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# Your Brain on Fiction

## Duncan Smith, Guest Columnist

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In our daily practice as readers' advisors, we generally focus on the immediate issue at hand—getting a book into the hands of a particular reader. This is as it should be, and we need to be facile at providing our readers with appropriate suggestions that are based on our discussion with them about what appeals to them about their reading. It is also important, though, to step back occasionally and to think about how *readers*, rather than an individual reader, respond to what they read. Here, Duncan Smith describes his experience in working with a reader over the past two decades in which he recorded her talking about her reading experience. Smith moves from the individual to the universal in suggesting that a better understanding of the reading experience will allow readers' advisors to make more thoughtful suggestions to our readers. Smith is the creator and product manager of EBSCO Publishing's electronic readers' advisory resource *NoveList*. He inaugurated this column in the Winter 2000 issue of this journal, when Mary K. Chelton was its editor, with his article "Talking with Readers."—*Editor*

**R**uiz Zafon's *Shadow of the Wind* opens with the ten-year-old main character Daniel, awakening from a dream—a nightmare really. The nature of Daniel's bad dream is that he can no longer remember his mother's face. Daniel's mother had died six years earlier as a result of a cholera epidemic. Daniel's father runs a bookshop, and that may explain his unusual solution for calming his son's fears.

The father takes his son to a secret and magical place called the Cemetery of Forgotten Books. You enter the cemetery through a carved wooden door "blackened by time and humidity."<sup>1</sup> To Daniel's eyes, the cemetery appears to be "a carcass of a palace, a place of echoes and shadows."

For Daniel's father and his colleagues who attend the Cemetery of Forgotten Books, "books have souls—the soul of the person who wrote it and of those who read it and lived and dreamed with it." Books are brought to the cemetery when they are no longer remembered. There they "live forever waiting for the day when they will reach a new reader's hands."

It is a tradition at the Cemetery of Forgotten Books that whenever someone enters its rooms for the first time, they choose a book to adopt and make a lifelong promise to keep the book alive by reading it, ensuring that it will never be forgotten again.

Daniel's path to the book he adopts is reminiscent of the way many readers find books in libraries. He roams through row after row of shelves until a title catches his eye. In his

case, it is a “timid” volume sitting on the corner of a shelf bound in wine-colored leather with gold letters. Just like the readers who roam the stacks in our libraries, Daniel pulls the book off the shelf, flips through a few pages, tucks the book under his arm and heads home.

Back home, Daniel starts to read the book to which he has made a lifelong commitment. As he reads the opening lines, Daniel experiences what happens to all of us when we start reading not just a book but the right book. Once he starts reading, he cannot stop. He reads through the afternoon, through the evening. The world of the book becomes as real to him as the world of his room. He doesn't stop until he is finished, and once he is done he remembers something that one of his father's regular customers had said:

Few things leave a deeper mark on a reader than the first book that finds its way into his heart. Those first images, the echo of words we think we have left behind accompany us throughout our lives and sculpt a palace in our memory to which sooner or later no matter how many books we read, how many worlds we discover or how much we learn or forget—we will return.

For Daniel, the book he adopted from the Cemetery of Forgotten Books was the book that found its way into his heart. The book's author was unknown to Daniel—Julian Carax. What happens over the course of Daniel's story is that the lives of the characters of his chosen book and his own life begin to parallel and merge. It is unclear what the nature of this relationship is. Is Daniel's life shaping the story that he reads, or is the story he reads shaping his life? It is one of the mysteries of this engaging novel.

And what is the title of this book by the unknown author, Julian Carax that has such a hold on Daniel? The title is *The Shadow of the Wind*.

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## THE PALACE OF MEMORY

The image of reading that is put forth in the opening pages of Zafon's novel is one in which a book that is loved exerts an influence on and shapes the reading of other titles. This image of reading is not limited to *The Shadow of the Wind*. It is present in the lives of our readers. We can see it operating in the life of a particular reader that I have studied over the past eighteen years. Starting in 1991, I began videotaping Joanne talking about books she has read and enjoyed. Each taping took place in her home and began with my asking the question that Joyce Saricks suggests we start all readers' advisory conversations with: “Tell me about a book you read and enjoyed.”<sup>2</sup> In 1991, when I asked this question of Joanne, she described her experience of reading Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides*:

I really liked the book *The Prince of Tides* by Pat Conroy. I was really surprised that I liked it because about 80 percent of the books I read are by or about women,

and I'm skeptical also about people who write about the South because I'm a Southerner, and I often feel that when people write about the South, they distort it. This book was recommended to me by a friend and I reluctantly read it, and when I did, I couldn't put it down. It was like I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep—I just had to read this book.

