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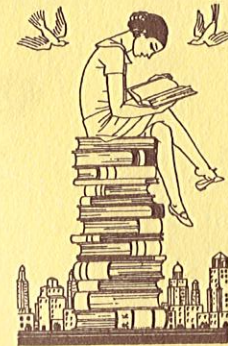
ANNE FADIMAN is—by her own admission—the sort of person who learned about sex from her father's copy of *Fanny Hill*, whose husband buys her nineteen pounds of dusty books for her birthday, and who once found herself poring over a 1974 Toyota Corolla manual because it was the only written material in her apartment that she had not read at least twice.

*Ex Libris* recounts a lifelong love affair with books and language. For Fadiman, as for many passionate readers, the books she loves have become chapters in her own life story. Writing with remarkable grace, she revives the tradition of the well-crafted personal essay, moving easily from anecdotes about Coleridge and Orwell to tales of her own pathologically literary family. As someone who played at blocks with her father's twenty-two-volume set of Trollope ("My Ancestral Castles") and who considered herself truly married only when she and her husband had merged collections ("Marrying Libraries"), she is exquisitely well equipped to expand upon the art of flyleaf inscriptions, the perverse pleasures of compulsive proofreading, the allure of long words, and the satisfactions of reading aloud. Perfectly balanced between humor and erudition, *Ex Libris* establishes Fadiman as one of our finest contemporary essayists.

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## Ex Libris



ANNE FADIMAN

### Confessions of a Common Reader

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highlighting reader joys and pleasures."

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Cover design: Susan Mitchell

Cover art: Bookplate by Rockwell Kent,  
from the library of Elnita Straus, Council House

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Essays/Literature



ISBN 0-374-52722-9



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*The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*

# EX LIBRIS

CONFESSIONS OF A COMMON READER

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ANNE FADIMAN



FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK





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A few months ago, my husband and I decided to mix our books together. We had known each other for ten years, lived together for six, been married for five. Our mismatched coffee mugs cohabited amicably; we wore each other's T-shirts and, in a pinch, socks; and our record collections had long ago miscegenated without incident, my Josquin Desprez motets cozying up to George's *Worst of Jefferson Airplane*, to the enrichment, we believed, of both. But our libraries had remained separate, mine mostly at the north end of our loft, his at the south. We agreed that it made no sense for my *Billy Budd* to languish forty feet from his *Moby-Dick*, yet neither of us had lifted a finger to bring them together.

We had been married in this loft, in full view of our mutually quarantined Melvilles. Promising to love each other for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health—even promising to forsake all others—had been no problem, but it was a good thing the *Book of Common Prayer*



didn't say anything about marrying our libraries and throwing out the duplicates. That would have been a far more solemn vow, one that would probably have caused the wedding to grind to a mortifying halt. We were both writers, and we both invested in our books the kind of emotion most people reserve for their old love letters. Sharing a bed and a future was child's play compared to sharing my copy of *The Complete Poems of W. B. Yeats*, from which I had once read "Under Ben Bulben" aloud while standing at Yeats's grave in the Drumcliff churchyard, or George's copy of *T. S. Eliot's Selected Poems*, given to him in the ninth grade by his best friend, Rob Farnsworth, who inscribed it "Best Wishes from Gerry Cheevers." (Gerry Cheevers, one of Rob's nicknames, was the goalie of the Boston Bruins, and the inscription is probably unique, linking T. S. Eliot and ice hockey for the first time in history.)

Our reluctance to conjugate our Melvilles was also fueled by some essential differences in our characters. George is a lump. I am a splitter. His books commingled democratically, united under the all-inclusive flag of Literature. Some were vertical, some horizontal, and some actually placed *behind* others. Mine were balkanized by nationality and subject matter. Like most people with a high tolerance for clutter, George maintains a basic trust in three-dimensional objects. If he wants something, he believes it will present itself, and therefore it usually does. I, on the other hand, believe that books, maps, scissors, and Scotch tape dispensers are all unreliable vagrants, likely to take

off for parts unknown unless strictly confined to quarters. My books, therefore, have always been rigidly regimented.

