

Good Stuff to Read This Year

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Reading: “the very word is like a bell/that tolls me back from thee to my sole self.”

Actually, Keats wrote “Forlorn,” but where I wrote “Reading” on the first line of this clean yellow sheet, the rest of Keats’ line came unbidden, and since I’m not by nature one to ignore the unbidden, I thought I’d better write it down. Now, why did it come? Well, I’ll go with “words like bells”—and I can think of all kinds of bells: reading’s a school bell—as in “I’ve got to get the reading done” or in “That was a great book we read in class”; it’s an alarm, a wake-up call; it’s a telephone bell, a door bell, some guest come calling, invited or not; it’s a chapel bell, something holy happening, something that engages us full-length, then pulls us beyond supposition. For Keats, forlorn was a funeral bell, tolling to him; for me reading’s something I need to do to keep from some kinds of dying. I suspect that’s so for you, too.

“From thee to my sole self”—I hear the “sole self” here, with its associated pleasures of solitude, of concentration, of choosing a place, a setting for this process. But I question, at the same time, the “from thee” part—for reading is engagement, entering the world of someone else’s thought; reading is imagination—thinking and feeling through someone else’s self. It’s a process of regaining our other selves even as we experience our own inmost self.

Is that perhaps, at root, why we read? Oh, surely—for information, for argument, for opening, for pleasure, for escape, for corroboration, for reshaping. But is it maybe, at root, to experience our other selves at the same time as, or within, or as a part of our central self.

Surely I’ve been meditating—at least partly—with you as an audience in mind, for it seems to me now that in this description, reading is a pastoral act: to minister must be to engage another at the level of his or her need, at some recognizable level of his or her self. And the more we know about the other person directly or imaginatively, the deeper we reach into that self and that need.

So, I think I'll proceed on that assumption—reading puts us in touch with our unrecognized selves and opens us to ministering—in all the rich, not to say confusing, variety of its manifestations.

Two sets of readings in my own life I'd like to pass on. One set comes out of my teaching and my increasing awareness of feminist concerns such as inclusiveness and marginality. I've been interested in and teaching Minority and Ethnic literature for years, but pretty much from a canonical and formalist perspective. As I begin to explore concepts like marginality—what it means to be oppressed and an outsider—that's giving me new ways to read these works—so they're in some process for me.

Native American	<i>Ceremony</i> , Leslie Marmon Silko <i>Tracks</i> , Louise Erdrich
Mexican-American	<i>Bless Me, Ultima</i> , Rudolfo Anaya
African-American	<i>Beloved</i> , Toni Morrison <i>Go Tell It On The Mountain</i> , James Baldwin <i>The Women of Brewster Place</i> , Gloria Naylor
Asian-American	<i>The Joy Luck Club</i> , Amy Tan
Women's Experience	<i>Member of the Wedding</i> , Carson McCullers <i>In a Different Voice</i> , Carol Gilligan <i>Surfacing</i> , Margaret Atwood
Jewish	<i>The Shawl</i> , Cynthia Ozick <i>The Chosen</i> , Chaim Potok, and his new one about Asher Lev
Catholic	<i>Final Payments</i> , Mary Gordon <i>The Company of Women</i> , Mary Gordon <i>Men & Angels</i> , Mary Gordon <i>The Underclass</i> , Carolyn Chute <i>The Beans of Egypt, Maine</i> , Carolyn Chute
Science Fiction	<i>The Dispossessed</i> , Ursula Le Guin

Another set comes out of my yearning, I think. I find myself buying books that talk to selves I'm just beginning to recognize.

Solitude, Anthony Storr
Gifts Differing, Isabel Meyers Briggs
The Dance of Intimacy, Harriet G. Lerner
Walking on Water, Madeleine L'Engle
Original Blessing, Matthew Fox
The Ways of Peace, Gray Cox