

FOR THE LOVE OF READING

# Oh Reader

WHAT DO YOU READ?  
NO, REALLY

UNDER YOUR BREATH:  
THE BIOLOGY OF READING

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AS AN ANCHOR



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ISSUE 008

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# Inscribe that Book

BY MARIA SPEIDEL

Giving someone a book? Toss out the gift receipt, take out a pen, and write an inscription on the end paper.

I think  
you'll get  
a kick out  
of this  
book.

*A Brilliant  
Novel*

"An unusually brilliant first novel."  
—*New York Times*

"... remarkable and absorbing ...  
profoundly moving ..."—*Saturday Review*

"Will recall to many the comedies and tragedies of Booth Tarkington's *Seventeen*, but *The Catcher in the Rye* reaches far deeper into reality. To anyone who has ever brought up a son, every page of Mr. Salinger's novel will be a source of wonder and delight—and concern."  
—*The Book-of-the-Month Club News*

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THIS IS A REPRINT OF THE ORIGINAL HARDCOVER  
EDITION PUBLISHED BY LITTLE, BROWN & CO.

**WHEN SHE WAS TWELVE** or thirteen, Jane Austen dedicated *The Beautifull Cassandra*, an extremely short, very comic novel about a young girl scampering around London, to her beloved older sister, who was not coincidentally named Cassandra.

The handwritten novel now lives in climate-controlled glory at Oxford University's famous Bodleian Library. At the beginning, Jane wrote:

*Madam*

*You are a Phoenix. Your taste is refined, your Sentiments are noble, & your Virtues innumerable. Your Person is lovely, your Figure, elegant, & your Form, magestic. Your manners, are polished, your Conversation is rational & your appearance singular. If therefore the following Tale will afford one moment's amusement to you, every wish will be gratified of*

*Your most obedient  
humble Servant  
The Author*

The modest Ikea bookshelves in my own library—and I use that word loosely—contain a few copies of books signed by famous authors—such as Helen Fielding and Edna O'Brien—but the ones that mean the most to me, much like Jane's note to Cassandra, are written by people I know. When I was small, my grandparents gave me and my brothers a shelf-load of children's classics, doled out over holidays and birthdays. On the Kelly-green end paper of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, my grandmother wrote, in tidy nurse's script, "To Maria/Christmas 1973/From Grandpa & Grandma Speidel." (The price on the dust jacket is \$3.95!) Decades later, when I found myself reading to my children from a worn, red-cloth copy of *The House at Pooh Corner* that has "To Maria" written in it in that same handwriting, the book became more than a collection of stories by A.A. Milne. *Pooh* is a piece of my Massachusetts childhood that I have passed on to my son and daughter in our little California house. I marvel that four generations have touched the same pages.

Then there is my mom's 1934 copy of *Little Women*. Its luxe, navy-blue silk moiré cover comes complete with a tiny hole right below the author's name. I assume that the missile that caused the offending cavity originated from her brother's BB gun. It tore clear through to page 88. The odd juxtaposition

of the pellet-hole and the silk somehow perfectly encapsulates my elegant tomboy mother, who signed her name in pencil inside.

And somehow, our family owns three copies of *The Catcher in the Rye*, but the one I like best is a tiny, tattered, fifty-cent Signet paperback (circa 1959). This copy originally belonged to my beloved maternal grandmother, Dee-Dah. In all its yellowed-page beat-up glory, it has accompanied me on a decades-long migration from her house in Ohio to my childhood home in Massachusetts through apartments in New York City and on to Los Angeles. In blue ballpoint scrawled at a very casual ninety-degree angle, she wrote a note to my uncle. "Dick, I think you'll get a kick out of this book."

Sixty-some years later, I still get a kick out of the time-capsule quality of Dee-Dah's note. Her language syncs with Salinger's, for one thing. No one talks about getting a kick out of anything anymore—and no one calls their sons Dick anymore, either. Her Dick briefly attended military school in Pennsylvania, just like J.D. Salinger and his fictional doppelgänger Holden, which is, I assume, one of the reasons my grandmother thought he needed to read *The Catcher in the Rye*. I adored the book when I first devoured this very copy as a young teen, and I appreciate Salinger in a different way as an adult. But what I really love is the conversation that it allows me to have across the years with a beloved woman long gone.

