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ORION'S
BELT

MAY 2022

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The Ramparts, as Cold
and Implacable as Love

Jess Hyslop

The Geomancer

Gary Every

The Importance of
Re-Reading

Joshua Fagan

Orion's Belt

May 2022

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Cover art: Karin Murray-Bergquist
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The Geomancer

by Gary Every

People called him a wizard
but that is not how he saw himself.

He was an acute observer of the natural world
and a very good listener. Listening was a rare trait
in human beings. Most people who considered themselves wise
liked to hear themselves talk— tall tales and
misunderstood rumors,
but the geomancer liked to listen,
singing birds, buzzing insects, boasting frogs, and howling
wolves.

He loved to watch the moon believing he was learning
about tides and changing seasons
but discovered cycles within cycles instead.

One early evening, full moon hanging low in the sky,
he saw the silhouettes of geese traversing the lunar orb.
The flock contained far too many geese to count,
shadows crossing the moon over and over.

One day while watching the swallows perform acrobatic dances
high above a snowmelt swollen creek
the geomancer realized that at any given moment
millions of bugs were riding the winds
and travelling the world while humans were unaware.
The wind whispers so many secrets we never hear.

The geomancer stood atop a rocky ridge
watching the geese fly across the moon.

One side of the ridge was forested with gnarled oak trees
and the other side with rows of low scrub brush.
The geomancer knew the ridge represented a fault line

and the bright orange poppies popping out of the soil
meant the ore they would dig out of the ground would be
copper.

The geese cried out as they flew, honking loudly.

The geomancer had never suspected that geese migrated at night
but he was pretty certain they travelled fast and far.

Any bird who saw so much of the world
was probably far wiser than he.

They called him a wizard because he knew
when the last frost had passed and it was safe to plant crops,
knew where to find minerals and medicinal plants,
and the patterns of the animals.

He merely considered himself an acute observer of the natural
world.

The geomancer stood atop the rocky ridge watching geese fly
and wondered if the large birds ever flew beyond the moon,
each feathered being illuminating the heavens
until the sky was filled with billions of migrating stars.

The Importance of Re-Reading

by Joshua Fagan

The idea of re-reading is a strange one, profoundly out of place in a consumerist society. Those who re-read discuss how the experience helps them remember the first, implicitly more memorable time they read a book. Those who don't re-read talk about how they don't have the time. Instead of retreading the same material, they choose to burn with Pater's famous "gemlike flame," always looking for new experiences. Re-reading—not as a flailing, ultimately doomed attempt to recapture the feeling of reading a book for the first time, but as a distinct experience as rewarding as a first read—is rather alien to us.

From a news business focused on capturing the attention of the masses through constant, flashy updates, to tech companies focused on marketing slightly improved versions of devices the consumer base already has, what defines contemporary experience is novelty and constant stimulation. The new is exciting, offering a temporary escape from stultifying routines. The new also makes money. Our economic system relies on convincing people that what they have currently is not good enough. The problem with this premise is not that it's necessarily wrong or that the new is inherently bad. Buying new books, just like new clothes or new appliances, can be a great opportunity for us to expand our horizons, and living in an era of prosperity where we can chase the new is a positive. The problem is unthinkingly accepting the fundamental precept of mass-consumption: that the breathless pursuit of the new will fundamentally bring happiness.

Reading a book for the first time fits into normal patterns of consumption. Admittedly, not all consumption is mindless. Finishing a book requires more time than watching the next Marvel movie and more intentional effort than sitting in front of the TV binging the latest season of *Stranger Things*, but a reader approaching a book for

the first time, looking forward to seeing what happens, is still interacting with it in much the same way as a customer at a restaurant. In exchange for a fixed amount of money, the consumer is temporarily satisfied. Even if the meal or book is enjoyable, the satisfaction provided is transient.

The customer returns to the restaurant. The reader buys another book. And on and on the cycle goes.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with reading for pleasure. A Pew poll from 2012 found that 27% of adults like to read either for entertainment or for escapism, and another 12% read in order to relax. Spending a significant amount of time focused on a book, whether it's Shakespeare or a middling YA fantasy novel, creates a space apart from the hyper-kinetic chaos of the outside world. Actively engaging with a book is different than scrolling through Twitter or spending five minutes watching ten different Netflix shows, as it demands ruminating on perspectives and situations outside your own instead of looking for brief shots of dopamine. A Harris poll found that an outstanding 81% of adults wish they read more. Reading books, broadly speaking, is a positive and should be encouraged. I'm far from a snob who takes pleasure in telling people the "right way" to read. Yet to blindly accept the consumerist, utilitarian view of how we should engage with books is a missed opportunity. Re-reading encourages us to question that mentality and consider new possibilities for what reading can be.

