and darkly drew me in, however in hindsight, it signifies the self that even then I was and might have been aspiring to be. Ironically, even though it is a book that is written for adolescents (in making the boys' fears, dreams and nightmares the focus of the narrative's movement and being on secondary syllabi for English courses for years—although not at RVR), a main character is Will's father. Fifty years old, shrunken and old beyond his years, a bookish reader/librarian disguised as a janitor, fearful of living—haunted by the past and averting his face from the future, it is Will's father who rescues the boys; who finds his courage, which rests on being able to laugh—and smile—in the face of soul-shattering danger. It was as if, in reading the book then, I was also reading it for now, this as I look back, and forward, to a self that found its courage and strength; that could smile (not always but more) in the face of its fears.

Threshold

My most vivid memory of a threshold was being on my bicycle at—what? 24 or so?—poised on a small bridge on a small residential road on the West Island, alone, before a tall, tall, astonishingly beautiful evergreen tree—and crying copious tears. No longer engaged to be married—the game was up; I was glad it was but still feeling culpable, ashamed, repentant—and not knowing where to go next or what to do, I was staying with my older sister and tutoring her daughter—I didn't want to go home, which was back with my parents in Calgary. Where was home, anyway? I then forged this idea of staying here, in Montreal, and turning over a new leaf: no more pretenses, no more trying to be someone else—instead: trying to be myself.

I sublet an apartment, on Cote des Neiges Road, a spare but beautiful place, after having successfully secured a full-time job at Marianopolis College Library, where I had once attended college.

Clock reset, my life began anew; myself transforming into… let's see: a more humble, kinder

person, I would like to think: someone honest first with herself.

That was one of my life's ultimate thresholds, the tree my witness.

Learning Something: Writing

I remember learning how I did it, I mean, writing in university. It was when I was doing my second undergraduate degree, this time majoring in my original love: Literature.

I began to observe writing and writers—what were considered to be exemplary ones.

Any essay draft I finished, I would start over entirely from the beginning, even if the papers were due the next day—as they often were. I rewrote with the end in mine: seizing the argument and letting it inform the paper throughout.

Then in graduate school, I gave myself permission to write in the first person, which was another threshold crossed, again with copious tears.

Being a Teacher

I think that when I was teaching elementary school, I tried to make myself over into the image of an elementary teacher. And while certain aspects of that role sat very well with me—I even excelled at some—in the end, I didn't stay there. After six years, I pursued a Masters, thinking: I will return to teaching in two years' time. But once I had returned (while attending, as teacher, my first conference) to sitting in a small, uncomfortable desk in a university classroom and listening, enraptured, to a talk that was highly compelling—on negotiated criteria and classroom assessment—I nevertheless knew I was done with being elementary teacher. Soon after, I applied for graduate school.

Name(s)

My name is Teresa Strong. I am, therefore, a Strong—although not only only a Strong. My mother's last name was Cunningham. Strong is an English name; Cunningham is a Scottish one. I am, was, still am a Wilson although no longer married, so when I go back to Bella Bella (and even when I don't), I am known by the family into which I married: the Wilsons (on the side of my ex-husband's father) and Humchitt (on the side of my ex-husband's mother). I keep Strong-Wilson because, when I was an untenured professor in the early to mid 2000's, it pointed to the link between publications as Teresa Wilson and those as Teresa Strong-Wilson. Upon re-entry to Quebec, my name reverted back to Strong, my maiden name, this according to the law. However, I also kept the hyphenated name because of my children, who are Wilsons. Strong is what is on all my official documents: passport, medical card, as well as McGill Banner although I was hired as Teresa Wilson (before my divorce was finalized). It is a bifurcated identity: Terea Wilson here; Teresa Strong there.

It was in so many ways so much easier to be a Teresa Wilson, which came with consciousness of becoming part of a large, extended family. Strong—and Cunningham—are now ancestral names cut off from their roots, from their clans. The people—relatives and progeny—dispersed. Only the names remain.

Wilson, though, is part of an extended family, a network of people who are living, yet to be born, ancestrally resonant. Wilson is my son's name and, as a Heiltsuk person, he is aware in

ways I was and am not, of all of his relations.

You can't believe how troublesome a last name like Strong is, growing up. Now, though, I see it as a valued family connection—to my father and his relations—but also as a word, one to live up to, when times call for it.