After five years of marriage and a child, George and I finally resolved that we were ready for the more profound intimacy of library consolidation. It was unclear, however, how we were to find a meeting point between his English-garden approach and my French-garden one. At least in the short run, I prevailed, on the theory that he could find his books if they were arranged like mine but I could never find mine if they were arranged like his. We agreed to sort by topic—History, Psychology, Nature, Travel, and so on. Literature would be subdivided by nationality. (If George found this plan excessively finicky, at least he granted that it was a damn sight better than the system some friends of ours had told us about. Some friends of *theirs* had rented their house for several months to an interior decorator. When they returned, they discovered that their entire library had been reorganized by color and size. Shortly thereafter, the decorator met with a fatal automobile accident. I confess that when this story was told, everyone around the dinner table concurred that justice had been served.)

So much for the ground rules. We ran into trouble, however, when I announced my plan to arrange English literature chronologically but American literature alphabetically by author. My defense went like this: Our English collection spanned six centuries, and to shelve it chronologically would allow us to watch the broad sweep of literature unfold before our very eyes. The Victorians *be-*



longed together; separating them would be like breaking up a family. Besides, Susan Sontag arranged *her* books chronologically. She had told *The New York Times* that it would set her teeth on edge to put Pynchon next to Plato. So there. Our American collection, on the other hand, was mostly twentieth-century, much of it so recent that chronological distinctions would require Talmudic hairsplitting. Ergo, alphabetization. George eventually caved in, but more for the sake of marital harmony than because of a true conversion. A particularly bad moment occurred while he was in the process of transferring my Shakespeare collection from one bookcase to another and I called out, "Be sure to keep the plays in chronological order!"

"You mean we're going to be chronological *within each author*?" he gasped. "But no one even knows for sure when Shakespeare wrote his plays!"

"Well," I blustered, "we know he wrote *Romeo and Juliet* before *The Tempest*. I'd like to see that reflected on our shelves."

George says that was one of the few times he has seriously contemplated divorce.

Our transfer of books across the Mason-Dixon Line that separated my northern shelves from his southern ones took about a week. Every night we lined up books on the floor, interlarding mine with his before putting them on the shelves, which meant that for a week we had to hopscotch

over hundreds of volumes in order to get from bathroom to kitchen to bedroom. We physically handled—fondled, really—every book we owned. Some had inscriptions from old lovers. Some had inscriptions from each other. Some were like time capsules: my *Major British Writers* contained a list of poets required for my 1970 twelfth-grade English final; a postcard with a ten-cent stamp dropped out of George's copy of *On the Road*.

As our piles accumulated on the floor, we had several heated debates about not just which books should go together but where they should go. I had lived in the loft for nine years before George moved in, and English literature had always occupied the most public spot, the wall facing the front door. (At the opposite end of the spectrum was a small bookshelf with a door, to the right of my desk, behind which lurked *The Zipcode Directory* and *The Complete Scarsdale Diet*.) George thought American literature deserved this place of honor instead. If I agreed to present myself to the world as an acolyte of A. J. Liebling rather than of Walter Pater, I would be admitting that the academic I had once thought I'd be had forever been replaced by the journalist I had become. Deciding that this was the truth and that, furthermore, our entrance wall should represent my husband as well as myself, I capitulated, but with a lump in my throat.

In the shelves next to our bed, we created a new category: Books by Friends and Relatives. I'd gotten the idea from a writer friend (now represented on these shelves



herself) who had done the same, saying it gave her a warm feeling to have so many of the people she loved gathered together in one place. George was initially dubious. He felt it was potentially insulting, for example, to banish Mark Helprin from the American literature canon, where he had once reposed alphabetically next to Ernest Hemingway, and force him to bed down instead with Peter Lerangis, the author, under a female pseudonym, of sixteen volumes of *The Baby-Sitters Club*. (Eventually he changed his mind, deciding that Mark and Peter might actually find a good deal to say to one another.)

