



Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading: Finding and Losing Myself in Books

Maureen Corrigan

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“It’s not that I don’t like people,” writes Maureen Corrigan in her introduction to *Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading*. “It’s just that there always comes a moment when I’m in the company of others—even my nearest and dearest—when I’d rather be reading a book.” In this delightful memoir, Corrigan reveals which books and authors have shaped her own life—from classic works of English literature to hard-boiled detective novels, and everything in between. And in her explorations of the heroes and heroines throughout literary history, Corrigan’s love for a good story shines.

Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading: Finding and Losing Myself in Books Details

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Amber Dunten says

Overall, I found this book moderately enjoyable, but for me the most transformative aspect of it was Corrigan's discussion of her own newly minted genre, the "female extreme-adventure novel."

This was an "Aha!" moment for me-- that throughout the history of novel writing, while men and male protagonists have been out exploring the physical landscape and challenging their physical limits, women and female protagonists have been exploring an inner landscape as jagged and formidable as any mountain or river. They contend with dangers that are just as real, though perhaps not as obvious to the careless eye, insanity not least among them. Perhaps the more important revelation was that these characteristically female adventures are well worth recognizing and writing about, and that a story about the inner life can be as compelling and fascinating as a story about exploring the outer wilds.

Since finishing this book, I see the female extreme-adventure novel everywhere, and I have developed a great appreciation for it. Many novels that are frequently dismissed by some readers as "boring" because "nothing happens," I now recognize as being full of an entirely different type of drama. I have encountered many wonderful examples of this in my more recent reading, and I talk to my bookish friends about it almost obsessively, like so:

"I read another great example of the female extreme-adventure novel last week. This woman spends her whole life so crippled by social anxiety that she can't leave her house."

"Hmm, sounds dull."

"No, really. The drama of her inner struggle to connect with the people in the town she lives in was intense. And what she ultimately does about it is pretty incredible."

sigh "There she goes again, blathering on about the female extreme-adventure novel."

(That book was *The Mill River Recluse*, by the way.)

Other great examples I've encountered that I never would have appreciated (at least, not at this level) if it were not for Ms. Corrigan include:

- * *The Pastor's Wife*
- * *The Hours* (and by extension, *Mrs. Dalloway*)
- * *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (has some of the more traditional adventure elements to it as well)
- * *Atonement*

Whatever else you may think of this book, this one aspect of it has completely changed my perspective and understanding of many other books, and has quite literally made me a better and more discerning reader.

Scott Taylor says

This book is what happens when a book reviewer turns her critical eye to her own existence. Any avid reader should appreciate the importance of books in one's own life and how they shape those who read. Corrigan says, apologetically, that we read to find authenticity, a scrap of something that will improve our understanding of ourselves. Perhaps. She says that reading a book can be a dangerous thing sometimes. True.

Peppered with examples from books she has read, this is a kind of memoir that eventually gets dominated by a long discussion on themes in Catholic Martyr Literature. For that reason I gave it less stars. But before the book becomes bogged down, and in places among the bog, there are some gems of learning present. Her opinion on women as adventurers in 19th Century literature was fascinating as was her discussion of the theme of 'work' in the novel form. Her musings on the importance of books in her life and the travails of a book nerd were often humorous, as when she remarks that her mother suggest she go on Jeopardy to finally put to use all those book smarts.

There is a lengthy section on adoption, wherein she speaks of everything from the challenges of the process to the tendency of complete strangers to offer their sometimes offensive opinions. As an adoptive father, I related to the pain she expressed, as well as the joy that is found in the miracle of adoption.

It was a well-written book that was easy to read, and had some great sequences, but ultimately not one I will remember too incredibly fondly due to its flaws.

Thanks for reading.

Lindsay says

I was really excited to read this book, but I couldn't get through all of it. I liked the introduction, but then the meat of the book reminded me (in a bad way) of my brief stint at an English major. I didn't like being tricked into reading literary criticism!

Melanie says

I love this book.

I love this book even though it has complicated my life by adding dozens and dozens of books to the list of books I will never have time to read, dammit.

** Maureen Corrigan is related to Douglas "Wrong Way" Corrigan.

** She once lived a part-time approximation of Harriet Vane in Gaudy Night.

** Her literary loves include mysteries with hard-boiled detectives ("the ultimate independent contractors").

** As a child, she read many Catholic "martyr stories" that taught a "pedagogical tough-love message. "

** She once told a student that Gertrude Stein's Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas is "an elegant goof."