The Most Practical Course

I will say what it was not—it was not my teacher education courses. I am tempted instead to say Grade 10 English, in which I was introduced to Northrop Frye and his notion of garrison mentality. It was in a course called Canadian Literature: at the time, a kind of special topics enriched English Literature course. This event—as it was quite eventful—proved very practical for me. It set me off on a pathway of reading deeply in Canadian literature—which at the time (I realize retrospectively), comprised settler literature—and that later led me to write about and critique Frye, having encountered and read deeply in Indigenous literature, having taught in an Indigenous community—and then encountering Dwayne Donald on fort mentality, a variation of garrison mentality (the basis of his doctoral thesis, on which he then wrote several times and which I recently re-encountered, recapitulated, in Donald, 2016). A life-altering course, that encounter with Frye.

What puzzles me is the sequence, which is unclear. How (or when) did I end up climbing a rickety staircase to the second landing of books in the Atwater Library, situated near the corner of Atwater and Ste Catherine in downtown Montreal? At that point, I was still in the suburbs, living at home. There I found the book (Frye's *The Bush Garden*; Frye, 1995; I would have read the 1971 edition) in which that passage and discussion occurs: garrison mentality. That must have happened later (while I was in college, up the hill from the library) but the two memories, tied to Frye's concept, are fused together. With this memory of climbing those creaky stairs and smelling those musty book smells is another of my father waiting outside, in the car, to drive us back home.

Riding a Bike

My father taught me how to ride a bike. It would have had training wheels—and then, it didn't! He held onto the back of the seat, discretely, all the while encouraging me.

Me? Petrified, I imagine but also focused—Let me go! Let me go!

Him, running alongside—then me: going, gone!

We were alone, in a circle road, wisely—no cars and… nowhere to go but back.

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I would ride my bike to school as often as I could when I went to Courtland Park Elementary. What I liked about it was that I could create my own route, quite different from the bus, riding towards the back end of Nelligan, through the shortcut on Clairevue, past the French school and then a sharp right and up a gently sloping hill. At its edge was a little street—I forget its name now. I entered and was amid its leafy darkness. Its huge trees grew on either side of the curved road, sheltering as well as hiding the houses. The leafy branches were tall and broad, meeting almost in the middle of the road, light filtering through but qualified by shadow, so: accentuated, deepened. The atmosphere felt charged, like that of an enchanted wood. My

wood. I was always alone, the houses still, respectful. I rode slowly up the curve of the hill, and round the corner. The change in lighting ahead marked the inevitable boundary between this world and the other one. Back in the glare of day, I trailed shadows.

λ

I used to ride to the Sommet. It was called Sommet Trinity and it sat on top of a huge hill at the outskirts of St. Bruno, a precipitously steep hill, around which expensive houses were being built. It took moments to fly down, and much longer to trudge back up. So I used to linger at the top for as long as I could and just feel myself where I was: the forest behind, the green farms and fields below, the highway a ribbon of concrete, St Basile Le Grand in the distance—and the sky: oh, the sense of open sky and free descent.

Transitions

There must be a story about the time between when my father as a young man, in his mid- to late twenties, headed off into the Rocky Mountains, and when he came back to Vancouver Island, after which time he proposed to my mother and a new chapter began. This time—of when my father was alone—is fuzzy in my mind in terms of chronology. It is as if it occupies a time warp, when time stopped or dissolved, and my father—who was not even a father then—disappeared. All we have are a couple of black and white photographs of him sitting atop a hill, smiling, healthy-looking, with snow-capped mountains all around.

Who took the picture? He didn't carry a tripod and such equipment with him. He was not a photographer enthusiast. This I do know the answer to, though, as he told me. The person who took the picture was his guide: a Native guide (as he called him). About this person, I don't know anything except that my dad engaged him for the journey, and they travelled together. Knowing my father, he talked the man's ear off but more than that, I do not know, and not necessarily because he didn't want to tell. I didn't ask. Or perhaps he thought it was not his story to tell, even if it is also the case that the story of his journey—where, how, why then, how long… and especially, why and what he learned about himself, there, and about his companion (whose territory perhaps it was, or who certainly knew the territory): this is lost now.

I don't know why that story comes to me now, unbidden. Nor which prompt it exactly responded to—perhaps the last one of the choice of writing prompts for this class: Homecomings, Departures, Transitions.

