

My Fictional Friends

Never, never did she feel in life the sense of recognition, the companionship, the great warm fact of solidarity that she found between the covers of a book.

Rachel Cusk *Arlington Park*

In a strange way I have come to know and befriend some of the people in the books I read. They are usually individuals who confront the same problems I do, have the same aspirations and cultural sensitivities that I have or would like to have if I was more sophisticated or better read. They are doing things I have done or dream about doing and they are doing them with greater depth and knowledge than I could ever hope to in my lifetime.

Moreover, I probably know some of my fictional friends better than my real ones. In *How to Read and Why* Harold Bloom wrote that one of the reasons we read is *"Because you can know, intimately only a very few people, and perhaps you never know them at all. After reading *The Magic Mountain* you know Hans Castorp thoroughly, and he is greatly worth knowing."* And in a recent introduction to Alice Munro's short story, *The Bear Came Over the Mountain Sarah*, Sarah Polley writes that *"...I have had a relationship with this story that has been a powerful and as transformative as any I have had with another human being."*

As Maureen Corrigan summed it up in her recent book, *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading*, *"It's not that I don't like people. It's just that when I'm in the company of others—even my nearest and dearest—there always comes a moment when I'd rather be reading a book."* Corrigan implies that other people take her away from herself, whereas in returning to her books, she is at the same time returning to herself, at least the self that she isn't able to be

in the presence of others. I know that is how I sometimes feel in rushing back to a book I am reading. It has entered my life and I don't want it to leave.

Leonard Schiller

Brian Morton's *Starting Out in the Evening* mesmerized me. The story concerns a young woman and a very old man, Leonard Schiller. Schiller is a writer. I am trying to be one. His early novels had a profound influence on the woman, Heather Wolfe, a graduate student in literature. She arranges to meet him in order to gather materials for her thesis on his work. I have worked with attractive young women on their thesis. The novel describes the course of their relationship.

While that naturally charmed me, I was even more intrigued by the character of the old writer. He is 71, fat, fastidious and very slow afoot. He is not well, suffers from various ailments, although he hasn't lost his wit entirely. It was his age that got to me. I am not far removed from 71 and was ill at the time I read the book. I dread being the way he was depicted in the tale--his slow shuffle, his ugly body, and lack of productivity. And I dreaded my illness that continued day after day while I was reading about his.

Of course, all this contrasted with the youth, the spirit, and gumption of the young woman. This difference made the book for me. Not the witty, attractive Heather or the aging, infirm Schiller. Not the numerous philosophical insights scattered densely throughout the novel. But the striking contrast between youth and old age. Between a vigorous and talented young person and an old and weary man. For a moment, a very brief one, she made him feel young again. For a moment, she made me feel young again too.

Starting Out in the Evening was also chock-full of the sort of truths and philosophical insights that characterize serious fiction at its best. If literature can become a

conversation between the reader and the character on the page, this book, at least in my case, was an exemplar *par excellence*.

Morton: *Maybe the best thing for your health would be to have a fascinating young woman in your life.*

Katzev: No doubt about it. I'll feel alive again. It will be exhilarating. Still, it can only last awhile. Eventually it will become as tedious as anything else and the consequences will surely be devastating. Of course, none of this will deter me in the least.

M: *If life had taught her anything—if she had a philosophy of life—it probably boiled down to that: Go with the skid.*

K: Perhaps so. At times I wish I had been able to go with the skid. Things might have been a bit different. But then it wouldn't have been me.

M: *Maybe you reach an age where you have to compromise. Isn't that the essence of maturity?*

K: I know this view is rather fashionable and always thought to be productive. But what good is a compromise if your principles fall by the wayside?

M: *He had found himself ridiculously interested in impressing this young woman. She would blow in like a little whirlwind, eager to hear him say wise things; and he wanted to have wise things to say—he wanted to be worthy of her admiration.*

K: Ah, yes. Trying to impress a young woman is a powerful force. But in the end, when you are done, nothing has changed—not you, not the young woman.