** She once taught a course called "Sleuthing spinsters and dangerous dames."

** She regrets that tomboy characters in children's books have been "gussied up and diminished into girly girls by Disney."

** (My favorite) As a critic, she has been forced to misspend reading time on mysteries narrated by cats.

I love this woman.

Corrigan's narrative is not jumpy, and is not list-like. My notes are, both. When I started reading, my notes focused on her thoughts about reading as a search for personal authenticity, to deepen one's own life. By the end, I was compiling a bibliography.

I am fascinated by her analysis of men's vs. women's literature. Both, she says, can be extreme adventure stories. Men's adventures usually are visible, external struggles with extreme topography or evildoers. Women's, however, may not be as obvious if they are internal struggles with issues as strong as the most fearsome dictator or hurricane: abortion, widowhood, childbirth, psychological or physical abuse, repression. A woman's extreme adventure, she says, is "less Herculean and more Sisyphean in nature."

I am also fascinated by the memoir that is woven through her literary adventures. She left the Catholic childhood behind and pursued a career in writing that included non-tenured professorships and writing for the "Village Voice." Her job at NPR as book critic is her dream job (which anyone reading this blog knows to be true). This trajectory was, at least, logical.

Not so logical or linear was her struggle to have a child. She and her husband endured the extreme adventure, all-too-common, of treatment for infertility. Finally, they decided to adopt a Chinese baby. That trajectory, through Byzantine paperwork and terrifying Chinese roads, careened from despair to optimism to bewilderment - and ended with their daughter, Molly, asleep in their arms.

I came away from this book wishing that I had Maureen in my life as a friend - or, barring that, wishing I had unlimited access to her library.

I don't just recommend this book. I relish it.

(In no particular order, some of the books that I now want to read or reread : Gaudy Night, News from Nowhere, The Girl Sleuth, The Unicorn's Secret, The Godwulf Manuscript, Etchings in an Hourglass, Quartet in Autumn, Villette, Lost Lady, Lucky Jim, Murder in the English Department, stories by Chekhov including "Lady with a Lapdog," Madwoman in the Attic, The Lecturer's Tale, Straight Man, and Charming Billy.)

Sheesh!

Caren says

I think one reason I enjoy reading is for the opportunity to get inside another human being's head, to connect mentally with that person's thoughts, even if that person lived centuries ago. It's a sort of magic, isn't it? Maureen Corrigan understands that magic. The opening line of this book is: "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." Spoken like a true book person, no? The author, in addition to teaching literature at Georgetown University, also reviews books on the NPR program, "Fresh Air". It sounds like an enviable life, doesn't it? In this book, she tells how she ended up where she is today, step-by-step, a life in books. Her voice is sincere, sometimes bemused (as when she wonders whether the ten years she spent getting her PhD may better have been spent having youthful adventures, trekking about Europe perhaps...), but always immediately recognizable for a book lover. She puts into words what many of you

have surely felt. Her father was also a reader, while her mother couldn't quite understand their obsession. As Ms. Corrigan says, "My mom, on the other hand, would rather try to talk to just about anybody---Minnie Mouse, Alan Greenspan---than read a book." (page xix). It is that wry, self-deprecating voice that is so endearing about Ms. Corrigan's prose. She acknowledges that this book obsession isn't quite normal, but there you have it: we love and accumulate books anyway. With books ever the backdrop, she tells of her Irish Catholic upbringing in Queens, her years in graduate school, her marriage, and her eventual adoption of a baby from China. The book concludes with a nice "recommended reading" list. There is something very comforting about spending time with this fellow book lover. I enjoyed every page.

Kathy says

Maureen Corrigan has spent her life doing what she loves: reading and interpreting fiction as a college professor, author, and newspaper/radio critic. Her semi-autobiography uses a lifetime's reading to explore not only her own life and those of her parents, but also the role of women in Western culture, popular vs. canonical literature, and what it means to be an American. She is most effective when describing her admiration for hard-boiled detective fiction and when drawing parallels between the once-ubiquitous memoir *Karen*, the strongly Catholic Beany Malone series for teenagers, and centuries-old tales of martyred saints. Readers who know Corrigan best from her three-minute reviews on the radio show *Fresh Air* will hear her voice in every line.