I feel as if hearing that elongated story—had I heard my father tell it—I might have learned something important: about my dad, about myself (and my own life trajectory) and too about my son, who resembles my father in many ways however who is Heiltsuk so both Indigenous and of his settler and English/Scottish sides (my/his grandparents' ancestry). I almost imagine (in my fantastical mind's eye) that he could have been that Native guide accompanying my father, but to mountains in his own territory, being the man teaching the (grand)father about where they were, even as they conversed about the mysteries of life.

When I Was

When I was in my 50's, my mother gave me a story. She was probably unaware that she was giving it to me. It was when we were doing a life history project together. The story she told me was of when I was young, quite young—3 years old. She was outside on the back porch

hanging up the wash or in the kitchen. I would have been in sight but I was alone. And I know I was alone—thoroughly and deeply alone—because of what she told me I was doing. I was reading a book. I picture it as on my lap. Ever so slowly, I was turning the pages, studying the pictures, as if a marvelous object lay in my little hands. As I turned the thin pages, I was careful not to tear them. I studied the pages carefully, as if poring over a precious artifact. And precious it was—the Sears catalogue.

"If life has a base that it stands upon, if it a bowl that one fills and fills and fills—then my bowl without a doubt stands upon this memory," writes Virginia Woolf (1988) of her memory of being very young, in bed, close to the beach at St. Ives, hearing the waves breaking (p. 75). Mine is of this kind, I like to think; I recognize myself in my mother's story. It shows my desire to sit with books and turn the page.

When I search my own memories for ones about reading, an image of a darkened room is called to mind, with the blinds pulled down, the light of a bright and warm summer day seeping through the sides, the light off, the door closed, and me in bed, looking at books: library books. I didn't have any books of my own, precious few before the age of sixteen, however my mother brought me to the library, so I always had on hand library books. They were picture books; most probably, fairy tales. I know what age I must have been because I had a twin bed that seemed large (for my smaller frame)—a lovely bed featuring built-in shelves behind my head. And it is the room that would become my younger sister's. But she is not there yet. I am in that room in the mid-afternoon because I have been forced to nap. I may even be there because punished for some misdemeanor. I am supposed to be sleeping, but it is just light enough for me to be able to see the pages, and I am reading or turning the pages and looking at them. I must be no more than five—too old for a crib; not quite old enough for a younger sister. I might mind a little the pressing heat, if it is a warm day. But I don't mind being there. Not at all. To this memory, I attribute my lifelong habit of preferring to read, alone, in a darkened room, or in a pool of light in the dark, among the shadows.

Shadows are also what draw me in. First there were the fairy tales, which I would have read in picture-books with the original illustrations, this from either the municipal library or the school library. I know I preferred these books to the tales excerpted in the My Bookhouse series: the only set of children's books on hand in the house. However, by the age of nine, I have moved towards stories of real shadows. My father was an active member of the Lion's Club as well as involved in sports. He was constantly visiting people who were likewise engaged; several of them were co-workers from the Vickers Shipping Company, where he worked. I often tagged along. C. was a year or two older than me. I remember only two details from visiting her home with my father. They had a budgie in a cage in the kitchen. She was an only child and had her own room. In that room, she had a bookshelf and several books. She also had a roll-top desk which, as soon as I saw it, was something that I prized above all things—what would it be to own a desk, a study space of my own (Benjamin, 2006), especially a roll-top desk! Inside the desk, my imagination tells me—but it could have also sat on the bookshelf—was a book that immediately caught my attention: *The Diary of Anne Frank*. C. let me borrow it. Reading this book changed everything for me.

Following My Nose

This phrase was part of some feedback that I received when I was taking a qualitative inquiry

course in which we submitted journals related to our research interests. The professor's feedback was never thick or long; the opposite, but it was… interesting and galvanizing. I remember this as one of them: Keep following your nose.

I didn't give it much thought at the time. I used to say that I was in a good place when things seemed to converge. For that to happen, I think I must have been following my nose.

Going Down a Rabbit-hole

One of my favourite stories to read is *Alice in Wonderland*. I would use it regularly in teaching the Children's Literature course. What always grabs me—and others, apparently—is the beginning, when she chases the rabbit and then falls down, falls, falls, keeps falling. That is the thing about a rabbit-hole (I guess, although I wonder if it is a fabrication of Lewis Carroll), you have a feeling of vertigo combined with a sense of entrapment. In academia, people (doctoral students especially) use it to refer to times when they feel lost—awash in things to read, without a clear sense of where they are going or will end up.