It's about, to use today's lingo, a dysfunctional family, and it's dysfunctional beyond anything you could imagine. There's two brothers and a sister and a mother and a father and some grandparents who are just basically crazy. And it's very, very funny; very, very, beautiful; and very, very tragic all at the same time. It's just this strange mix of people and events set in the marshes that I just love.<sup>3</sup>

*The Prince of Tides* is an atypical title for Joanne. She normally reads books that are by or about women. She has some concerns about books set in the South because some authors don't portray that region in the way that Joanne experiences it. She concludes her description of her reading of Conroy's book by saying “it's just this strange mix of people and events set in the marshes that I just love.” This phrase sums up what made this book a satisfying read for this reader. She is a character-oriented and place-oriented reader. She focuses on the crazy, dysfunctional family portrayed in Conroy's book and the Southern setting. She has clearly encountered books set in the South that didn't work for her, but when an author creates a picture of the Southern landscape and its people that resonates with this reader, that book becomes one that is enjoyed and may in fact become one that is an essential part of this reader's palace of memory.

Readers familiar with Conroy's book will recognize that there are several things this reader leaves out of her description of *The Prince of Tides*. For example, she does not give us any plot details. If you aren't already familiar with the book, you will not learn anything about what actually happens in it, including the family secret that is the key to this particular Southern family's dysfunction. Unless you have either read the book or seen the movie, you wouldn't know that almost half of this book takes place in Manhattan. Nor would you know anything about the book's main female character, the New York psychiatrist who is working to understand why her patient (the narrator's sister) has attempted suicide.

For a setting-focused reader, the omission of the New York setting is intriguing. For a woman who primarily reads books by and about women, it is also interesting that she does not talk about the book's main female character—the psychiatrist. This reader is clearly reading selectively. She is in fact editing out the parts of Conroy's book that don't speak to her, and the version of *Prince of Tides* that she commits to memory is her condensed version of Conroy's original.

Norman Holland writes about readers and their selective reading in his book *Five Readers Reading*.<sup>4</sup> Holland had five undergraduate students take a variety of personality tests and then read Faulkner's short story “A Rose for Emily.” He then

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asked each of the students to write a short paper about the story and met with them individually to discuss their experience of the work. He found that the students varied widely in their thinking about the story's content and which portions of the story were important. He also found that these variations correlated to the personality themes and issues identified in each student's psychological profile.

While on the surface *The Prince of Tides* seemed like an unusual selection for Joanne, it is in fact emblematic of what elements need to come together to provide her with a satisfying reading experience. Here is another description of a book that this reader read and enjoyed two years after *The Prince of Tides*:

The book I've enjoyed the most recently is *Bootlegger's Daughter* by Margaret Maron. This is an author that lives in Garner [North Carolina]. It's a mystery featuring Deborah Knott, who's a woman attorney running for a district judge seat, and she is also trying to solve a twenty-year-old murder. What takes this book from being a book of genre to being a book of substance is the incredible setting and feel it has for North Carolina. At one point, when she's bumfuzzled, she goes looking for arrowheads in a ploughed field, and the description of that was very evocative for me. The mystery is a tight mystery. It has some political overtones. The women characters are very strong and the men characters are real and believable and also good. She has friends in Raleigh, and they talk about coming to the Triangle [the counties surrounding Raleigh], and I can't tell you any more about it because it's a mystery and it would spoil the book. But it's just about one of the best mysteries I've read in the last couple of years, and I highly recommend it for anyone who likes mysteries or books about North Carolina.<sup>5</sup>

Again character and place are the essential elements that result in this being a good read for this reader. In fact, it is the book's "incredible setting and feel it has for North Carolina" that moves it in the reader's mind from being genre fiction to a book of substance. The book also has a strong women character who is in fact working to unseat a racist judge while she is also working on—to use today's lingo—a very cold case. Though this book is by a different author and in a different genre, the building blocks that contribute to this reader's enjoyment remain the same—an evocative rendering of place and engaging characters who have interesting and complicated relationships. These factors remain constant through an extended period of time. Here is Joanne talking about Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* in April 2008, eighteen years after I recorded her talking about *The Prince of Tides*:

