A second time around

By Diana Butler Bass
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What books compel a second—or third or repeated—reading? How is the second reading different from the first, and what does the difference reveal about the book or the reader? We asked ten writers to reflect on their rereadings.

In the summer after second grade, I read Louisa May Alcott's story of the March sisters, **Little Women**. I related most to Amy, the youngest sister, who was artistic, headstrong and eager to grow up. Of the four sisters, she found it most difficult to accept her family's financial misfortunes. Most of Amy's struggles related to learning humility and practicing charity.

In graduate school I read the book with new eyes. Until then, I did not grasp that Alcott's book was a 19th-century revision of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the record of a soul's journey toward God. While Bunyan's book placed this account in a metaphorical spiritual landscape, Alcott's tale involved girls in a real place and time. I realized that *Little Women* is more than a coming-of-age story; it is an account of women's spirituality and of how the ordinary unfolding of life is a school for theological insight and the practice of faith.

—Diana Butler Bass of Alexandria, *Virginia*, *author of* The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church *and* Christianity for the Rest of Us.

A rereading of Ian McEwan's novel **Atonement** is richly rewarding, particularly since the first-time reader learns only at the end that the entire book is not quite what it appeared to be. On the surface, it's the story of 13-year-old Briony Tallis, who misperceives the relationship between her older sister Cecilia and their housekeeper's son, Robbie Turner, setting in motion a series of events that lead to Robbie's conviction for a crime he did not commit. He is able to reduce his sentence by joining the British army and then is caught up in the horrifying circumstances that lead to the evacuation at Dunkirk. Briony, Cecilia and Robbie seem to hope that the war will partially efface the ugliness of the past. But they discover, in differing ways, that only the shape of one's entire life can "redeem the time."

The novel's surprise ending dramatically magnifies its theological import. On rereading, one can see that the book is not only about the cruelty of war and the appalling ramifications of a young child's lie, but a story of self-examination and remorse, and of the partial reconciliation that can sometimes result. It is also an inquiry into whether, and to what degree, a creative act of the imagination can serve as a form of penance: an atonement.

A second reading allows us to pay attention to a master stylist. Robbie's memories of his brief time with Cecilia have been "bleached colorless through overuse." A figure seen from afar is "a distant rhombus of ocher light" that "widened, paused, then narrowed to nothing." Characters are brought to life by their surroundings; Briony's well-organized self-assurance is suggested by her model farm, which "consisted of the usual animals, but all facing one way—toward their owner—as if about to break into song." Cecilia, preparing herself carefully for a dinner that Robbie will attend, "wanted to look as though she had not given the matter a moment's thought, and that would take time."

—David Cunningham, *director of the CrossRoads Project at Hope College*, *Holland*, *Michigan*, *and author of* Christian Ethics: The End of the Law.

I read Evelyn Waugh's **Brideshead Revisited** when I was a seminary student who possessed all the optimism and smugness of the station. The book attracted me because it explores both the poignancy and hypocrisy of religious belief (in this case, Catholic belief). I felt great sympathy for the main protagonist, Charles Ryder, a self-described agnostic. Through his college friend (and implied first love) Sebastian Flyte, Ryder become close to the staunchly Catholic Flyte family and watches the ways in which the religion shapes their lives, sometimes positively and other times ruinously. As a result, he himself begins to wrestle with matters of faith. In the end, he bows the knee—and I felt pietistic self-satisfaction about that.

Reading the book 25 years later—all the optimism and smugness of youth overthrown—I found myself overwhelmed with sympathy for the novel's true protagonist: the beguiling, eccentric and ultimately ruined Sebastian. Debilitated and emaciated by alcoholism, Sebastian moves into adulthood carrying the shame and the scorn of his family. He grows increasingly isolated, even from Ryder, and takes up residence in a monastery in Morocco, where he vacillates between bouts of religious devotion and drunkenness and is lovingly looked after by the monks. His younger sister Cordelia, with a no-nonsense Catholic devotion, says near the end

that she had a unique and lavish love for Sebastian because, for all his weakness, he was nearest the heart of God. That is why, the second time around, I loved him too.

—*Wendy Murray*, *a writer in Boston*, *whose latest work is* A Mended and Broken Heart: The Life and Love of Francis of Assisi.

My favorite fictional boy-coming-of-age story is Russell Hoban's **Riddley Walker.** It is also my favorite book about the aftermath of a nuclear war. Set in a far-future England, after civilization has been destroyed, Hoban's novel takes us to a dark age in which scattered groups grub out a living, using an expressive, minimalist dialect. "On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs," the book begins.