I feel as if it has been a long time since I had this feeling for real. Reading and re-reading and re-reading Alice again in each iteration for teaching was vicarious. I felt for her, not with her.

Did I feel it this past summer?

I went down a rabbit-hole of chasing citations and it felt interminable. It was actually interesting and informative, and I strongly feel it was something, I had to go through to get to the other side. But it was thick and messy, in part because it became compulsive. Like Alice, I had to try this door, eat this cake, sample this drink, until I had tasted all.

And what was I left with? A citation collection—citations of citations.

Like I said, a rabbit-hole.

Now, I feel as if I have truly stumbled across one in this project on reading, books and subjectivity. And I couldn't be happier, even if every time I reach for a tea bag in the cupboard, the white rabbit on the Tetley Tea can faces me, tapping his finger on his watch, reminding me: it's time.

Yes, time for that rabbit-hole and exploring this door and that one until I find my way through.

I Used to Eat Books

I used to eat books.[2] Not literally. No, that's not exactly right. I would convert them into water and I would drink them. It's not hard. Your eyes just keep moving, slipping over word by word, the sentences become lines, the lines fuse into pages, pages moving, turning, until the book in your hands is a river and you are swimming in it and with it, stopping only when your eyes lift.[3] Movement stops; thought remains; the feeling of thought remains, a residual

2 In saying so, I am thinking of Madeleine Grumet's observations—ruminations—on reading, which I read about many years ago (*Bitter Milk*; Grumet, 1988). There she writes that reading is not about looking (at a page) but about ruminating: "When we consult the etymology of the word "read," we find that "read" is lodged in the very guts of the word "ruminate," which means "to think things over." She goes on: "Nevertheless, the word "ruminate" is not associated with a group of animals noted for their erudition" (p. 132), but she keeps playing with the etymology, probing further to locate reading in ritual and divination, in a seeking of "what is hidden, internal, unseen … The reader pores over the text, like the priest reading the entrails, seeking signs of how to live" (p. 133). I may yet return to Grumet on reading and, if not eating/consuming, then: rumination.

3 Rivers have definitely been on my mind, courtesy of Robert Macfarlane's recent writing, his *Is a River Alive?*

burning that must be desire. This was when I was perhaps eight—Grade 3. I read all of those series books—Nancy Drew (but not Hardy Boys), Ingalls Wilder, Beverly Cleary, Enid Blyton, the Bobbsey Twins. This was before the days of the shorter chapter book: Blyton's Noddy books; Raggedy Ann and Andy. These books were interludes before the real stuff: the coursing of the river.

I came to books ostensibly to feast, but did I ever digest them? It seems as in early elementary school, I drank far more than I imbibed.

When did I start *tasting* reading?

I had a taste for reading; this was clear. But my first consciousness of tasting a book, as book, as distinctive object—one that, by virtue of having been read, I could not let go of, this came with Tolkien, and it came with Edgar Allen Poe, and it came with Anne Frank. In all of these, I was entering a world—a wood; the fictional wood, says Umberto Eco (1995)—even if Anne Frank was a diary (or, one version of it) and J. R. R. Tolkien's main oeuvre comprised four books: *The Hobbit* and the 3-volumed *Lord of the Rings*. There were the fairy tales—all of them; in my mind's eye, they comprised one book. And there was Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, later on. I have had the same feeling with W. G. Sebald—as I have had with several others, like William Faulkner, who once picked up, I could not put down. I have the same feeling, now, with Susanna Clarke. And I have had the same feeling with many a children's picturebook or author.

There are many—but they are also few.

No, not just a wood; it is more a world.

And if it is a world (A subject? A preoccupation? A concern?) that I am most driven to, and where I am pressed to remain for a long duration, through constant reiteration and repetition—same author, same books, same world—then why is it that I am inexorably drawn back *there*, to those places? This is the question I ask myself. If I was to put all of these worlds together, side by side, what would they say, collectively, and to one another? Are they one world, or many?

They are full of darkness, and they are full of light. They are fantastic, in the sense of what they manage to create through their webs of words. And they are real; grim, even.

They bring me where I need to go to feel real myself.

A good part of them are fictional, but many are not; some write about fiction (Rita Felski), others about experience and life (Alan Block; H.-G. Gadamer; Maxine Greene; William Pinar), Hannah Arendt being the first I read in a sustained way on the subject of trauma.

