

Better Lives Through Reading

Jonathan Hartmann

"And if he left off dreaming about you, where do you suppose you'd be?"

—Tweedledee, in *Through the Looking-Glass*

Philip Davis, *Reading for Life*. Oxford University Press, 320pp., \$33 cloth.

Umberto Eco, *On the Shoulders of Giants*. trans. Alastair McEwen. Harvard University Press, 336pp., \$28 cloth.

The Edinburgh History of Reading: *Common Readers*, edited by Jonathan Rose. Edinburgh University Press, 384pp., \$125 cloth, \$40 ebook.

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, bully boy Tweedledee tells Alice that The Red King, whom she notices snoring, is dreaming of her. Next, he posits that Alice's very existence may depend on her presence in the dream. A similar conundrum occurs to narrative theorist Umberto Eco, who asks, "Which came first, the author or the reader?" Books, Eco argues, extend readers a hand for a tacit though consensual relationship. Reading fiction, for example Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), gives one chills, not only for the content but also the

uncanny resemblance between fictional and real-world events. Reading opens us up to a topsy-turvy, funhouse-mirror, Alice in Wonderland universe where we follow in wonder every hint of the hero, intermittently puzzling over what our author is doing.

Eco's theory of reading explores what we do when, like Hansel and Gretel entering the forest, we are faced with a new text—that is, a story whose pages we have not previously entered. As he puts it in his Harvard lectures *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994), we give a novel roughly ten minutes to engage us, making an Inferential Walk, that is, a mental scouting expedition, each time we read. This involves asking ourselves a series of "what if" questions in order to help us predict the arc of the narrative and the relatability of its central character. Since we are made anxious not by the presence of a wolf but by the possibility of a (story) world without meaning, we find comfort in all manner of rationalizations, reducing ambiguous situations to simple quest, princess, or buddy stories.

Reading opens us up to a topsy-turvy, funhouse-mirror, Alice in Wonderland universe where we follow in wonder every hint of the hero, intermittently puzzling over what our author is doing.

While Eco focuses on our individual engagement with our books, Jonathan Rose's collection *Common Readers* offers empirical studies of reading. Instead of focusing on readers and authors, however, two chapters of Rose's work address the reciprocal relationship linking readers and publishers. In Chapter 10, "Putting Your Best Book Forward: A Historical and Psychological Look at the Presentation of Book Collections," Nicole Gonzalez and Nick Weir-Williams show how readers and publishers discriminate in both the positive and negative sense of the word. As the authors explain, readers do so for two reasons: to simplify their buying choices and to enhance their self-image. Publishers model distinctions between literary and popular fiction as a way to make their wares costly habits. For publishers' bottom line depends on their conditioning individual readers to rush after literature or lunge into beach reading. By painting every expensive new release as either an ascetic nibble or a zesty stew of passion and violence, publishers engrain this distinction in readers.

Outside of our two pandemic years, large numbers of reading groups have met at readers' homes. These meetings may flourish not so much as literary appreciation sessions, but as opportunities for members to meet and greet one another over wine and cheese. Samantha Rideout and DeNel Rehberg Sedo's *Common Readers* chapter "Novel Ideas: The Promotion of North American Book Club Books and the Creation of Their Readers" maps out the

effort of North American publishers' own book clubs to attract and secure their target audience. Club members, largely female readers, receive regular publisher promotions. As Rehberg Sedo and Rideout observe, publishers' newsletters abandon any fear of overselling their wares. For example, Harper Collins's April 13, 2010, newsletter *Chatter* delivered the message

"... in the newest novel from beloved #1 New York Times bestselling Ya-Ya author Rebecca Wells."

This description yields the formula

"qualifier + amplifying adjective
+ rank + bestseller type + term
'best-selling' + reference to earlier
bestselling work + author's name."

Apparently, a New York Times mention works as publishers' most highly prized descriptor. Harper Collins' language seduces readers by implying that their purchase confirms their intimate acquaintance with the finest writing available. Rehberg Sedo and Rideout suggest that busy readers are at a publisher's mercy: if book promotions were stripped from our magazines, newspapers, and e-book interfaces, we would be confronted with a daunting array of choices. When we read in conspicuous book consumption—that is, one's bookshelf display and discussion in a book group—reading serves as a kind of mirror to which we ask the classic question, Honey, does this book make me look attractive? For all practical purposes, then, publishers and readers rely on each other in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Our adventures in reading are dramatized in an 1882 tale, Frank Stockton's "The Lady, or the Tiger." Stockton offers a fairy tale fused with a Roman forum event and "The Price is Right," asking readers to choose between two endings for the princess's common lover. Readers may observe that the two endings offer differing challenges to this forbidden dalliance. That the lover is awarded immediate marriage to a woman he has never met (door number 1) or death by tiger (door number 2), with his lover's body language his only guide as to which door is which, emphasizes the challenges of going against cultural and familial strictures. Stockton's title announces its intention of simply offering two paths for the commoner to follow. Readers may ponder the possibilities for surviving tiger attack, evading the door-woman before or after the forum wedding, or somehow escaping the Monty Hall forum.

Eco's work helps us see that readers are more like the Princess—who has a modicum of choice, restricted by patriarchal and royal confines—than her lover, who will be either eaten or married off, thus ending the lovers' relationship. At the same time, Eco's studies suggest that authors are something less than absolute monarchs: rather than simply kill us or marry us off, so to speak, they generate signals for us to interpret.

Instead of reading to improve our appearance or entering a deep dark forest like Hansel and Gretel, groups of British readers meet to uncover a book as one would unwrap a holiday gift. Since there's no studying up for *The Reader's* book groups, readers surprise each other with

emotions and long-hidden memories brought to life. A drug addict, for example, may find a bit of hope, and an ex-offender may be spurred to reach out to someone he thought was lost to him. One well-educated but troubled participant observes:

If you're reading aloud you're thinking Help, where's this going to end? But you want it to keep going as well. It's a sort of double feeling: relief when it does end in making sense, but exciting when it keeps going into another phase, and then another. I'm not at all used to reading aloud: it is a physical thing, you use different muscles from when you read at home, and the length of the sentence becomes like a physical thing in the mind. Your brain is looking ahead on the page because you've not seen it before. There is a sense of an immediate future ahead of you, to work out.

Here Frances describes her investigation of literature, which *The Reader* takes as poetry and challenging fiction. *The Reader* and CRILS (Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society, housed at The University of Liverpool), to which Philip Davis dedicates *Reading for Life*, might take as their motto "Better Lives through Reading."

Davis describes the mission of *The Reader* as generative reading—that is, an activity that opens up new possibilities for everyone involved. When reading literary writing, he reports, we slow our pulse to indulge in its deliberate embrace. Davis's framing of the activity resembles Carroll's notion of Alice caught up in the Red King's dream, to the extent that the book-less life may be a lonely one. One would thus do well to follow the authors' advice and make time for a new book. ■