What follows cannot be summed up neatly here, but St. Eustace plays a role, as do the ruins of Canterbury Cathedral, the disastrous rediscovery of gunpowder, Punch and Judy, "chemistery and fizzics," and much more. Riddley's adventures toward manhood and his muddling efforts to grasp his lost culture's science, religion and folklore are punctuated by sudden violence—sometimes mordantly funny and often heartrending.

The language never quite becomes clear, even on a second reading, but its opacity is surely part of Hoban's design. Riddley's struggles and his obvious intelligence, courage and spirit still moved me the second time around, as did the grim yet not entirely lost culture Hoban presents so vividly. I have been haunted for two decades by Riddley's efforts to make his way in the world. "The onlyes Power is no power," he decides at one point, but he revises that judgment later, deciding he must try to live "in fear and tremmering only not running a way. In emtyness and ready to be fult." Among many other things, *Riddley Walker* is an astonishing exploration of how to be a post-Christian Christian.

—*Jeff Gundy*, *who teaches at Bluffton University*, *Bluffton*, *Ohio*, *and whose latest book of poems is* Spoken Among the Trees.

Walter Miller's **A Canticle for Leibowitz** is an eloquent, wry, angry, funny, heartbreaking, brilliant imagining of a postnuclear world in which, for 600 years, monks have been carefully copying and preserving any bit of paper they find with writing on it. Someday, they believe, humans will again value literacy and learning. The monks are inspired in this effort by the (possibly legendary) founder of their abbey, Saint Isaac Leibowitz, whose name is known to them only through his initials

on incomprehensible engineering blueprints and the enigmatic relic upon which he wrote the words, “Pound pastrami, can kraut, six bagels—bring home for Emma.” The story follows changes in the abbey as human history recapitulates the Dark Ages, the Renaissance and a second nuclear age.

When I first read *A Canticle for Leibowitz* I was 18, a recent veteran of grade school duck-and-cover drills but mature enough to know that hiding under desks wouldn’t increase our chances of survival if Chicago got nuked. Rereading it ten years ago, I appreciated the beauty of Miller’s exquisite prose, nuanced humor and balanced structure, but did not believe that religion would ever dominate world affairs again.

Now, in a world rocked and ruled by religious fervor, I am awed by Miller’s graceful elucidation of the tensions pulling at faith and science, and the compassion with which he conveys the particularity of an individual’s death within the sweep of impersonal history. And at 58, I am sufficiently fed up with my species to share Miller’s resigned amusement at this bleeding world, which any rational vultures might think God created just for them. *Sunt lacrimae rerum*.

—Mary Doria Russell of Cleveland, *author of* The Sparrow *and*, *most recently*, Dreamers of the Day.

Does the following story sound familiar? Having assumed command of the vessel, the master reveals himself to be a single-minded obsessive with an *idée fixe*. He is not really interested in hunting whales. He yearns to eradicate evil. His relentless quest for Moby-Dick has little to do with “lighting the lamps of the world,” as his straight-arrow first mate, Starbuck, assumes. It is a passionate compulsion for which he is willing to sacrifice the ship and the crew. Nothing can deter him from his zealous quest. The whale has ceased to be a whale, but has mutated into a mere screen behind which lurks all that is wicked and iniquitous in the universe. “All visible objects,” he declares, “are but as pasteboard masks. . . . If man will strike, strike through the mask!” Vituperating against the white whale, he barks, “He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.”

My rereading of Herman Melville’s classic **Moby-Dick** was not motivated by a thirst for political metaphors. Rather, it was sparked more innocently when I took three of my grandchildren on a whale-watching tour. We spotted four, cresting majestically from the waves, dorsal fins cutting the surface. One even spouted.

Back home, I took down the thick volume from the shelf and opened to one of the most famous lines in literature: “Call me Ishmael.” From there on, page after page, insights I had hardly noticed before crashed into my cranium like cannon balls dropping on a deck. The biblically literate Melville knew full well who Ishmael was; his tale is that of an abandoned wanderer. No wonder critics today see in the Berkshire sage a prescient forerunner of the 20th-century existentialists who viewed all of us as exiles and spiritually uprooted wanderers, tossing on a trackless sea. Never dour, however, Melville conjured this lost condition with zest and wry humor. He even crafted a scene in which Ishmael wakes up in New Bedford to find the dark, tattooed Queequeeg sharing his bed. As the 21st century sets sail, we must again salute Melville’s vision of the American future. As the year 2030 draws near, when white people will be a minority in the country, we all find ourselves truly in the same bed, or maybe the same boat.

When first published *Moby-Dick* was dismissed as ponderous froth. Only after the author’s death was it recognized as one of the great American novels. After my latest rereading, I’d call it the greatest.

