

Student Model Rereading Essay #1

Rereading *Old Man and the Sea*

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I am a secret keeper. I hide secrets under my hair, behind my ears, places where people won't see them, but they are in constant danger of being exposed. I can't remember most of the secrets I've kept, because secrets become absorbed if you keep them long enough. When I was small, every secret I kept about my own imperfections seemed enormous. I didn't like to lie, I just felt safer behind secrets. I grew out of old secrets and collected new ones, and the secrets I kept in Middle School amazed my conscious as equally important, large, dangerous.

I had one especially dangerous secret. In 8th grade I concealed the fact that I couldn't read.

I was literate, of course. I can't remember not looking at a book and seeing—believing—what it was telling me. I collected books, I inhaled them, I took them home from my classroom and couldn't stand to bring them back (for this, I apologize to my elementary school). I could read—know the words, feel them infiltrating and informing my mind—faster than anyone I knew. I wrote a solemn contract and signed it in pencil in the late 90s, swearing to have my first novel finished by the time I was 15. Read read read, let the books inspire my fingers, write write write, and my report cards all sounded "hallelujah!" Then I was asked to do something new.

Maybe we'd been asked to do it before, I don't know, but the anxiety I felt as a result is an 8th grade secret. Instead of matching words that rhymed or hummed together, we had to read as if there was something underneath the text. I had always kept secrets, but my books had never kept secrets from me. Now I clawed at them when they were assigned, begging them to reveal themselves, their special messages that had been there all along, that I couldn't see. To keep my secret, I had to lie. I had to pretend that I understood.

I couldn't ask for help. I had to make sure no one—not my teacher, especially my friends—knew of my impotence. When given assignments I read until my mind was sweating. Sometimes I gave up. I had the familiar reaction to reading at first, the words reaching up their arms to wrap around me. But then my mind went blank. What could I say about this book, what could I invent to sustain my secret?

In class, we sat at tables of five and discussed *Macbeth* and *Of Mice and Men*. I stayed mute and let confident boys do the talking. I still loved the books; how Shakespeare made English a brand-new language, how Steinbeck made me want to dissolve my long flowery sentences into their essential minerals and create art like his. Beyond the resonance of their poetry, I was stumped. The new academic expectations inspired my classmates to make their own literary conquests. One brought in stacks of heavy classics, and tried to engage me in conversation; part compassion, part competition. I invented opinions that sounded right (a Lab-bred skill). I tried to keep up by buying Faulkner and Hemingway. The charade was sound, but I was bored and confused, so in the privacy of my own

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home I would read *Watership Down*, reclaiming my passion for myself again, but still ashamed of my elementary grasp on literature.

Buying books never stopped being exciting, though. With every new volume I purchased, I was hopeful that I would be able to crack the code. I was convinced that if I read enough my brain would eventually be forced to catch up. I stalked books in familiar territories: the Barnes and Noble on Astor Place down the street from Church; the used bookstore in Milwaukee airport. These bookstores were places of holiness and opportunity. The bookstore in the Wisconsin airport never changed, not the way it looked (cluttered and unkempt), not the way it smelled (like yellow pages). It was as constant as my grandparents, offering up nourishment for the plane ride home.

One such book that I bought in that airport was *The Old Man and the Sea*. It was another attempt to induce the maturation of my brain, to force it to come to term, as I felt it was long overdue. It had a hard cover, which I never liked, because it prevents intimacy with the book you're reading. But the thin, square volume fit well in my hands, and with the purchase came the hope of learning to read.

I can't remember, really, how I read the book. It's hard for me to remember reading. I have bits and pieces of memories, but mostly I have read and reread my favorite books so many times that I can remember pages of text, but not the girl who was reading those books. I always read delicately. My favorite books, read and reread again, look like they have never been touched. I remember that I held the book in front of me as I read it, in a chair in my room, which is at a higher altitude than the rest of my apartment. Above everyone else I read *Old Man and the Sea* in one sitting, devouring the book. After I was done I felt an odd sense of accomplishment, that I had read Hemingway; that, if pressed, I might be able to find meaning in his simple words. Though I thought the book was horribly beautiful, I never picked it up to read again. It sat on the top shelf of my downstairs bookcase, the one reserved for my favorites. All the books around it were plucked out and put back, but it became frozen to the shelf.