*Prince of Tides* has been one of my favorite books for years, and I'm not quite sure I can say it's been replaced, but it's been equaled with *Prodigal Summer* by Barbara Kingsolver. I like all of her stuff. I like all of

her books, but this one really resonated with me. It's set in the Virginia Mountains, and the main character is a woman who has checked out and is living in a cabin. It's got wonderful characters. The book opens with a crotchety old man getting bit by a turtle while he's putting up a No Trespassing sign, and he thinks he is having a heart attack. It's very funny in places, and the characters are people you would really like to have dinner with. You could say, I want to have a dinner party with all of the main characters from *Prodigal Summer* and you would have a fabulous time. It talks about ecology—the lack of predators in the East. It has a lot about love, families, and generations. It has a little bit of the new culture coming in when one woman decides she can make a living raising goats and this doesn't fit in with the traditional economy there—but it will work. Kingsolver has incredible descriptions of the natural landscape, and she really manages to teach a lot about ecology without being preachy. Like I said, it's very funny in places, and in part it's a love story and it's an absolutely delightful book. It's not about a dysfunctional family in the way that *Prince of Tides* is, but it's about a dysfunctional Southern society and it's a wonderful book.<sup>6</sup>

Again we see the factors that we have come to suspect will be present in a book that Joanne has read and enjoyed. Engaging characters, vivid descriptions of the landscape, and a Southern setting are all contained in Kingsolver's book.

Taken together, these three testimonies about books that have been read show the palace-of-memory process that Daniel is alluding to when he quotes his father's customer talking about the first book that finds its way into a reader's heart. It is clear that *The Prince of Tides* was a book that found its way into Joanne's heart, and in her description of *Prodigal Summer* we see clearly that the core story about the South, its land, its people, and their issues has continued to fascinate Joanne. In fact, *Prodigal Summer* overlays and enhances the core elements and issues contained in *The Prince of Tides*. *Prodigal Summer*, in this reader's palace of memory, is integrated into the room in that mansion that contains stories about the South.

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## BOOKS, READERS, AND THEIR LIVES: AN ECOLOGY

Ecology is a central theme for Joanne in Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer*. Ecology is often defined as the science of the relationship between organisms and their environment. Reading has an ecology too, and these summaries of Joanne's readings provide an opportunity for us to observe the relationships that exist not only between books but how they are instantiated in a reader and, because we have an overview of this reader's life, how all three of these elements—books, a reader, and the reader's life—interact.

A year after the *Bootlegger's Daughter* interview, I was getting ready to tape Joanne for a third time. Before our session,

I asked her to write down a brief autobiography—to outline some significant moments of her life:

My first significant moment happened when I was in elementary school. I was on a field trip with the Georgia Mineral Society, and instead of finding the crystal we were looking for, I found a perfect arrowhead. A professor from Emory University was on the trip, and as I greatly admired Emory, I ran up to him and showed him my treasure. He was nice and told me of the probable tribe. Warming up, I told him I wanted to be an archeologist when I grew up. He looked down his pipe stem and said “The last thing the world needs is another woman archeologist.” I was crushed.

My second significant memory of a significant “event” was my high school graduation. I was one of the speakers and had several awards (State DAR History, top female all-around student, top social studies student, outstanding senior, editor of the paper, assistant editor of the yearbook, etc.). I had achieved my goal of getting a full scholarship to college, but except for that tangible fact, it all seemed rather empty. I had “done it all” (in a very small, working class/poor high school)—big fish in a very shallow, small pond, but it was not particularly satisfying. I think this revelation changed how I approached college and my life. I would attempt at least to live it on my own terms and not other people’s. This was very clear to me that day. I can remember the scene as well as the feeling.

The third event happened in college. In 1968, I was a Southern Baptist Summer Missionary in an experimental program that paired me with a young woman from the National Baptist Convention. The National Baptist Convention is an organization of black Baptists. We lived with a black family in Kansas City, Missouri working in inner-city churches. Two things changed for me from this experience. I learned about poverty, and how it is color blind, and how many poor people work much harder than I ever would. And I learned what it was like to be in the minority. Some weeks I lived in a completely black world: churches, stores, swimming pools, restaurants. This whole summer was the most difficult and most expanding of my life. I never told my parents that I was working and living with black people.

Returning to college, I knew things would be different. I needed to stay in Georgia and teach in exchange for my scholarship. But I wanted something more than a suburban Atlanta school. With an eclectic group from school, I visited Koinonia Farms outside of Americus, Georgia. Koinonia, founded in 1941, is a community with a mission of pacifism, interracial justice and economic justice. (This is in rural southwest Georgia, mind you.) Our group listened to tapes by founder Clarence Jordan (who had died the year before) and was given a tour by two “partners” who had visitor’s duty. One

was a Hutterite doing his CO (conscientious objector); the other was a New York native who had burned his draft card. I thought both were a bit strange. But I had made the belief of racial justice my own, and felt the War (as we called the Vietnam War) was wrong, and as I read the New Testament, a good case could be made for economic justice being part of life for anyone trying to be a Christian. So I moved to this strange place, where I was the only white Georgian, based only on what they believed. It was one of the best decisions of my life. While folks laughed at the way I talked in my own state; I found wonderful people who became a family to me, Koinonia—“fellowship” in the true sense of that word. Living at that place, at that time, profoundly changed the way I looked at myself, my faith, and the world.<sup>7</sup>

