

1-1-2017

## Meditation on Reading

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Class of 2018

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Bolger, Kathleen M. (2017) "Meditation on Reading," *The Mercury*: Year 2017, Article 14.  
Available at: <http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2017/iss1/14>

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## Meditation on Reading

### **Author Bio**

Katie Bolger is a junior English Major with a Writing Concentration with minors in Spanish and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from West Caldwell, New Jersey. On campus, she is the Event Coordinator for The Mercury, a Resident Assistant, a tutor at the Writing Center, and a Peer Learning Associate for the English Department. In her spare time, she sings show tunes (loudly and off-key), thinks about the proper use of the semi-colon, and watches The Office. Her life motto is "What would Lady Macbeth do?" She has given Gettysburg a reprieve by spending the spring of 2017 in Salamanca, Spain.

## Meditation on Reading

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In February of 1959, nine experienced Russian hikers were found dead in the Dyatlov Pass of the Ural Mountains, scattered in various directions within a one-mile radius of their tent, which had been torn open and abandoned. Despite the freezing temperatures and high winds, the campers had fled the safety of their site in a hurry, some of them not even pausing to put on their boots. Unsurprisingly, six of the members of the party died of hypothermia. Surprisingly, one victim had a fractured skull, another died of brain damage without any sign of head trauma or wound, and yet another had traces of radiation on her body as well as a missing tongue.

Fifty-six-and-a-half years and five thousand miles away, my ass grew numb from immobility rather than cold, and I shivered despite the August heat. I had begun reading *Dead Mountain* by Donnie Eichar earlier that day, dragging a chair to the edge of the shore and letting waves tickle my toes. Aside from adjusting my position when I'd first settled in, I hadn't moved or spoken more than a few words in hours, not even as my mother attempted to drag me into conversation with my cousin. She should have understood after so many years of raising a reader that I was investigating in the Urals, not sitting on a beach chair in Manasquan, New Jersey. It's dangerous to disturb a sleepwalker because of the unintentional harm they might do to themselves or to the person waking them. It's dangerous to disturb a reader because the book might be a hardcover.

Such is my routine at the beach. Arrive, lather on sunscreen, pick out the day's adventure, bring a chair to the edge of the shore, sit down, decide the chair is too high on the shore, adjust, decide the chair is too low on the shore, adjust, sit, read. And read and read. About two hours later, when the sun has all but scorched my skin, I bring the book and the chair back up to our beachside treasure trove—towels and bags and food, whozits and whatzits galore—before diving into the waves and forcing myself to think of *The Little Mermaid* instead of *Jaws* whenever a piece of seaweed brushes my foot.

Having repeated a similar process many times in a variety of settings, I have mastered the art of escapism, the tendency to surround oneself with distractions for the sake of relief from unpleasant events. It encompasses any form of entertainment that allows one to forget about their real life problems. I'd first heard the term my freshman year of high school, when we read *The Glass Menagerie* in Mrs. Ford's English class. She wrote the word on the board in big letters—E-S-C-A-P-I-S-M—and we all dutifully copied it down, stowing it in our minds for the inevitable test at the end of the week. Mrs. Ford used "escapism" to describe Tom Wingfield's obsession with the movies as a way of getting away from his family. As she talked, I pictured the corner of my bed, where I kept the three to seven books I was working on at a given moment, and I thought, *Yeah, I get that.*

Tom's withdrawal into the cinema more than resonated with me, and, hav-

ing learned the official title for this flight from reality, I began to see myself as an escape artist. Beach reading is, of course, the best kind of reading because it implies a double-layer of escape. German explorer Alexander von Humboldt referred to traveling as “an uncertain longing to be transported from a boring daily life to a marvelous world.” The beach is a great big reading nook—despite the obvious total lack of privacy—complete with a foot massage, soothing nature sounds, and the occasional dolphin sighting. It is its own marvelous world. So why do I so eagerly leave that world in favor of a somehow better one that only exists in my head? Psychotherapist Robin Rosenberg attempts to explain the psychology behind the perfect beach read, saying vacation heightens our capacity to immerse ourselves in the story. When the sun and the sand melt away the time restrictions and pressures of our daily lives, we “have time to wonder, to let your mind wander, to be really curious, to be introspective if you’re an introspective person.”