Veronika says

So let's start off with a couple of things. First off, I love NPR. I love Fresh Air. I love NPR. Maureen Corrigan being the book reviewer for NPR= extreme jealousy/worship. Second off, I adore books about books. I could read books about books all day forever and ever. Ok now that we have that established...forward march!

I really did enjoy this memoir, I loved how she incorporated books into nearly everything and I was laughing out loud more than a few times just out of sheer disbelief. I have had some of the exact same thoughts that she has, done some of the exact same things. It's utterly bizarre but kind of ridiculously awesome. I think this alone makes me more than a little biased. I related to it way more than I thought I would and got at least 2 pages of awesome book recommendations to boot. I only had a couple of qualms, one of them minor. First qualm: she used the word *vicarious* and all of its forms a lot. I understand that this word has a pretty limited meaning so when you are using it it's not like you have many other choices but really how many second-hand thrills can you have? Wait let me rephrase that, I think she could have gotten the point across without using that word so many times. I realize that the question is rather stupid considering we are talking about books here. My second qualm was the Catholic school girl chapter. I know that this was a part of her life and all that but for a self-proclaimed "skeptical Catholic" she sure spent a lot of time talking about. I found the chapter rather long and rambling and I really had to force myself to get through it. I'm not sure if it's from my lack of interest or what but it was the longest and dullest part of the book which isn't exactly a great combination...on to the positives.

Ok the whole adopting the little girl from China? Amazing, that would be such an awesome experience and the way she wrote it really had me on the edge of the seat there for a while haha, plus all the ridiculous things people ask made me laugh. I also really liked her whole "Female Extreme-Adventure" chapter. It was rather

random and odd way to start out the book but I found the subject really fascinating so I really didn't mind. I think the last part of the book is my favorite when they visit their friends house in New York. This part focused the least on books but it gave me a really nostalgic feeling which is something I have been craving for a while. To sum it up, this book is recommended for all book lovers. It's well-written, heartwarming, relatable, and just an enjoyable experience.

Claryn says

Don't be fooled -- this isn't a memoir. But it's not lit theory either... it's mostly the wishy washy area in between. Here Maureen Corrigan spoils plot after plot, stringing together a series of dubiously connected book reviews. She makes excuses at various points of the book for her "lack of methodology" and lack of direction, which are the downfall of this book. She tries to read feminist themes into a variety of crappy fiction, which might be admirable if she didn't make so many gendered comments. For someone so well-read, Ms. Corrigan sure has putrid taste in literature, in addition to her painfully repetitive and disconnected writing and a mandatory reference to 9/11. Snore.

Rebecca says

I discovered a kindred spirit in Maureen Corrigan. A Georgetown professor and book reviewer for NPR's "Fresh Air," she is lucky enough to make a living by reading and then writing (and talking) about what she's read. The very first lines of her book convinced me that I'd found a like-minded soul: "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." I couldn't agree more.

For people who read and write for a living, creating a personal realm of seclusion and silence may well be essential. Corrigan refers to reading as a "necessary solitude" and "essentially an antisocial and even voluptuous indulgence." Growing up, she avoided social situations such as dating; "Given the choice, I'd always opt for staying home and reading a book." And even as an adult, despite the multiple joys of interacting with a large social circle and her extended family, Corrigan insists "I would go nuts if I couldn't go off by myself regularly to read."

Her introduction is by far the best chapter; much of the rest of the book is, alas, filled with rather facile and boring literary critique, though I like her invented subgenre of "women's extreme-adventure tales" (to which I would add Margot Livesey's *The Flight of Gemma Hardy*, *The Virago Book of Women Travellers*, Susanna Jones's *When Nights Were Cold*, Sara Wheeler's *O My America!*, Molly Peacock's *The Paper Garden: Mrs. Delany Begins Her Life's Work at 72*, and Diana Athill's *Somewhere Towards the End*). I also enjoyed her tale of adopting her daughter from China.

Luckily, I happen to share her delight in academic farces and Victorian literature (her PhD was on master prose stylists like Ruskin and Carlyle), though not her enthusiasm for detective fiction (she completely ruins the plot of Dorothy Sayers's *Gaudy Night*) or Catholic martyrdom tales.