There are many parallels between the stories that Joanne reads and the story she tells herself and us about her life. For example, it is easy to see how Conroy’s story about a crazy dysfunctional family and Tom Wingo’s quest to find for himself a family that works would resonate with our reader who finds family outside the one she was born into. We also have more information about how *Bootlegger’s Daughter* became a book of substance. It is hard to imagine that book not finding its way into this reader’s heart when she encounters that scene of Deborah Knott walking through a ploughed field looking for arrowheads. And while Kingsolver’s book doesn’t replace Conroy’s, it is easy to understand how it would equal it, as *Prodigal Summer* moves the imperfections and flaws of Southern life from a single family to a broader context in much the same way that Joanne’s life moves from the preoccupations of a working class, blue collar family to the broader societal issues of racial and economic equality.

The copy of *The Shadow of the Wind* that Daniel discovers in the Cemetery of Forgotten books is not *The Shadow of the Wind* Zafon writes. Daniel’s story and Carax’s *Shadow of the Wind* are embedded in Zafon’s. In Zafon’s, the book that Daniel reads begins to parallel and merge with Daniel’s life in much the same way that the books Joanne reads parallel and merge with her life. While this article is only examining one reader, this parallelism between the worlds of the stories we read and our lives are the rule, not the exception.

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## NECESSARY LOSSES, ESSENTIAL GAINS

Judith Viorst is well known for writing children’s books that deal with the everyday issues of children’s lives. She, for example, deals with issues like having a bad day or dealing with busy parents. She has also written a book about the issues that adults face as they struggle to grow up—issues that are rooted in those initial psychic wounds of dealing with the realities of not always getting what we want (our mother’s attention or overcoming the haunting presence of an all-powerful father). In *Necessary Losses* Viorst takes a Freudian perspective, insisting that we essentially repeat and rework

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the issues of our childhood in our adult lives.<sup>8</sup> She asserts that the key to our happiness is not in avoiding the losses that life invariably presents but in how we accept and integrate them into our attitudes, the beliefs we hold, and the relationships we have as adults.

In *The Uses of Enchantment* Bruno Bettelheim argues that, in essence, the reason fairytales have a hold on children (and many adults) is that the world of the fairytale is structured in a way that helps us deal with and resolve the Oedipal conflict.<sup>9</sup> The story provides a model and strategies for growing beyond this developmental stage.

Recent research by Djikic, Oatley, Zoeterman, and Peterson have found that readers of a fiction passage experienced a higher degree of change in self-reported emotional traits than readers of a nonfiction reworking of the same content.<sup>10</sup> Oatley in particular has discussed fiction reading as a way for readers to simulate experiences outside themselves in a manner similar to that of airline pilots simulating the experience of flying an aircraft in flight simulators.<sup>11</sup>

The Holland and Djikic studies focused on the reading of a single, assigned work. In the case of Joanne, we have her descriptions of several, self-selected works through time and a biographical sketch that allows us to witness the parallels between her reading and her life. It is clear from Joanne's biography that she is called to actively create a South that has overcome the prejudices and limitations that have formed a significant part of its tradition. She finds in *Bootlegger's Daughter* a model in Deborah Knott who seeks to unseat a racist judge. In *Prodigal Summer* she finds Southerners who are capable of forming a more perfect union with their land and each other. These stories are essential and are integrated into Joanne's life in a way that sustains the hope that they are achievable in the larger world.

We frequently hear fiction reading described by both readers and fiction's detractors as escape. The studies contained in this article and Joanne's responses to "tell me about

a book you've read and enjoyed" reinforce this conception of fiction reading. However, we need to be clear about what readers are escaping from. They are escaping from a narrow, limiting view of the world and journeying to a place where it is possible to experience a deeper connection to our real selves and to live fully in our world.

Joanne sums this up nicely in a paper she wrote in April 2006 as part of a course Freedom Stories at Duke University:

Memory is a funny thing. We choose what we remember and edit out the rest. Life is much like memory. We see what we want to see and ignore the rest. Knowing the inherent dangers of selective memory and selective living, these days I try to live with awareness.

The title of her paper: "Faith, Love and Hope."

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