*Dead Mountain* came to save me from boredom in August of 2015, but Rosenberg’s theory was much more applicable to my life earlier in the summer of that same year. By July, I was waitressing over forty hours a week at a tacky Irish pub in my hometown. On a good day, I sloshed half a gallon of beer down the front of my spinach-colored polo, got honey mustard highlights in my hair, remembered to ask customers how they wanted their burger cooked *before* I put the order in, and managed to keep everyone so glugged with booze and fried food that they didn’t have time to complain before I dropped off their check. All of this kept me too tired to establish a regular reading routine when a seven-day stint in Ocean City, Maryland arrived. As my family drove down I-95 from New Jersey, I slowly sloughed off what Rosenberg refers to as the “cognitive load”—the information people take in and compartmentalize on a daily basis as they navigate work and the gas station and the supermarket. My personal cognitive load was forty different draft beers and whatever amalgamation of ground beef, bacon, and cheese the restaurant had dubbed the Burger of the Week.

We left for Ocean City on a Saturday. By Tuesday, I’d gone through all three books I had brought with me, thanks to seven-hour days at the beach and a keen desire to purge all thoughts of the Cloverleaf from my head. I got up early to buy more books before hitting the beach for the day. Having already visited Westeros, a version of Reconstructionist America populated by vampires, and a small Midwestern town experiencing a series of child murders, I entered the bookstore as a literary tourist consulting my travel agent about the next destination. I bought three more books. I had nothing to read on the ride home the following Saturday.

Paradoxically, the stories I have clung to most fervently during unpleasant moments in my life have themselves been quite despondent. If misery loves company, I was the best hostess a pity party could have asked for. As a child, I turned to *A Series of Unfortunate Events* in the months after my grandmother passed away. The struggles of the Baudelaire orphans lifted my spirits through the simultaneous realizations that *I’m not the only unhappy person* and *it could*

*be so much worse* (perhaps not the healthiest way of dealing with grief, but it did the trick when I was eight). In Ocean City, bemoaning my sad fate as an unhappy waitress, I accompanied Louis Zamperini into the Japanese-occupied belly of the beast, the Marshall Islands during World War II in Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken*. Later that summer, after more waitressing mixed with back-to-school anxiety, the scientific conclusion Donnie Eichar reached at the end of *Dead Mountain* restored a sense of calm in me, despite the fact that the story of the nine hikers was as chilling and bizarre a story as could be conceived, all the more so because it was true. Reading allowed me to tie up literary loose ends while temporarily ignoring the fraying threads in my own life.

In October of 2013, one of my closest friends texted me to say her mother had passed away. The author of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* once said, "Reading is one form of escape. Running for your life is another." That night, after I'd exhausted myself from crying, the two were synonymous. I cleared my eyes enough to distinguish black squiggles as words on a page, laced up my metaphorical running shoes, and opened Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. If I was talking to someone who was just beginning the process of mourning, the last book I'd suggest to them is *Gone Girl*. But as I turned the pages of the novel, I dematerialized from the floor of my bedroom and ended up in the middle of a murder-mystery media frenzy in Missouri. My breathing began to return to normal. Days and months were passing beneath my fingers in a matter of minutes, just as the Pevensie children were able to hide out in Narnia for years and years while war-torn England stood still outside the wardrobe. While I had mastered the art of escape, reading was more of a pause button than anything else. It gave me something to do until my thoughts stopped crashing into one another like members of a clumsy marching band. Even as I refused to think about what was happening in my life, dedicating myself entirely to finding out what happened to Amy Dunne, I was subconsciously relieved to know that when I closed the book and came back to New Jersey, everything would be as it was when I had left. And I would deal with it as soon as I was ready.