M: *Life made more sense in the Middle Ages, when no one lasted past forty.*

K: Often now I think how much truth there is to this idea. What is the purpose of going on day after day without anything to show for it other than a co-payment receipt from the doctor?

M: *...brain-dead aura of the suburbs.*

K: Love that phrase. It captures my experience in the suburbs exactly. It is all encompassing and associated with great wave of sleepiness.

M: *The primary human need, he decided—stronger than the need for food or sex or love—is the need for recognition, the need to make a mark in the world.*

K: It isn't primarily the recognition although that can be enjoyed for a moment. It's the "making of a mark" that is the stronger of the two. It motivates just about everything I do, even though I am nothing but an amateur.

M: *She had given him an astonishing gift, the gift of her interest...[she] had accomplished the impossible: she had made him feel young.*

K: A gift most fervently desired. Where does one find such "interest" these days? It isn't much to ask, after all.

Starting Out in the Evening was a sad tale of an aging and infirm author, whose writing life was over but who could still be moved by another person. As I read the book, I saw all too much of myself in Schiller. But I also enjoyed being surprised by his insights and chatting with him about them. We don't have an easy time knowing ourselves. Sometimes a good book makes our task a little easier, to say nothing of the pleasure it gives to talk things over with someone else.

Henry Perowne

Ian McEwan's *Saturday* is an intellectually rich novel about a single day in the life of Henry Perowne, a British neurosurgeon. I read the book three years ago, read it with enormous pleasure, and continue to think about it to this day. *Saturday* was one of those tales that I didn't want to end and in a way, it never has.

Henry Perowne is a deeply reflective man. He muses, ruminates, broods and wonders about one thing or another--the nature of his discipline, his family the routine chores that occupy his day, and the troublesome times in which he lives

during the early years of the 21st century. The changing conditions of the contemporary world are a constant worry, as is the apparent decline of Western values and ideals.

I admired Perowne and felt a certain affinity with his introspections and the life he led. I also worry about those very same issues and have had a life not unlike his. But the Henry in *Saturday* is younger than I am now so in a way his tale allowed me to recapture some of those heady days of yesteryear, days of a crazy-busy academic and family life that seem now like they belong to another person. Did I brood then as much as he does? It is hard to tell: who can remember if and what they brooded about thirty years ago? But since I do now, I have no reason to believe I didn't then.

I also I paused to reflect on his musings and the extent to which I agreed with them or not. As a result, although it was not a very lengthy novel, it took me forever to finish—a pleasure devoutly treasured by this reader. And for a while I befriended Perowne and experienced his weekend day somewhat, as though I was going through it with him side by side.

McEwan describes “the drift, the white noise of [Perowne’s] solitary thought” and at one point characterizes his state as a “folly of over-interpretation.” Henry speculates a good deal about the origins of human behavior and difficulties of identifying them with any precision. He also expresses his optimism about the ability of science to unravel the mysteries of the brain and consciousness. At the same time Perowne recognizes the role of random events in governing one’s life, including his own, and he often muses about the power of “accidents of character and circumstance.”

Together we carried on a dialogue about these issues and exchanged views about our beliefs. We talked about several in an exchange of ideas that make the reading experience such a treasure:

It's a commonplace of parenting and modern genetics that parents have little or no influence on the characters of their children.

But what really determines the sort of person who's coming to live with you is which sperm finds which egg, how the cards in the two packs are chosen, then how they are shuffled, halved and spliced at the moment of recombination.

...statistical probabilities are not the same as truths.

No more big ideas. The world must improve, if at all, by tiny steps. People mostly take an existential view—having to sweep the streets for a living looks like simple bad luck. It's not a visionary age. The streets need to be cleaned.

In this way Henry Perowne became my friend for a while. I was back in the classroom either teaching or learning about these matters. But all this occurred in a work of fiction, on the page, embedded in a story with its own appeal and mystery. I could move along at my own pace. There were no papers to grade or exams to take. Who could also for more from a work of fiction—ideas, a friend, and questions of consequence.

