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Reading Writers Reading

By Victoria Olsen

As the memoir genre has expanded, perhaps it was inevitable that writers would turn to chronicling their own reading. Over the past 15 years, some writers have described their relationship to a book as it unfolds, as Phyllis Rose did in *The Year of Reading Proust* (1997), while others have followed in the footsteps of a beloved author, the way Wendy McClure shadowed Laura Ingalls Wilder's pioneer family in *The Wilder Life* (2011).

In *My Life in Middlemarch*, published next month, Rebecca Mead does some of both: She expands her 2011 *New Yorker* article "Middlemarch and Me" into a book that examines her life in relation to rereadings of George Eliot's classic novel. In *The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia* (2008), Laura Miller establishes the premise for this mini-genre of memoirs about reading: "The books we happen to latch onto as children help to furnish our imagination and, to a certain degree, our identity."

We are what we read? These writers think so. They reflect on the books that captured their imaginations, influenced their values, and changed their lives, often by turning them into writers themselves.

For a reader to identify closely with a novel or fictional character has historically been thought of as dangerous, even immoral (think of Don Quixote and Emma Bovary with their romances). In her 1977 book *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas, a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, traced the rise of the novel in the 19th century as a new kind of "faith," especially among women, that threatened religion. Novels could become addictive, like tobacco or alcohol, it was believed. George Eliot thought that the "feminine fatuity" of her peers would have a bad effect on women readers, writing in her essay "Silly Novels by

Lady Novelists" (1856) that "the most mischievous form of feminine silliness is the literary form, because it tends to confirm the popular prejudice against the more solid education of women."

Studying at Oxford, Mead discovers the "history of reading and writing [as] my cultural inheritance, a centuries-long chain of readers and writers in this centuries-old city." Her book is an extension of that chain, another book about books and readers, particularly female. Mead revisits *Middlemarch* often and finds it relevant to each new period in her life.

At first reading, she writes, "I identified completely with Miss Dorothea Brooke, an ardent young gentlewoman who yearns for a more significant existence. This identification was in spite of the difference between our social stations. Dorothea lives at Tipton Grange, a large estate equipped with household staff. My family lived in a modest house with a small garden, built in the 1950s, and I had to go back only a few generations to find ancestors who had belonged to the household staff on properties like the Brookes'." Later, when Mead had children, she identified with Dorothea's domestic sister Celia, and as she ages she better understands the flawed characters of Lydgate, Ladislaw, and even Casaubon.

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In my own life, it was *Little Women* that catalyzed my imagination. When I read it as a teenager, it seemed to offer me as clear a guide to life as the March sisters found in *Pilgrim's Progress*. To be a dutiful daughter meant putting the needs of others first. To be a good wife and mother meant controlling one's temper, as Marmee had done and Jo must learn to do. These were hard lessons for an adolescent girl, but they spoke to the question I asked myself at the time: How do I balance responsibilities to myself and others?

Similarly, Mead asks of Eliot and *Middlemarch*: "How is wisdom to be attained? ... What is the proper foundation of morality?" She concludes that "the book was reading me, as I was reading it." Eliot

seemed to predict Mead's own life questions about marriage, ambition, and social relations as they came up. Mead insists, though, that *Middlemarch* is "not a moral codebook, and no one would want to read it if it were." In her view (and others'), Eliot's moralism aims more generally to expand readers' sympathies by broadening their perspectives. Thus it is reading itself, rather than any particular wisdom, that has the potential to change (and improve) a life.

That process is not always easy. Miller reveals that her adventures in Narnia included disillusionment when she understood the Christian symbolism throughout the books. A series that she had read for pleasure turned out to have an ulterior religious motive. Her memoir traces her path through her feelings of betrayal at being "tricked" by C.S. Lewis to her eventual reconciliation with the author and the world he created. The result illuminates both the book and herself: "What I dislike about Narnia no longer eclipses what I love about it, and the contents of my own mind still have the capacity to surprise me when I study them carefully enough." To look back at a favorite book from childhood as an adult can be embarrassing, she discovers, but it can also reveal continuities between our former and current selves. It can juxtapose what we thought and felt at the time with what we think and feel now.

For myself, I have found the memory of my childish allegiance to Alcott's moralism so uncomfortable that I have not reread *Little Women* or its sequels as an adult. Yet a matched set of early-20th-century editions of Alcott's series, inherited from my grandmother, still stands on my bookshelves.

William Deresiewicz is an exception to the pattern of young women reading their lives and themselves into favored books. His memoir *A Jane Austen Education: How Six Books Taught Me About Love, Friendship, and the Things That Really Matter* (2011) follows a different path through this genre, from rejecting the feminine to embracing it.

He begins his book as a stereotypically macho graduate student who wants to study modernism—Conrad's seafaring yarns and Joyce's radical form. He avoids Austen and the feminized 19th-

century novel for as long as he can, but his reluctant appreciation of Austen's *Emma* leads to more self-awareness. In fact, he undergoes exactly the sort of character development that he ascribes to Emma, turning from a feeling of superiority to his surroundings to a more attentive appreciation. That emotional growth in turn leads him to "fall in love" with Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* and progress through Austen's six novels, in the six chapters of his own book, to find his own happy ending ("Reader, I married her").

Although Deresiewicz reverses the experience of a female reader finding herself in a book, he is an exception who proves a rule: Austen's novels teach him "what it means to see and think and talk like a woman." His book, in a sense, interrupts the more seamless identification between reader and text that occurs for Mead and Miller (who emphasizes Lucy Pevensie's role in the Narnia series). Deresiewicz has to learn how to identify with Emma, as we have to learn to identify with him reading *Emma*.

By revealing the pleasures and pitfalls of readerly identification, these memoirs succeed in blurring the boundaries between living and reading, self and book, critic and fan. In *The Possessed: Adventures With Russian Books and the People Who Read Them* (2010), Elif Batuman claims Don Quixote as her inspiration for her contribution to this mini-genre: "He had lived life and read books; he lived life through books, generating an even better book." Here, she notes, the usual opposition between life and reading is dissolved, which is the goal of her own memoir as well.

In Mead's words, "When a reader is grasped and held by a book, reading does not feel like an escape from life so much as it feels like an urgent, crucial dimension of life itself."

These memoirs imply that books, by their very existence, can make readers (like Jo March) into writers. When Miller says that a teacher's giving her a copy of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* "made a reader out of me," we know from the book in our hands that it made a writer of her too. These reader-writers are the heroes of not only their own lives, but their own books as well.

Victoria Olsen is a senior lecturer in the expository-writing program

at New York University and the author of From Life: Julia Margaret Cameron and Victorian Photography (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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