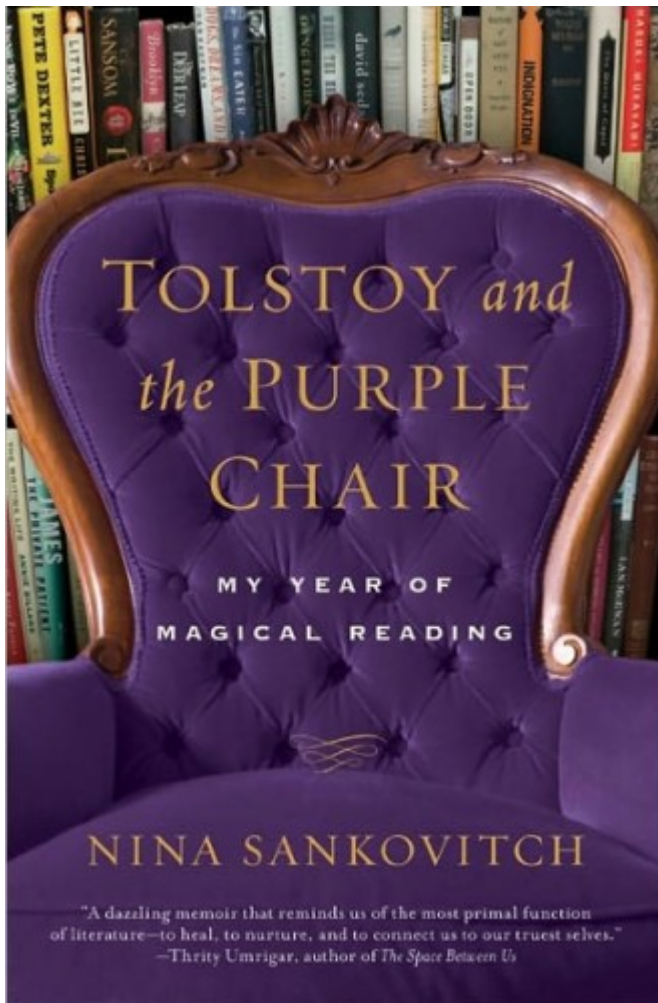


Tolstoy and the Purple Chair and The Reading Promise

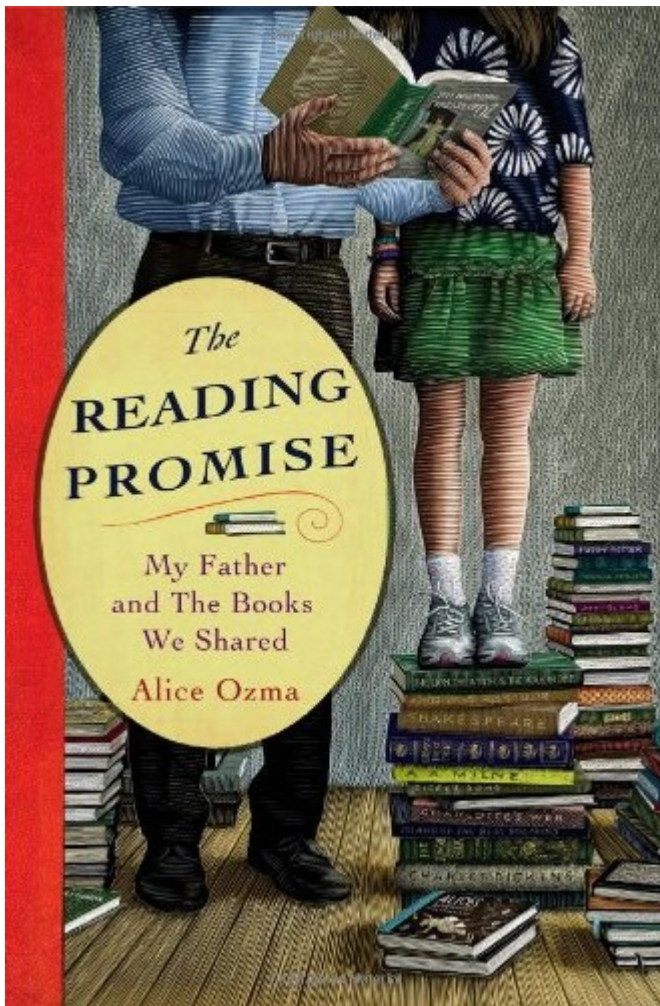
reviewed by [Valerie Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [November 1, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Tolstoy and the Purple Chair

by Nina Sankovitch
HarperCollins



The Reading Promise

by Alice Ozma
Grand Central

To read a story well, Ursula Le Guin has written, "is to follow it, to act it, to feel it, to become it." Reading is an act of "absorbed alertness," she says, "not all that different from hunting, in fact, or from gathering."

Two reading memoirs, one focused on reading as an accompaniment to grief and the other about the read-aloud journey of a daughter and father, record two distinct experiences of such absorption. If reading is hunting and gathering, then these memoirs are dispatches from two foragers, notes regarding the labors and satisfactions of subsisting on books.

