

Reading for service on July 11, 2021

Rebecca Solnit—*from A Velocity of Being: Letters to a Young Reader*

Dear Readers,

Nearly every book has the same architecture — cover, spine, pages—but you open them onto worlds and gifts far beyond what paper and ink are, and on the inside they are every shape and power. Some books are toolkits you take up to fix things, from the most practical to the most mysterious, from your house to your heart, or to make things, from cakes to ships. Some books are wings. Some are horses that run away with you. Some are parties to which you are invited, full of friends who are there even when you have no friends. In some books you meet one remarkable person; in others a whole group or even a culture. Some books are medicine, bitter but clarifying. Some books are puzzles, mazes, tangles, jungles. Some long books are journeys, and at the end you are not the same person you were at the beginning. Some are handheld lights you can shine on almost anything.

The books of my childhood were bricks, not for throwing but for building. I piled the books around me for protection and withdrew inside their battlements,

building a tower in which I escaped my unhappy circumstances. . . Books gave me refuge. Or I built refuge out of them, out of these books that were both bricks and magical spells, protective spells I spun around myself. They can be doorways and ships and fortresses for anyone who loves them.

The object we call a book is not the real book, but its potential, like a musical score or seed. It exists fully only in the act of being read; and its real home is inside the head of the reader, where the symphony resounds, the seed germinates. A book is a heart that only beats in the chest of another. The child I once was read constantly and hardly spoke, because she was ambivalent about the merits of communication, about the risks of being mocked or punished or exposed. The idea of being understood and encouraged, of recognizing herself in another, of affirmation, had hardly occurred to her and neither had the idea that she had something to give others. So she read, taking in words in huge quantities, a children's and then an adult's novel a day for many years, seven books a week or so, gorging on books, fasting on speech, carrying piles of books home from the library.

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Like many others who turned into writers, I disappeared into books when I was very young, disappeared into

them like someone running into the woods. What surprised and still surprises me is that there was another side to the forest of stories and the solitude, that I came out that other side and met people there. Writers are solitaries by vocation and necessity. I sometimes think the test is not so much talent, which is not as rare as people think, but purpose or vocation, which manifests in part as the ability to endure a lot of solitude and keep working. Before writers are writers they are readers, living in books, through books, in the lives of others that are also the heads of others, in that act that is so intimate and yet so alone.

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E.B. White on writing and writing for children:

“Some writers for children deliberately avoid using words they think a child doesn’t know. This emasculates the prose and, I suspect, bores the reader. Children are game for anything. I throw them hard words, and they backhand them over the net. They love words that give them a hard time, provided they are in a context that absorbs their attention. I’m lucky again: my own vocabulary is small, compared to most writers, and I tend to use the short words. So it’s no problem for me to write for children. We have a lot in common.”

“Anyone who writes *down* to children is simply wasting his time. You have to write up, not down. Children are demanding. They are the most attentive, curious, eager, observant, sensitive, quick, and generally congenial readers on earth. They accept, almost without question, anything you present them with, as long as it is presented honestly, fearlessly, and clearly. I handed them, against the advice of experts, a mouse-boy, and they accepted it without a quiver. In *Charlotte’s Web*, I gave them a literate spider, and they took that.”

“A writer should concern himself with whatever absorbs his fancy, stirs his heart, and unlimbers his typewriter... A writer has the duty to be good, not lousy; true, not false; lively, not dull; accurate, not full of error. He should tend to lift people up, not lower them down. Writers do not merely reflect and interpret life, they inform and shape life.

[...]

A writer must reflect and interpret his society, his world; he must also provide inspiration and guidance and challenge. Much writing today strikes me as deprecating, destructive, and angry. There are good reasons for anger, and I have nothing against anger. But I think some writers have lost their sense of proportion, their sense of humor, and their sense of

appreciation. I am often mad, but I would hate to be nothing but mad: and I think I would lose what little value I may have as a writer if I were to refuse, as a matter of principle, to accept the warming rays of the sun, and to report them, whenever, and if ever, they happen to strike me.”