—Harvey Cox, *author of* When Jesus Came to Harvard, *who is writing a book on the demise of fundamentalism*.

I keep coming back to Ray Bradbury’s **Dandelion Wine.** The writing is sensual, about as close to pure experience as prose can get. The novel is driven by characters—the boy protagonist and the lovely and interesting people in his life. The story is irresistible—how can you not connect with a 12-year-old who has come awake during this pivotal season of his life? He keeps discovering what it means to be alive. His heart is bursting with passion, and it’s also breaking from the intensity of what he loves or what he loses. He spends the summer celebrating ordinary objects, relationships and rituals and then must say good-bye to a summer that he understands will never be repeated.

When I settle down with this book, it’s like sitting in my backyard swing with an old friend, sipping tea. Each reading takes me deeper into this story but also deeper into my own memories. As the summer of 2008 came to an end, I recalled the speech made by the junk man, Mr. Jonas, as he gives the critically ill Douglas bottles of air collected from different times and places: “When you’re drinking these, remember: It was bottled by a friend, The S.J. Jonas Bottling Company, Green Town, Illinois—August, 1928. A vintage year, boy . . . a vintage year.” And I am reminded

that every moment of my life is vintage.

—*Vinita Hampton Wright of Chicago*, *who has written* Dwelling Places *and* The Soul Tells a Story.

The book I have returned to most often in the past ten years is **That Hideous Strength**, by C. S. Lewis. I have read it fully at least five times and have read portions of it too many times to count. It is the third volume in a trilogy by Lewis, and it is his most frightening work, for it presents a stark and ugly picture of evil and sin. The sin is that of pride and the intellect, which is probably why I am so drawn to it. My subconscious mind is attracted to what tempts me.

The story is about a young scholar named Mark Studdock, a fellow at Bracton College in England, who wants more than anything to be accepted as an intellectual equal by the scholars of the college. There doesn't seem to be much he won't do or leave undone to secure their favor. As the story spirals downward, his small lies and attempts to cover his tracks bring him more and more under the control of evil until he is hardly recognizable. I'm drawn to Studdock's story like a dream, for I know that his story could easily become my own.

—*Gordon Atkinson*, *a Baptist minister in San Antonio*, *who blogs at reallivepreacher*.*com*.

For some books, two readings are not sufficient. I have reread St. Augustine's **Confessions** every few years for the past 40, astonished each time that reading the same text with different experience and questions makes a different text pop into my eyes. A book—perhaps not just any book, but a book similar in richness to the *Confessions*—can become a palimpsest that maps its reader's interests and stages of understanding. Rereading is good for self-knowledge. My paperback copy (Rex Warner's translation for Mentor-Omega Books), read first in 1964, is so tattered that it must be carried around in a cut-to-fit box. My second reading of the *Confessions* was in Latin, and I noticed that the vividness of Augustine's Latin is poorly served by most translations. The tricky part of translating is discerning at which point to translate a word or phrase along a continuum from pale to vivid. Augustine's intemperate, frequently purple prose should almost always be translated with the most vivid terms.

I learned in my many readings of the *Confessions* to lay aside judgments inherited from many of Augustine's interpreters who read him as neurasthenic, dualistic and

monomaniacal. Allowing oneself even briefly to see the world as Augustine saw it can be a life-changing experience. The passionate, even violent, imagery with which he described his search for God challenges all sluggishness. Yet Augustine also experienced the calm of resolving his anguished search: “Cessavi de me paululum—I relaxed a little from myself” (7.14). Informed by many readings of the *Confessions*, I find that the rhythm of avid search and grateful acceptance has become the systole and diastole of my life.

—Margaret R. Miles, emeritus professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, and author of The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought.

The pattern of life created by modern technology dominates our everyday lives but goes unnamed and unrecognized; it reveals itself in the ambivalence, disengagement, sullenness and subtle emptiness that so often haunts our daily experience. So argues Albert Borgmann in **Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life**.

My first reading of Borgmann was like an awakening. As a pastor somewhat early in my ministry, I had begun to feel that my interpretation of everyday life lacked depth and traction. Reading Borgmann was an ah-hah moment. For the first time, it felt like I could see the water in which we swim.

If my first reading was like stumbling upon a pearl of great price, my second reading was like returning to the place of discovery to stake a claim and dig deeper. My first reading introduced me to an analysis of everyday life. My second reading enabled me to draw on this analysis to make sense of a world increasingly seduced by the promise of technology.

—David J. Wood of Auburn, Maine, who serves on the staff of the Fund for Theological Education as the coordinator of Lilly Endowment’s Transition into Ministry Program.