It was one book that helped alleviate my secret. I look at *Old Man and the Sea* on the top shelf and I wonder why I hadn't read it again, when it was the one book that made sense to me and calmed my anxious mind. So I take it down again. It isn't as broad as I remembered, and I'm surprised at the subtlety of the cover illustration. It is precise, not the sweeping tableau that captivated me in the Milwaukee bookstore. On the back is a picture of Hemingway, who I know better now but don't remember ever seeing. His eyes are squinting like there is sunlight or a hangover in them. He has a bruise on his forehead and a thick moustache that isn't awkward like I think moustaches are. The book was twenty dollars.

As I read it, I realize it's a picture book. It's the sort of picture book I would have liked as a child, small pictures, salty words, all in black and white like Hemingway on the back. I was always striving

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for minimal elegance, and the book achieves that, where I always ended up talking too much. I did not remember the illustrations. They sometimes seem to make the fish comically huge, but the Old Man's awe keeps the fish grounded in nobility. Reading it, I remember all those first time impressions again. The book made me feel so old last time, and now I feel overwhelmingly young. The old man seems so much closer to death, and I am a small blonde girl again, smaller than I was in 8th grade.

The fact that I know the ending makes me sad, as well. When the old man dips his bleeding hand in the ocean to soothe it, I know that soon the sharks will be there to eat the carcass of the giant marlin (who isn't dead yet, but he will die). I hope to delay the arrival of the sharks by writing this reflection. Where I read the book all at once last time, drunk on lovely language, I have to stop now. Not just because I'm oh-so-busy but because I feel I can't take it all in at once. I was so proud of myself that I read it so fast last time, but I can't imagine rushing past this tiny book.

I am reading it delicately, a reverence in my handling that I don't practice very much anymore. My books get so beat up in my bags now that I can't worry too much about preserving mint condition. I flinch when putting *Old Man and the Sea* in my bag to bring to school, carefully pressing it between my folder and my homework planner. I started to read it the night before, and I feel I should handle the protagonist with care. I cannot escape the oldness of the man. He's too old for secrets, it seems, they're all slipping out of his mind at once, which feels like an uncomfortable loss of dignity, something that happens only to the elderly. The confrontation with his oldness unsettles me not just because I feel so young. My father is a fisherman, and when I read the book the first time my father was not at all the Old Man. I'm afraid to read the Old Man too closely now, for fear I'll see my father there. It's such a personal book, and I haven't felt a book this personally since I learned how to read. That is, learned how to read the right way. I can see the hidden message in any text now when I look for it, I am the one who gets to interrogate the insides of the book. This way, all my secrets stay safe. This book is baring its secrets to me and I think it can see into mine.

Another secret: I used to skim.

As I read on, I read slower and slower. The book is short, I could probably read it faster now and get more out of it this time around. In the past, I had a gift for skimming. Never intentionally, but my eyes would be so eager to discover the next sequence that I would skip words. I never missed anything important, my brain automatically filled in the words I'd missed. I don't skim anymore (SATs don't count). I got caught doing it once in 6th grade and the shame made me slow down—but only a little. I haven't ever really slowed down, I have rushed past books and left them behind. I haven't stopped to look at the way I read. Once I figured out how to do it the "right" way, I never thought about the way I used to read.

Old Man and the Sea helped me to escape from my nightmare of pre-high school readership. It is honest, I have realized. So honest that it was able to speak to me when I was buried under mental

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barricades of shame and frustration. Again, its honesty has breached barricades. Before it passed them I didn't know they were there. It challenges me, asks, are you still pretending? I don't think I am. It shows me just how much more I have to learn. I thought it would be safe and reassuring to return to this book, equipped with my reader-ly prowess. I was mistaken. There are no secrets in books, only the secrets I invented for myself. My encounter with the Old Man made me realize how fast I have torn through books, how little I stopped to think about my reading handicap once I was rid of it. He was so delicate I was afraid to read him, but I realize that I may be too delicate of a reader in his eyes. I tremble in the face of a thin novel, so small that it was published originally in installments, in an old magazine, in the years shortly after my father was born.