



READING  
THROUGH  
THE  
NIGHT

JANE TOMPKINS

Christopher Bernard

## Reading for Your Life

*Reading Through the Night*

Jane Tompkins

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Why, really, do we read novels, stories, poems, memoirs – that fuzzy bundle of things written down and absorbed by the eye from page or screen, or by the ear on services like Audible? Most of us would probably say, if we were candid and not trying to impress someone else, or, even more foolishly, ourselves, because it's absorbing – entertaining: fun. Sometimes more than fun: sometimes it saves our lives.

Though college professors have been known to forget this, reading is not some intellectually detached examination between a piped and a retort; it is an intensely, even shockingly, personal experience. Readers love a novel that won't let them go; following its labyrinth of words deep into the caverns of the moon. They relish a story that gets under their skin; that defines problems they may have faced, or can imagine facing, and finds solutions that are emotionally and intellectually and morally satisfying. Their spirits are danced into fillips of joy by a poem that names things, in letters shining like fire, that we are forever stumbling over in the darkness of our tongues; by how poetry creates worlds just by naming them, like a god.

Many a person's life has been changed, overwhelmingly and permanently, by a book: "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Moby-Dick," "Ulysses," the Communist Manifesto, the Bible. Commonly this happens in adolescence, but it can occur at any period of dramatic personal change, when one feels lost, harassed by demands we can neither face nor meet, or abandoned by those we care about or the supports that until now gave life sense and hope. Sometimes we read through the night because we can't help being mesmerized by an author's language; sometimes because we are desperate for the rising of the sun.

Jane Tompkins has been exploring literature as personal encounter at least since her absorbing memoir, “A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned.” In that book, about her years as a professor of literature, and her discontent with much she found in her profession, she began challenging the approach to literature that still dominates American universities. That approach effectively removes the study of literature from the context of the lives of both author and reader, treating it as either an autonomous linguistic artifact, frozen in an amber of timelessness and grammar, or as a piece of socio-political evidence, or weaponized rhetorical thread, to be used in the indefinitely open court of contemporary condemnation. Either way, the human encounter involved in any reading – in any writing – of a novel, poem, story, memoir, play, is either ignored as irrelevant or dismissed as sentimental, unprofessional, or merely an embarrassment, like being caught crying in the faculty lounge.

Now retired, and suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome, which has drastically limited her physical activities, Professor Tompkins has returned to, and deepened, the explorations she began in the earlier book. And she has discovered what many of us knew in the wayward wisdom of adolescence, though some of us may have forgotten it in a sometimes false understanding of “maturity.” And that is that literature is not only entertainment of the highest order (something never to be despised, despite the killjoy puritans who run academia and envy the love for poets and storytellers that never landed on a critic); but is ultimately about shining a revealing light, sometimes painfully so, over our brief lives and our solitary, limited, imperfect selves.

And the result is this deeply personal and engaging book.

Bravely and lucidly, Tompkins presents us with close, personal readings of work by a number of authors who have helped make sense of her life, her relationships, her weaknesses and strengths, her limitations and gifts, her bouts of atrocious luck (such as the incurable, debilitating ailment she lives with), and her inestimably good fortune – her courage, honesty, grace, intelligence, and capacity for love, all of which warm these pages.

The first such book that seems to have opened the author to the capacity of reading to prise the stones of her life into illumination, was a gift from a close friend: “Sir Vidya’s Shadow,” Paul Theroux’s memoir of his long, complex friendship, and mortifying break, with V. S. Naipaul.

Theroux is a widely read and esteemed American author, though living for most of his professional life in England. Naipaul, born in Trinidad of Indian parents, also lived most of his life in England, won a Nobel, and is generally considered one of the pre-eminent anglophone writers of the last half century. The two were friends for decades; the break happened in a moment; the echoes of the break, and the questions it raised – questions that have never been satisfactorily answered – echoed for many years.

Reading Theroux's book raised many questions for Tompkins – about friendship, loyalty, seemingly motiveless cruelty, the dynamics of marriage and their effect on other relationships, and the ambiguities, and the ambivalences, of any long intimacy. And the search for answers led her to examine Naipaul's and Theroux's other writings, as she looked for clues about the personalities and life decisions of the authors and their fraught friendship. As Theroux turned out to be the more personal of the two, exposing considerably more of his warts and weaknesses than Naipaul, Tompkins concentrated on his work until she discovered some cautiously revealing writing by the elusive, judgmental, non-introspective Naipaul – and then a devastating biography that lays bare Sir Vidya's profoundly imperfect humanity in humiliating detail.

As she explored the complex emotional lives of the two men, Tomkins found herself almost involuntarily drawing parallels, sometimes painfully clear, with her own life, which by now contained a long past with many complex relationships, from parents to the complications of marriage, career, and love, to the painful present and an uncertain future. And with those examinations, and the comparisons they suggested, came, partial at first and then more comprehensive, the sorts of revelation that can treat, and sometimes help heal, long-untended emotional wounds. A book, she learned, can be a probe, a scalpel, a flashlight, a lens; in a window on other lives, she found her own ghostlike reflections. And in those reflections found lost pieces of herself.

Other writers also provoked such close and intimately tinged readings from the author. They included Henning Mankell, with her downbeat, gray-toned Wallander mysteries, and Ann Patchett, in a book of essays, "This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage," with passing visits to Shunryu Suzuki's "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," Rachel Remen's "My Grandfather's Blessings," Jeff Klinkenberg's "Alligators in B-flat," Stacey D'Erasmus's "The Art of Intimacy,"

and Elena Ferrante's "The Days of Abandonment," all of which threw lights of various brightnesses, fractured and oblique and refracted, into the author's shadows.

All of Tompkins' readings are perceptive, sensitive, of interest in themselves, but the main thrust is how they helped Tompkins to read herself. This strategy is tricky, of course, as it can slip altogether too easily into the narcissistic and self-serving, but, if anything, Tompkins is too hard on herself, and succumbs only rarely to forms of self-indulgence such an enterprise as this makes almost inevitable. The final, surely intended, effect is of how this openly personal kind of reading, pursued in good conscience, with honesty and a healthy skepticism for the ego's enduring talent for self-protection, can deepen our understanding of ourselves as well as of the people in our lives and of humanity in general; can help us, in ways unique to it, follow the famous Delphic command – to "know thyself" – that we ignore at our peril.

In the end, the author has done us, her readers, as well as herself, and literature and literary studies, a peculiarly timely service, when literature is in danger of drowning in a sea of irrelevancies, false hopes, and even falser denunciations. Hers is surely not the only way to read a book – there are reasons to store pipeds and retorts, the driest of theses and the purplest of manifestoes, in even the most personal of libraries – but it is a primary way, and one that motivates most readers for whom literature is not a profession – and was the first way for most of those for whom it is. We read first in order to escape the world and ourselves – and then, at last, to find them. May the academy have the humility to accept its salutary lesson. It is a way of salvation only literature can offer.

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Christopher Bernard is co-editor of *Caveat Lector*. His new novel "Meditations on Love and Catastrophe at The Liars' Café" will be published later this year. He is the author of two previous novels as well as plays and collections of short fiction and poetry.