By far the hardest task came toward the end of the week, when we sorted through our duplicates and decided whose to keep. I realized that we had both been hoarding redundant copies of our favorite books “just in case” we ever split up. If George got rid of his beat-up copy of *To the Lighthouse* and I said goodbye to my genital-pink paperback of *Couples*, read so often in my late teens (when Updike’s explorations of the complexities of marriage seemed unimaginably exotic) that it had sundered into a triptych held together with a rubber band—well, then we would clearly have to stick together for good. Our bridges would be burned.

We each owned copies of about fifty books in common. We decided that hardbacks would prevail over paperbacks unless the paperbacks contained marginalia. We kept my *Middlemarch*, read at eighteen, in which were registered my nascent attempts at literary criticism (page 37: “Grrr”;

page 261: “Bullshit”; page 294: “Yccch”); George’s *Magic Mountain*; my *War and Peace*. *Women in Love* generated the most agonizing discussion. George had read it at sixteen. He insisted that whenever he reread it, no edition other than his original Bantam paperback, with its psychedelic cover of one nude and one seminude woman, would possibly do. I had read it at eighteen. I kept no diary that year, but I had no need of one to remind me that that was the year I lost my virginity. It was all too apparent from the comments I wrote in my Viking edition (page 18: “Violence substitute for sex”; page 154: “Sexual pain”; page 159: “Sexual power”; page 158: “Sex”). What could we do but throw in the towel and keep both copies?

After a final, post-midnight push, we were done. Our duplicates, plus another hundred or so painful culls, were neatly stacked, ready to be carted off to Goodwill. Sweating and panting beneath our triumphantly united Melvilles, we kissed.

Our library was in impeccable order, but it was a little airless, much as my own life had been before George entered it. And so, by subtle degrees, as the weeks passed, George’s style began to retake the upper hand in a not entirely unwelcome fashion. As the excessively rectilinear foundation lines of a new house are softened by the addition of a few windblown weeds here, a knocked-over tricycle there, so the flawlessness of our new system was softened by the forces of entropy and my husband, which are closely allied. Our bedside tables started to sag under



the weight of new, unsorted volumes. The Shakespeares reshuffled. One day I noticed that the *Iliad* and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* had somehow found their way to the Friends and Relatives section. Confronted with the evidence, George crossed his fingers and said, "Well, Gibbon and I were like *that*."

A couple of weeks ago, when George was out of town, I decided to reread *Travels with Charley*. I got into bed with the copy I had first read the summer I turned seventeen. I was settling into the familiar feel of my crumbly old paperback, the one with Steinbeck sitting cross-legged next to his poodle on the cover, when I reached page 192. There, next to a passage about the dwindling redwood forests of California, in a younger version of my husband's handwriting—I'd recognize it anywhere—was the plaintive comment "Why do we destroy the environment?"

We must have had identical copies, and we'd kept George's. My books and his books had become our books. We were really married.

❧ THE JOY OF SESQUIPEDALIANS ❧

When my older brother, Kim, and I were children, our father used to tell us stories about a bookworm named Wally. Wally, a squiggly little vermicule with a red baseball cap, didn't merely like books. He ate them. The monosyllables he found in most children's books failed to satisfy his voracious appetite, so he turned instead to the dictionary, which offered a richer bill of fare. In *Wally the Wordworm*, a chronicle of some of our hero's lexicographic adventures that my father wrote when I was eleven, Wally savored such high-calorie morsels as *syzygy*, *ptarmigan*—which tasted pterrible at first, until he threw away the *p*—and *sesquipedalian*, which looks as if it means "long word" and, in fact, does. Inspired by Wally, Kim and I spent years vying to see who could find the best sesquipedalian. Kim won with *paradimethylaminobenzaldehyde*, a smelly chemical that we used to sing to the tune of "The Irish Washerwoman."

One of my greatest disappointments about growing up