Perowne's daughter is a poet and he is amused by her tutorials to try to get him up to speed about literary works. In turn, I was amused by their delightful banter and the ironic exchanges they have with one another about his lack of interest in following her lead. And it is clear that Perowe is not much of a reader. So even

though he is a deeply reflective man, I suppose one should not have been surprised, as I was at first, by the following passage

Henry read the whole of Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary, two acknowledged masterpieces. At the cost of slowing his mental processes and many hours of his valuable time, he committed himself to the shifting intricacies of these sophisticated fairy stories. What did he grasp after all? That adultery is understandable but wrong, that nineteenth-century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so.

No, Henry is a scientist devoted to his work and the promise he sees in neurophysiology. Still he is restless, at times silently dissatisfied with his life, and yearns for something more. If it is anything, the missing element is music.

There's nothing in his own life that contains this inventiveness, this style of being free. The music speaks to unexpressed longing or frustration, a sense that he's being denied himself an open road, the life of the heart celebrated in the songs. There has to be more to life than merely saving lives.

I don't have a friend like Henry Perowne. I wish I did. But he became a close friend during the time I was reading the book. I greatly enjoyed his company and the chance to spend some time with him. And once in a while, I think back about our conversations and return to the ideas we discussed. It seems we had a good deal in common especially our tendency to spend part of each day ruminating about one thing or another and examining the contents of our mind down to the smallest synapse.

Simon Heywood

Now that you have finished reading Elliot Perlman's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* don't you think it is amusing to read what the reviewers had to say about it? One critic described it as "fat, pretentious" an "embarrassment" and could not believe it was ever published. Another described Perlman's "talent for sharp satire," and noted that portions of the book were "marvelous stuff." Still another vacillated between "distinctly odd" and an "exciting gamble of a novel." Isn't this bizarre? What can a reader make of these differences? Shall I read the book or not? There is only one way. Forget about the critics and give the book a try. You did. Didn't you think it was worth it?

Did you notice the way the reviewers were silent about the effects this ambitious novel had on them personally? Instead they went about evaluating the text or Perlman's writing skill or lack thereof? I suppose that is the customary practice. Critics don't talk much about how a book affects them personally. The critics of Perlman's novel didn't tell you how they *felt* about the tale and the characters, especially 32-year-old--Simon Heywood, the central figure who is depicted from seven different perspectives, including his own. What did they think about Simon? What kind of experience did they have in reading about him? Did his life and dilemmas reflect anything about their own life or contemporary life in general? Don't you think these are fair questions? You have read the book; what are your views about Simon? Did you like him as much as I did?

Yes, I found Simon an immensely likeable person whose plight I understood quite well as it bears a certain similarity to my own. In one way or another this is true of most of my fictional friends. Perlman writes: "...readers usually identify with one or other of the characters in a story...That is why most of them read fiction in the first place." This is certainly true of most of my fictional friends.

You might think it odd that I identified with Simon, but I did. I know you think my life bears little or no relationship to his. But don't forget that while I did not lose my teaching position because of budgetary cutbacks or because of any impropriety, true or not, I did leave the academic world long before I had to. And, as you know, while I do not drink or live a lethargic life with a prostitute, even one as beautiful one as Angelique, my life is drifting aimlessly now in much the same way his did.

Simon also never fit in, he never found a world that accepted his quirky views or made the most of his versatile mind. Remember when Simon says:

I was just not cut out for the business of living at a time like this, a time when wondering, caring, dreaming...they were just not selling, they were uncool, unhip, not sexy.

Doesn't that describe him perfectly? Simon read poetry at a time when not many others did. He really had no one to talk with about the poems, the music, the movies, the history and the politics that meant something to him. Not even Anna, his one and only Anna, the Anna who had rejected him in spite of or perhaps because of his deep love for her. *She says: "I wasn't any longer feeling augmented by him but diminished."* I doubt I would have felt so diminished. Instead, I know I would have enjoyed talking with Simon about the arts, culture, and ideas that he was drawn to.

