

LINDA KETELHUT/ILLUSTRATION WORKS/GETTY IMAGES



I ♥ READING

A love letter to literature

By Bryon Cahill

READ. That is who we are and that is what we do. And as readers, we know there is an intense, indescribable magic that occurs somewhere between the words on the page and the grand echo of those words in our heads. When that mysterious translation strikes in our minds, we mostly ignore it and read on. Our eyes continue to fall on letters forming words that turn subtle phrases into lingering sentences. We become **enraptured** by this intellectual gift as it fills us full of stories ... and we read on. But what is that unnameable feeling that *is* reading?

It is not easy to describe what happens to you as you read. It has been said on countless occasions—and certainly this magazine has been guilty of mentioning it once or twice—that reading is like being “swept away to new worlds.” True as that may feel, it doesn’t really *mean* anything. In my entire life, I don’t think I’ve ever opened a book here on Earth and then, three pages in, looked up to see the rings of Saturn before me. But still, the sentiment behind that cornball phrase is worth more than its weight in words.

In this issue’s play, *The Neverending Story*, a

bookseller asks Bastian whether he has ever forgotten hunger and cold because he was reading a good book. He asks Bastian whether he has ever read under his blankets with a flashlight, hiding from his parents because they had some ridiculous notion that he needed a good night’s sleep. Without hesitation, Bastian answers yes to both questions. He knows what it feels like to hunger for a good story. But could he explain what it feels like to truly “fall into” one? Could any of us?

Readers (who love reading) often talk about being transported into a story. When we get lost in a book, *really* lost, there is an overwhelming sense of **euphoria** attached to the experience. We lose ourselves and completely **empathize** with the characters. We suffer their pain and celebrate their triumphs. We share their fears and realize their **epiphanies**. That is truly a thing of wonder, and yet, we cannot nail down what it *is*.

Book critic and journalist Max Watman once wrote about how, in reading one particular book, he was reminded what reading *should* feel like:

Early in Salman Rushdie’s [novel] *Shalimar the Clown* I felt a sense of awe. ... It was as if the entire thing, the rhythm of the book, the pulse of the language was bigger than what I’d been reading. ... I felt as if I were a much younger man, or perhaps a child, flushed with the intensity of imagination in literature, cracking open *Anna Karenina* for the first time and being swept away. ...

✦ vocab

ENRAPTURED: filled with delight

EUPHORIA: a feeling of exaggerated happiness or well-being

EMPATHIZE: to identify with or feel the thoughts, attitudes, or emotions of another

EPIPHANIES: sudden insights that come seemingly out of nowhere

BIBLIOPHILES: book lovers

Now we’re getting somewhere.

Lovers of literature can tell you what it felt like when they first learned how to read as children. They can easily point out all the major plot points of the first full-length novels they ever read, rattle off all the characters’ names, and give detailed descriptions of how the books made them *feel*. But you know what? I’ll bet most (if not all) of those **bibliophiles** can’t actually remember *reading* their first books. Why? Because children don’t *read*

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books—they *experience* them. Sure, the physical act of reading *has* to be there ... but as children read, they aren’t always aware that they are reading. The experience is so new and fantastic that it’s almost as if they are ... well, let’s be honest and just say it ... being swept away to new worlds.

How can anyone describe what it feels like to read? A bird can no more easily describe how it feels to soar. But maybe it doesn’t matter all that much. The bird doesn’t care about telling you what soaring feels like. It just likes to soar. In that same way, readers just like to read. And when we come to the last page of a good book, our sense of loss can be reduced by knowing there is a neverending fountain of stories out there ... each waiting patiently to capture us. ■

WRITE ABOUT IT

Think you can nail this one down for us? Write an essay about what it feels like to read and send it to word@weeklyreader.com. Put “Being Swept Away” in the subject line. We’ll post the best essays on our blog, WORD, at www.readandwriting.com, on May 16.