Knowing my grandmother, who loved a good laugh and a good zinger, I interpret that eleven-word inscription as showing that my grandmother, like Salinger and his most famous fictional creation, did not stand for phonies. This aligns with all my best memories of a fun, convention-flouting grandparent, who let me and my two brothers stay up way past bedtime watching forbidden late-night TV like *Love, American Style* and even Johnny Carson. Beside her chubby dachshund, Karl, we piled onto her long, white-leather Chesterfield sofa. She sipped Jim Beam and soda on ice, we guzzled cans of Dr. Pepper or glasses of Tang. Her charm bracelets jangled as she lit cigarillos and the ice cubes in her drink melted.

Nearly two years ago, right before Christmas in the pre-vaccine, serious-shutdown portion of the pandemic, I discovered another inscription from Dee-Dah. It was a moment when I decided that I couldn't work for one more minute in my home office/library unless I rearranged all the furniture. This inevitably

involved much un-shelving, dusting, and reshelving of books. While wiping down a homely, mud-colored copy of *The Hard Winter* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, I absentmindedly flipped it open. I had loved *The Little House on the Prairie* series once upon a time, but I hadn't really looked at this book in years—decades, maybe. There, in a thin, looping line of fading black fountain pen, was something I had never noticed before. Dee-Dah had written, "Looks like the same kind of winter we are having. / Xmas 1945."

I come from a family where mordant humor is held in the highest regard. So, seventy-five years later, in a pandemic year of ever-increasing uncertainty, when rearranging furniture was my chosen mode of self-care, those off-the-cuff jokey words from my grandmother reached me like a warm, reassuring, slightly salty hug.

I can speculate about what was happening in the backdrop of my grandmother's life, but I cannot know exactly what was so difficult about the winter of 1945. The war was over. Rationing done with. My family did not lose anyone close, but obviously death was all around. Mom's beloved swim teacher died on Omaha Beach. The copies of World War II newspapers and magazines that Dee-Dah kept in piles in her basement for years bore witness to the horrors of that time, including the shocking *Life* edition documenting the liberation of people from the concentration camps. Maybe she was wrapping presents at the last minute during a cold Ohio winter, thinking of such things.

Or was she thinking of my grandfather, who worked hard during the war running an aluminum kitchenware factory that procured government contracts and transitioned to wartime production, making items for the Navy? Was the factory's future now uncertain? Had all the overnight train trips to Washington worn him down?

Maybe it was just extremely cold that year. Whatever the specific reason, Dee-Dah's words conveyed a matter-of-fact strength and acceptance of hardship. It could be endured—laughed at, even. At the end of 2020, with the pandemic raging and vaccines still months away, this was exactly what I needed to know: They got through that hard winter. I would get through mine, and live to giggle again on a long couch somewhere, ice tinkling in my glass.

In serious book-collecting circles, published books containing handwritten dedications by

an author are called "presentation copies," and can add significantly to the book's value. For instance, in 2014, a copy of *Flappers and Philosophers*, containing short story "Bernice Bobs her Hair," sold for \$100,000 because it included rare, tongue-in-cheek handwritten notes to a man named J.W. Rogers from both author F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife and muse, Zelda. Then there are "association copies"—books once owned by a famous author, like Herman Melville's old copy of Owen Chase's *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex of Nantucket*, with no less than eighteen pages filled with the author of *Moby Dick*'s handwritten notes.

But in my book, the personal is always best. There are so many on my shelves. My mom misspelled ciao in "Ciao Bella" when she wrote a note to me in Marcella Hazan's *Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking*. I use that book a couple times a month, and it always makes me smile. Or my husband's copy of *The Beatles: Recording Sessions*, a gift from an ex-girlfriend, who did not share his musical taste and wrote a stinging, "Dear Michael, Happy Birthday, ZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ. . ." Luckily for me, I met Michael shortly after that breakup, and the ex's bad vibes were long ago erased with Wite-Out by my practical husband.

I have love notes and mixtapes from Michael in our early days squirreled away in bureau drawers and boxes. I rarely take them out, even though I cherish them. But my books are always standing at attention on the shelves, waiting to tell me their stories—and my own.

The next time you buy someone a book as a gift, go old-school and mark it up. I know that in the days of internet shopping and gift receipts, it is hopelessly old-fashioned—but do it anyway. If necessary, do a tiny bit of sleuthing first to make sure the giftee does not own a copy. Then, take a pen, record the date, note the birthday or holiday, write a poem, draw a picture, make a joke, be as hyperbolic as a young Jane Austen. There is probably someone in your life who deserves to be called a Phoenix. Someday, someone may take the book off the shelf and read the exact message that they need. If not, there is always Wite-Out. ■

Maria Speidel is a writer who lives in Los Angeles in a small house with a lot of books.