And at a certain point, when I have read and re-read and slowed down and paused and lingered, when I have studied and researched the ground in and around and inside of the words they share, they become as rivers inside of me, their words interweaving with my words and with my world, to the extent that I am able to grasp hold of something worth saying, that I can do in words. I *can* do! (We are all little engines that can, according to Watty

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(Macfarlane, 2025), with which I recently concluded a graduate curriculum course. However, the river formed from Alice's copious tears when she was nine feet high (Carroll, 1966) also comes to mind, copious tears also seeming to mark by feltuller release into writing.

Piper (1976), author of *The Little Engine That Could*).

These days, though, I am feeling somewhat parched—and have over the past year become too used to feeling parched. I read constantly, and when I'm not reading, there are few places where I want to be more than inside of a book. However, I do not write, not enough. I write intermittently, here and there; there and here. I should go back to writing more freely, as I did especially in graduate school, which was when the dam broke and the reader became the writer.

As it is, it is early, and it is late. I pick up Basbanes—a sea of words about books, an ocean even—and I know in picking him up, I will enter his field of words behaving like a dog, my nose pressed to the ground, reading as waiting to encounter something I can use. Following my nose.

And then unaccountably, as I used to do before, a sentence, unbidden, pops into my mind, courtesy of reading Basbanes, I presume; triggered perhaps by being in and among the subject of books. My sentence is: I used to eat books. And, rather than discount the sentence, I decide to write it down. But where? I have only written books around me; no notebooks. Just a book on the notebook but that won't serve me now. Desperate now. It is the middle of the night. I do not want to wake anyone. Why don't I have a notebook handy? I have my snowgoose book, for recording my reading, but I don't want to use it for this purpose, as it is a book for reading and one that I share with others for pedagogical purposes.[4]

And then I see my notepad, with its beautifully thick paper and its evocative leaves and acorns: metaphors for writing. It is the foolscap of long paper. (There is a countervailing political story to that word—foolscap; fool's cap—which I read about in the past year, in Keith Houston on the book (2016, p. 324)). And so I write. And now, I am here, at my laptop at 2:12AM, transcribing my words, and I revise and add and prune, this as I fast. Blood test in the morning. But surely, fasting and feasting in writing, as in reading, need to be understood (by me) to go hand in hand: a self-discipline. I can fast, but I can't starve myself or feel parched. Write. Write. Write: on reading, on the reader, which is a nice paradox to keep me moving until I find out what I really want to say. (Am I closer? I feel as if I might be).

Back to the question—a real one, an important one—of the world. It's not (only) about reading, and it's not (only) about writing, although it is about those, too. Those are my ways, and not only mine; cultural ways (plural, but cultural nevertheless: will need further explaining). It's all about the world: imagination and thinking, the two being sides of the same coin.

I like what fantasy writer Susanna Clarke said (in an interview), after a long hiatus from writing. She published her first book, *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, to great acclaim in 2004 then sudden collapse and silence, followed almost two decades later by *Piranesi* (Clarke, 2020), *The Wood at Midwinter* (Clarke, 2024) and a reissued *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* (2024a)—

[4] The snowgoose book is my name for the notebook with a snowgoose painted on the cover in which I track my reading and writing. I picked it up in an artist's shop in St-Jean-Port-Joli, Quebec, a little town to which I return recursively to witness the snow geese along the St. Lawrence River preparing for their southern migration. Feeling at an impasse, as I recount in these *currere* writings, I had used the occasion of teaching the doctoral Proseminar to start a practice of recording what I was reading and writing and for how many minutes/hours and connected to what project I was working on. If I can do it, I challenged the doctoral students, so can you, that is, set aside dedicated time for reading and writing. I was surprised by how galvanizing I have found the notebook practice, which was inspired by suggestions in Goodson's (2024) *Becoming an Academic Writer*. The snow goose depicted on the cover is growing plump, feeding (see Footnote 1), as I also aspire to do with reading and ruminating.

which was when I first started reading her, stimulated by Alexandra Alter's article on Clarke's life story in *The New York Times Book Review*. I find her writing riveting—as much as I do literary affect theorist, Rita Felski. But the particular reason why I like Clarke is that she kept on, slowly, after her collapse, because driven to write. She could not imagine a life without writing words: her words, her world.*"Write the way you can and not the way you think you are supposed to,"* she said, to which she added that all she has ever done is to follow the path in front of her (Susanna Clarke in Alter, 2024, p. 14).

I think I can do that; yes, I think I can.

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