

Book Review

Patricia Meyer Spacks, *On Rereading*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. 280 pp.

What happens when we pick up a book and decide to read it all over again? Curious about rereading, Patricia Meyer Spacks embarks on a year-long project to unveil her speculations surrounding rereading various types of literature. *On Rereading* is created as a medium for describing the rereading project. The chapters are organized into categories by the type of texts she chose to reread: childhood, higher education, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, pleasure-seeking, professional, generally acclaimed top reads, guilty pleasures, and reading together. The final chapter is a coda, where Dr. Spacks enlightens the reader with the knowledge she gained from such rereading experiences.

Immediately the reader learns the motivation behind the rereading experiment, that rereading “may shed light on why and how we read in the first place.”¹ Rereading isn’t just about revisiting a text, but can perhaps reveal a deeper meaning to how and why we read. The reader is encouraged to be intentional about establishing a purpose for every reading, while recognizing that the chosen reading purpose will steer a reader in a particular direction. The reader is given multiple reasons to consider revisiting a text, like the comfort in knowing what will happen next and the ability to look at the text through a different lens and gain a new perspective. The overarching message in chapter one is to encourage the readers to start their own rereading journeys.

The next chapter, “Once Upon a Time,” reflects on rereading childhood short stories and novels such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Story of Ferdinand*, *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe* and *Kidnapped*. Interests change, as discovered upon rereading *Alice in Wonderland* when Spacks reveals “although I loved the book as a child and read at least parts of it over and over, I found rereading it as an adult tedious.”² The conclusion is that children enjoy rereading more than anyone else mainly due to the stability and comfort of knowing the plot a story will tell. When rereading children’s books, we are rereading our younger

selves, which allows for a self-reflection and comparison of who we were once to who we are now. Rereading is personally enlightening because it allows for intentional reflection of growth and change.

The next nine chapters focus on describing Spacks's experiences of rereading select novels. "A Civilized World" contains a rereading of *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, which is a back-and-forth summary of the plots. These rereadings tell of the reader's ability to recognize and interpret character behaviors at a deeper level. "Other Times: The 1950s," "Other Times: The 1960s," and "Other Times: The 1970s" discuss the importance of going beyond the text to understand effects of the social world on authorship and the reader's experience. The 1950s highlights *Lucky Jim* and *Catcher in the Rye*, the 1960s revisits the *Golden Notebook*, and the 1970s retells the experience of *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*. Rereading a text from a specific time period may make the reader feel "both familiar and forever new partly because they [books] change as we change."³ When we reread a text from a past era, both the reader and the book have changed; the individual has encountered new life experiences and the book has changed because it may reflect a different social perspective. Being critical about who we are when reading can reveal a great deal about ourselves, but sometimes we enjoy reading books for pure pleasure, as discussed by Spacks in "The Pleasure Principle," where readers reflect on choice reading. A few pleasurable reads include *Brighton Rock*, *Middlemarch*, and *Wizard of Oz*. The reader is encouraged to realize that as one proceeds through life, the knowledge gained will affect understanding by helping to shape additional pleasurable reading experiences.

Next, Spacks takes a break from revisiting pleasurable readings and switches to "Professional Reading." Professional works include poetry, published journal articles, and acclaimed novels such as *The Seasons*, *Tom Jones*, and *A Simple Story*. It is important to realize the value behind purposeful reading, responding to a circumstance, and assessing literature with a critical lens. Specifically, the purpose of professional reading is to take public action by writing for publication and teaching others.

The final three chapters engage the reader personally in "Books I Ought to Like," "Guilty Pleasures," and "Reading Together." In accordance with the title "Books I Ought to Like," Spacks feels guilty lacking fondness for books she once recalled enjoying. Surprisingly, she discovers joy in books once viewed as distasteful. *Pickwick Papers* was once described with "annoyance" and "irritation,"⁴ but upon rereading the novel arrives at admiration and greatness by finding joy in appreciating the novel's details. As we expose ourselves to new literature and encounter life experiences, we realize our tastes change over time. In another example, *The Good Soldier*, a top-seller in its time, resulted in a

reread that was simply unenjoyable. The text lacked joy and Spacks developed a grand annoyance with the narrator, who was “needlessly confusing and tedious.”⁵ For readers seeking to read for pure pleasure, an entire chapter is dedicated to “Guilty Pleasures.” The series by P. G. Wodehouse, particularly *The Most of P. G. Wodehouse* is the highlight of discussion. Readings by Wodehouse “offered the same undemanding satisfactions,”⁶ reveling in the comfort of rereading. Comfort can also be sought in book clubs, described in the book’s final chapter, “Reading Together.” The reader is cautioned about being with others when reading because people are easily influenced by one another, which can often result in constricted thinking. Spacks remembers the talk far better than the story, but despite the social influences on a book’s memory and interpretation, books clubs are pleasurable because “talking about the book with my colleagues was glorious.”⁷

“Coda: What I Have Learned” is a message highlighting the most important reasons to reread. Perhaps the most exhilarating part of rereading a text is its ability to arouse a new but comforting experience, which Spacks declares as “exploring new ground in familiar territory.”⁸ Rereading allows the reader to focus on the intricacies of a story rather than a simple plot. By focusing on the details, rereading augments the ability of the reader to enlarge consciousness of the text and its connection to the surrounding world. Additionally, the reader is reminded about the limitations of rereading, with Spacks caution of “what we seek is often what we find; rereading can enlighten us about what we are looking for now and what we have sought in the past.”⁹ Even though words on a page are unchanging, humans are constantly changing based on their past selves, creating an invigorating experience between the text and reader.

A variety of text types are explored, which are likely to appeal to a diverse population of readers. Organization of the texts into familial categories appears to be a practical approach to summarizing the rereading of multiple texts. However, it is unlikely that readers will possess the same reading repertoire as Spacks and they likely won’t require intricate details of each individual plot to understand the value behind rereading. Additionally, when Spacks compares her rereads to her initial reads, there’s no documentation of what she was thinking then. Therefore, she only can evaluate what she thinks she was thinking back then, which can be a very biased perspective, in which we tend to portray ourselves and our former selves in the best light.

The rereading experiment may have strong internal validity as a rich personal experience, but this could make readers question the external validity of her experiment, especially considering reading is such a personal experience where all readers have their own unique libraries. Further research is needed to arrive at generalizations about rereading.

On Rereading emphasizes the importance of revisiting a text at different stages of life to provide provoking insights about reading and how it has

affected us and continues to mold and shape our thinking. The purpose of identifying the significance of rereading is justified throughout the many text examples and can be best summed knowing that “in reading as in writing, the more you know, the richer the experience.”¹⁰ Spacks’s book is likely targeted toward English or Reading majors in higher education, but may also be enjoyed by many reading enthusiasts.

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Notes

1. Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *On rereading*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011, 8.
2. *Ibid.*, 34.
4. *Ibid.*, 70.
6. *Ibid.*, 188.
7. *Ibid.*, 198.
8. *Ibid.*, 219.
10. *Ibid.*, 265.
11. *Ibid.*, 277.
12. *Ibid.*, 242.
13. *Ibid.*, 73.