In Ancient Greece, epic poems like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were not written down and read, but recited in the *agora*. Citizens didn't listen to these recitations because they wanted to know whether Odysseus would return to Ithaca. They were interested in the skill of the speaker and the ritual of returning to the journey of Odysseus. These recitations were more similar to the opening ceremonies of the Olympics than to the modern, plot-based conception of narratives. Greek tragedies were similar. These tragedies took familiar stories, like the tales of Oedipus and Orestes, as foundations. Citizens knew

these stories, but they flocked to performances in order to return to these stories and see them through the perspective of the playwright.

This is a direct contrast to the modern obsession with new plots containing unexpected twists and surprises. In Hong Kong, a crowd physically assaulted a man who revealed spoilers about *Avengers: Endgame*. Most anti-spoiler hysteria is thankfully not that intense, but even the idea that a film or book can be “spoiled” if you know major plot details implies that a narrative is valuable because of its plot, and thus experiencing the narrative is of little value if you already know what happens.

There is nothing innately wrong with wanting to be surprised when reading a book. Literary fiction and even non-fiction can surprise and disconcert. Those who willfully reveal what happens to friends or family who don’t want to know are petty individuals. Still, the obsession with wanting others not to discuss what happens in a work, even when that work is years old, borders on the narcissistic, even as it cloaks itself in the language of virtue and selflessness. Yet the main problem with contemporary spoiler hysteria is that it results in a mindset that, in its reduction of a book’s value to its plot, has no conception of why we would read a book after we know its plot.

Jokes are only funny once. Scares and surprises only register once. Even pure entertainment relies to a certain degree on novelty. There are only so many times you can ride on a rollercoaster before it starts losing its charm. Re-reading is valuable because we can return to a book at different times, when we’re in different stages in our lives, and have a different reading experience. Reading *Romeo and Juliet* in my freshman year of high school, I sympathized wholeheartedly with the young lovers. Coming back to it as a more cynical adult, I pity them but lament their recklessness. Neither of these responses are wrong. They’re both authentic reactions from different stages of life. Literature that relates to emotions and relationships, fears and hopes, provide different experiences depending on when and how they’re read. There’s thus value to re-reading these books that exists outside

the consumerist mindset of reading a book to enjoy its plot, then tossing it aside for a newer, shinier book.

Re-reading allows us to engage with the wisdom of works we love. This wisdom is timeless but never static. Reading is a collaborative project between the active mind and the tapestry of words on the page. When the words are inert or the mind slumbers in consumerism, a book has no value beyond the rote conveyance of information or cheap thrills.

The best works are not flat and straightforward. They have hidden, crystalline facets that present themselves variously depending on the emotional state and life experiences of the reader. Re-reading *The Great Gatsby* in your mid-twenties, for instance, is not a shadow or reflection of reading it as a tempestuous, hormonal high-school sophomore, but an entirely different experience. The value of the most poignant or thoughtful books doesn't decay as they're re-read. They constantly surprise us.

The Ramparts, as Cold and Implacable as Love

by Jess Hyslop

I remember the first time I saw you riding across the plain towards my castle walls. Your pennant flew behind you, a red phoenix on a black field, the matching crimson plume of your helm rippling in the wind.

Your armies gathered at your back.

Watching from the ramparts, I knew you were a foe to be reckoned with. I had heard tales, of course, but it was different seeing you with my own eyes: the easy way you sat on your horse, the breadth of your shoulders in your black armor. Yet our walls had never been breached, and you—even you—would not succeed. I ordered the women and children inside the keep, but I kept my gaze trained on you just as yours was on me.

First, you tried the classic storming of the walls. It wasn't a bad idea; you had superior numbers. But you didn't reckon on my buckets of hot pitch, the expertise of my archers. It took four days, but you fell back eventually. When you sounded the retreat, I smiled through the blood coating my cheeks.

The second offensive was more creative. A feint at the walls to draw our fire while an elite group attacked the western gate. I admit I admired your pluck. But I am no fool, and neither are my soldiers. Your men fought hard, but it was easy pickings in the narrow entranceway. I let one escape to take the bad news back to you. I imagined you smiled a little, too.