I too have never felt truly comfortable in any of the places I've lived or worked. None of my views ever really met with much favor other than to a few kindly students and occasional friend. I have always felt just as lonely in this respect as Simon. Do you understand what I'm saying and why I felt so attached to Simon? Like him, I too became somewhat of a recluse, dislocated from much of the world around me, opted out of an ordinary life. At times I thought about moving to

Europe, to a country where culture, mostly the reading tradition, seems to be more highly valued than it is in America. But I knew whatever it was that I hoped to achieve by doing that could, with a little searching, be found right here, in my own neighborhood if I really wanted to make the effort. It was just another of my adolescent longings. I wonder if you have ever felt this way?

But then Simon did something stupid. He “abducted” or so it was claimed, Anna’s son, Sam, who he had previously unbeknownst to Anna and her husband, saved from drowning in their pool. Here, of course, my life departed from his, but not my sympathy for what Simon had to deal with after this act. You help a friend in need. I would have liked to have helped Simon get through the consequences of what he admits was an irrational and futile act. Did you want to console Simon after reading what he had done?

You are a teacher. Didn’t you enjoy reading about how much Simon loved teaching, how he seemed early on to thrive in the experience of teaching young children. Of course, I too loved teaching in the beginning. It is why I came to a college where teaching was central to the academic enterprise. The students continued to make it all worthwhile, at least they did for many years. I would have enjoyed comparing notes with Simon about our days in the classroom. Wouldn’t you have enjoyed that too?

To my way of thinking Simon was a very bright, beguiling young man, full of ideas, many of them seemingly crazy but on analysis ever so sensible who was thoroughly misunderstood by just about everyone, even his therapist who often seemed utterly befuddled by what Simon did and thought. I never thought Simon was depressed as others did, at least, in its clinical form. Rather I thought he was simply a little melancholic, not without justification in my view and he was unhappy, sometimes very much so, just like everyone else. As Alex, his therapist

notes *"Simon has always been, other than for short periods, too involved in things to be clinically depressed."*

There wasn't any pretense to Simon; he was totally honest and up front about everything. That surely doomed him to anything approaching a normal life. Simon also knew as well as anybody else who he was. In describing himself, he says:

I was a man of more than average intelligence seasoned by years of wide and considered reading, a man of not unpleasing visage and of some awareness of the mighty winds and faint breezes that move the world, a man sensitive both to the plight of the many and to that of the man in his shirt sleeves ambling through the leaves in the city park during his lunch hour, desperately trying to keep his own tepid inconsequence at bay with every short and time breath.

He knew his best and he knew his worst, knew how perfectly rational he could be at one time and then at another fall into a web of destructive obsession. Aren't we all a mixture of two or more selves? Don't you see yourself that way? I know I do. And so it was not difficult to admire Simon, to want to read every one of the six-hundred odd pages of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* to learn how things worked out for him. For a very long time Simon was a literary friend of mine and at times a shadowy reflection of the person I am as well. How about you? Did you react the same way as I did?

Do my fictional friendships bespeak of some kind of malady? I don't think so. Other perfectly normal readers seem to have the same kind of relationships. In *So Many Books, So Little Time*, Sara Nelson writes: *"I talk about my books as if they were people, and I choose them the way I choose my friends; because somebody nice introduced us, because I like their looks, because the best of them turn out to be smart and funny and both surprising and inevitable at the same time."*

And Proust is said to have compared friendship to reading, because both activities involved communion with others. He also noted that reading had a key advantage: *“In reading, friendship is suddenly brought back to its original purity. “There is no false amiability with books. If we spend the evening with these friends, it is because we genuinely want to.”*¹

My fictional friends offer the pleasure of their company. They engage me in conversation, pose questions, pass along ideas worthy of consideration, and point the way out of the mundane dilemmas that unsettle my days. It is a treat to know them. They are always there, ready to take up where we last left off, full of sparkling wit and thoughtful commentary. They don't shout or insult me with a nasty word or a sly inuendo. And from time to time they are a source of those truths that do not, as so many have said before, appear in any source other than literature. Who could ask for more of any friend, fictional or otherwise?

¹ Alain de Botton. *How Proust Can Change Your Life*.