Throughout, Corrigan has the peculiar habit of twisting facts to fit her own preconceived definitions. So her experience of infertility and foreign adoption is phrased as an 'extreme adventure,' while her preference for

semicolons apparently reflects her desire to always be holding two things together. Psychoanalyzing punctuation might just be a step too far.

All this said, a true bibliophile will certainly find some tidbits to love here, even if it's just the many great quotes about the love of reading. Be prepared to skim, though.

(This book inspired a portion of a Bookaholic article entitled "Is Reading Selfish?")

Sue Dix says

I love books about books or about reading. Maureen Corrigan's descriptions of herself as a reader felt so familiar to me. This book was written twelve years ago, but the feel of the book is fresh and present and relevant. It is a quiet book but well worth taking ones time to savor.

notyourmonkey says

Oh, this one was a hard one to rank. It was a three when I first picked it up, a two when I first put it down, a four when I picked it up again years later, and a three when I put it back down a second time. I was determined to knock off a lot of low-hanging almost-finished fruit from my TBR pile this weekend, and I finally read the last thirty pages. So, hey, let's average this out to a three? Ish?

This is one of those books that tragically reinforces my extreme reluctance to get rid of books. My mom gave me this for Christmas lo those many moons ago, knowing it was a good fit for me just because of the blurb quote about how at some point, during any gathering of people, no matter how much the author loves those people, she realizes she would rather be reading. My mother, perspicacious woman that she is, recognized her wee darling in that sentence.

And, yes, that is sort of what this book is about. But only sort of. It's also got a huge whack of general audience literary criticism of female action-adventure novels, detective novels, and Catholic secular saint novels. Which turns out to be *fascinating* to me, once I got over expecting to read about how one balances the desire to be with people with the desire to read. I was sorely disappointed when I first put the book down, midway through the first literary criticism section, but I came back to it a few years later, and it was *exactly* what I wanted to read.

What was the difference between Read #1 and Read #2? The internet, I think. I have learned far more - *absorbed* far more - about feminism and women in fiction and women who write and *so much* of the stuff that my literature degree attempted to beat in my head, so I was far, far more appreciative of the discussion of women and books and women in books and women writing books in *this* book after a few years knocking around the internet than I was after three years of Serious Literature Classes. (Okay, part of that is probably because I spent much of the time I should have been studying Serious Literature going to Rocky Horror, writing papers on Rocky Horror and the Exorcist, and discovering the wild and woolly world of internet media fandom. Slog through Anna Karenina or the Sith Academy, hmm, that's a toughie.) What seemed a bit dry and a bit pointless on first read was far more engaging the second time around.

And then, hm, I kind of got bored during the Catholic secular saint portion of the competition (a bit of a

letdown after the female action-adventure novel section and the detective novel section, both of which I had vested interests in), and I put it down for another year or so. Picked it up again, found Corrigan's writing style just as charming as I did the second time around, and was delighted by the reading list at the back of the book.

Recommended, at least for those interested in easy reading lit crit. The bits about a life lived with books feel a bit like a framing device, albeit a lovely one.

Susan says

A professor of literature/NPR book reviewer discusses her readerly reflections and the intersections between her lifelong habit of reading and life experiences. For instance, one chapter discusses books she categorizes as "women extreme adventure stories" (like *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*), which are "heavy on anxious waiting and endurance" which leads to the story of the long, complicated process she and her husband went through to adopt a child from China. In another chapter, the author brings a fresh, feminist perspective to her love of hard-boiled detective stories and her fascination with how working for a living is portrayed in fiction. While sometimes conclusions seem too sweeping for the literary evidence presented, this is an entertaining and creative look at reading, life, and literary theory.

Matthew says

Maureen Corrigan, noted book critic from NPR's "Fresh Air," has written a memoir for true book lovers who do not see their reading life as separate from real life. Growing up Irish-Catholic in New York, the daughter of a World War II Navy vet (himself a huge reader), Corrigan recounts her life in terms of the books she read along the way, studying literature at Fordham and Penn, teaching at Georgetown, and eventually marrying another passionate reader and adopting a Chinese girl. Particularly compelling is her argument for classics like "*Jane Eyre*" and "*Pride and Prejudice*," and contemporary heavyweights like "*A Handmaid's Tale*" and "*Beloved*," to be considered part of a long tradition of "female extreme adventure tales." Just as men in traditional adventure tales by the likes of Jack London and Ernest Hemingway must survive physical ordeals in difficult circumstances, so too must women characters often endure great hardships by, say, caregiving to the sick or elderly, or waiting out a fateful decision at the hands of privileged men. Corrigan also explores the Mystery novel as an expression of working class values, specifically the hard-boiled crime novel depicting heroic private eyes who thrive on restoring justice to the world while independently toiling at a job well done. The modern-day popularity of writers like Robert Parker, Sue Grafton, and Lisa Scottoline, grows out of this tradition, as collectively we hold great admiration for the modern-day Spencers and Millhones, who endear us with their quirky ordinariness, but faithfully kick butt, often in non-traditional settings. Finally, Corrigan explores the Catholic martyr stories of her young adulthood, which was not as compelling for me, but introduced me to some tortured Catholic narratives and bestsellers of bygone times.