Next, you dragged in the engines. That, indeed, was daunting. My men trembled at the sight of the trebuchets, your people loading them with rocks coated in violet-tinged wizard fire. But I raised my sword high, even as the fiery missiles rained down upon us and shouted for my defenders to hold. We shall not bend to the Black

Knight, I told them; he shall not break us. Did you see me then, the dawn light glinting from my blade? Did you hear my defiance, even as you screamed to fire again?

You didn't break us. But you did break the walls. The thunderous explosion, the crackle of flames, the cries of wounded men—I still hear them in my dreams. And I still see you, riding towards the breach, close enough now to see the line of your jaw beneath your helm. You gave me no choice; we fell back.

Those were the worst days. The keep was crowded, stinking. You made half-hearted attempts to assail it, but then you drew back. You knew you had time. I slept with my warriors in the bunkhouse and thought incessantly of you: the breach you made in my ramparts, your pennants flying within my walls.

I went up on the roof each day. My warriors begged me not to—too exposed—but I could not resist. The first time, your archers bristled, but your raised hand lowered their bows. I stared down at you, and you stared up at me. Finally, you turned away. I watched you as you went, my heart beating as fast as a war drum.

We should not have survived longer than a week, but we did. An ally smuggled our food through the postern door. I still wonder how they went undetected. Perhaps because you were distracted, because every day I came to the roof and we locked eyes until you turned away. Because every day you stared a little longer.

Days, weeks, passed. My warriors bickered. The women grew wan, the children listless. I knew I had to act.

We rode out on the thirty-ninth day. I polished my armor to a shine and led a golden wedge through your warriors. All was chaos: hooves and steel, sweat and blood. My men fell left and right, but I did not waver. My attention was only on you.

When we met, it was with a clash of blades that rang across the battlefield. My gleaming armor equal and opposite to your black.

Your eyes beneath your helm, so close now as we closed swords.
Your irises grey as the clouds overhead. Your lips curving in greeting.

We fought then. We swung, we blocked, we stabbed. We danced.
We sought each other's

openings, probed for weaknesses, learned the rhythm of each
other's breaths. You pushed me, sometimes, and I gave way, only to
find my strength and force you back. Then it was your turn to gather
yourself, to drive forward again. None dared come between us.

I saw the opening before you did. I had the better of you,
momentarily, and I raised my sword for a strike. But I had
miscalculated. My side was exposed, your blade free to drive into my
armpit. I saw it, then the flicker in your eyes: you saw it too. Your
chance.

You were not supposed to falter.

I could not stop my swing. It bit into your neck where your helm
met your breastplate. Blood spurted over your armor. You slumped,
and your eyes rolled up to find mine. I could not speak. But I held
you as you died, while around us, your armies broke, scattered, fled.

You broke the rules, Sir. Hesitation is not for men like us—no
matter what we feel. Yet, you hesitated. If you hadn't, it would be me
lying here, cold and still.

So here I am. It took me five days to hunt the necromancer and
return with her potion. I dared not take longer; the longer you lie in
death, the less chance this will work. I still do not know if it will. She
said to pour the potion between your lips, and so I have. She told me
it may take a while to act, and so I wait. She told me talking may help
guide you back from beyond. And so I sit here, and I talk.

Your sword is here too; I fetched it from the battlefield. I went to
place it in your hand, but when I clasped your fingers, I found I
could not let them go.

Notes on Contributors

Gary Every is an award winning journalist, slam poet, teacher, storyteller, musician and has been nominated for the Rhysling Award 7 times. While you are reading this he is probably out hiking somewhere.

Jess Hyslop is a British writer of fantasy, fabulism, and science fiction. Her short stories have appeared in venues such as *Interzone*, *Black Static*, and *Cossmass Infinities*. Jess can be found online at www.jesshyslop.com. Offline, she resides in Oxford with a number of slowly decaying houseplants.

Joshua Fagan is a writer and critic currently residing in New York City. His creative work has previously been published in venues including *Daily Science Fiction*, *The Fantastic Other*, and *Star*Line*. As an academic, his work focuses on the intersection of literature, myth, and technology in the aftermath of Darwin, and his critical work has been published in *The Robert Frost Review*. He is the founder and editor-in-chief of the literary speculative-fiction publication *Orion's Belt*. His YouTube channel has received over 1.6 million views.