Trisha says

As soon as I read the first sentence in the author's introduction I knew I was hooked: "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." My sentiments exactly! So I figured Maureen Corrigan and I

must have a lot in common – despite the fact that she's the book critic for NPR's Fresh Air and the only book reviews I ever publish are the ones that show up here on Goodreads and in my own collection of book reviews that I've been adding to for the last 30 years or so! This book was a delight to read – not only because the author is such an avid reader herself but also because she's a darn good writer. (unlike some authors of books about reading – most notably Alice Ozma, author of The Reading Promise) Corrigan's book is a memoir of sorts because she has organized it around the books that shaped her at different periods and throughout the various circumstances of her life. She makes it clear that no matter what was going on, she always had a book within easy reach and often these books sustained her and formed her as her life unfolded. Like most other books about reading, this one has an extensive "recommended reading" section at the back, where Corrigan lists an eclectic collection of books she has read and loved – and often re-read. In addition to the usual categories (fiction, non-fiction, biography, mysteries, etc.) she also lists titles that have to do with everything from books about Adopting infants from China (as she and her husband have done) to books about academic life, to books she first read in her Catholic grade school and have always loved. And while many of the titles on her lists were familiar because I've read them and loved them too, there are also quite a few I've never heard of – but will definitely be adding to my TBR list because after reading her book I suspect that if Maureen Corrigan recommends them, they must be worth reading.

Teji says

As a true book lover, I was drawn to this book by its title.

However, I found the book a little disjointed and less about the joy of reading books in general, less about the transportive effect of books, and more a literary analysis of various books thrown in amongst various autobiographical bits of the author's life.

Also, I have a bit of a "pebble in my shoe" issue after reading this book. I very much dislike it when authors throw in certain "facts" to support an argument but don't provide you with enough detail to verify the data for yourself. Corrigan states that "according to a Wall Street Journal article of a few years ago, some 59 percent of Americans don't own a single book. Not a cookbook or even the Bible" pxiv-xv. I found this "fact" astounding! However, Corrigan does not provide a year or a title of the article; I suppose I should be grateful that she at least sources the periodical. I have attempted to track this down, to verify it--no luck. The only thing that I can come up with that is even in the ballpark is a Roper poll from 1978 indicating that 45% of American's polled had not read a book that year.

And yet...yet, there are these moments, these small moments, where she *does* talk about the impact of books on her life, the power of the written word. Many of these ring as "true" for me, as a bibliophile. For instance, one of my favorite quotes from the book: "...sometimes even a few good sentences contained in an otherwise unexceptional book can crystallize vague feelings, fleeting physical sensations, or, sometimes, profound epiphanies." Yes! Unfortunately, I think the quote also is descriptive of her own work--a few good sentences in an otherwise unexceptional book.

Quotes:

"I think that, consciously or not, what we readers do each time we open a book is set off on a search for authenticity. We want to get closer to the heart of things, and sometimes even a few good sentences contained in an otherwise unexceptional book can crystallize vague feelings, fleeting physical sensations, or,

sometimes, profound epiphanies. Good writing is writing that's on target..." p xvi

"I've also noticed that I use semicolons a lot. That punctuational rut is partly a consequence of the years I spent reading Victorian nonfictional prose writers...who were capable of raging on in page-length semicolon-studded sentences...But there's more to it than that. The semicolon is my psychological metaphor, my mascot. It's the punctuation mark that qualifies, hesitates, and ties together ideas and parts of a life that shoot off in different directions. I think my reliance on the semicolon signifies that I want to hold on to my background...and yet, also transcend it." pxxxi