Nina Sankovitch, author of *Tolstoy and the Purple Chair*, situates her reading as a way to mourn her sister's death from cancer at age 46. In a sprint away from grief

and survivor's guilt, Sankovitch first threw herself into a frenzy of work and caregiving for her four sons, her husband and her father. Three years later, as she contemplated turning 46 herself, Sankovitch hatched a book-a-day-for-a-year plan as a way to "answer the relentless question of why I deserved to live." It became, she says, a "year in a sanatorium . . . away from the unhealthy air of anger and grief with which I'd filled my life."

Mining literature for therapeutic purposes tracks a long history, and Sankovitch chose her counselors well: Soyinka, Camus, Proulx, Buechner, Dillard, Russo. She is adept at stitching together musings about the books she is reading with memory and narrative from her own life, which includes harrowing stories from her immigrant parents' lives in Belarus and Belgium during World War II and tales of her own childhood in Illinois and of parenting her four sons.

Turning to books as companions through grief is not where Sankovitch goes wrong. The false note in her memoir comes from her reliance on the "my year of" conceit. Although it has produced some impressive writing—Judith Levine's *Not Buying It* and A. J. Jacobs's *The Year of Living Biblically* come to mind—this memoir trope works better with a light topic that has the ballast of occasional poignancy or personal growth or social commentary, rather than with a weighty topic like loss. Sankovitch never explains why she "needed to read a book a day," as opposed to a book a week, as her husband suggested, or a certain number of hours each day, both of which would have allowed her to read deeply, gently, meditatively. Grief itself is a slow, recursive project, and at times the "my year of" theme feels like an outsized gimmick has been wrangled onto the spine of what could have been a moving memoir of reading, grief and memory.

Sankovitch set up her reading year as the antidote both to her grief over her sister's death and her resultant furiously scheduled life—"I had spent the last three years running and racing, filling my life and the lives of everyone in my family with activity and plans and movement, constant movement." She suggests that books helped her stop running. Yet she never seems to consider that reading a book every 24 hours is another version of her previous frenetic pace rather than a departure from it. Not only did she read a book a day during her year of "magical reading"; she posted a review of each book on her website ReadAllDay.org, which was designed to encourage adults to read for pleasure and certainly helped her attract a literary agent.

Sankovitch outlines the strictures that her plan dictated—choosing a book generally of 300 pages or fewer, reading it within four hours and writing her review in two—and she occasionally records the panic she felt when sitting down to start her book for a particular day at ten at night. But nowhere does she examine the difference between the fever-pitch pace of reading necessitated by her project and what Sven Birkerts has called "the slow and meditative possession of a book." Were there any losses associated with inhaling books at the rate of one a day, any sense of shortchanging the authors who had so painstakingly crafted them? Did she ever wish she could have lazed around in one book for, say, three days, rather than giving herself to the next, and the next, and the next? If reading is akin to hunting and gathering, as Le Guin writes, then rushing through it might mean returning to camp with fewer provisions.

It's been said that anything truly worth reading is worth reading slowly. The voluntary practice of slow reading—a phrase that's been around at least since 1887, when Nietzsche described himself as a "teacher of slow reading"—is gaining attention recently, especially as it intersects with other slow movements like slow food and slow parenting. Digital reading encourages us to become fast scanners rather than deep readers, extracting the information we desire and quickly moving on. "When you accelerate things that should not be accelerated, when you forget how to slow down, there is a price to pay," writes Carl Honoré, author of the best-selling *In Praise of Slow*, who recommends deliberately slow reading as one method of dealing with the hyperactivity of late modernity.

Readers will need to calculate the costs and benefits of both society's and Sankovitch's fast reading. My curmudgeonly response to her memoir may grow from the fact that I read *Tolstoy and the Purple Chair* in less than 24 hours, a little experiment I undertook as a way to explore Sankovitch's method as well as her content. The cost of my own accelerated reading may have been a more generous treatment of one author's heartfelt journey through literature and loss. It is possible that I skated too quickly over the surface of her book's deep waters, thus missing nuance and wave and the play of light. I do wonder, however, what Sankovitch might have achieved, in terms of both writing and healing, had she chosen Birkerts's "slow and meditative possession" of books rather than the more marketable 365-books-in-one-year approach. Truisms garnered from her year—"I have learned, through books, to hold on to my memories of all the beautiful moments and people in my life"—might have been transfigured into insights less easily packaged,

meditations more carefully crafted.

I read Alice Ozma's memoir, *The Reading Promise*, more slowly, so my favorable response to it may have less to do with any difference in the quality of these memoirs than with the differing amount of time I spent absorbed in them. Ozma's memoir feels less jerry-built than Sankovitch's, and the fact that it was written by a 22-year-old makes the achievement more stunning.

While Sankovitch's work centers almost entirely on solitary reading, Ozma's memoir revolves around shared reading. She recounts the "Reading Streak" that she and her father achieved between the time she was nine years old and the day she left for college. What began as a short-term promise to themselves—that her father would read aloud to her for 100 consecutive nights—stretched to eight years as they read together for at least ten minutes every night. Ozma writes of the roadblocks they encountered along the way—a case of laryngitis for her father, slumber parties where he had to read to her over the phone, her preteen embarrassment about their habit, the late-night play practice in high school that threatened to run past midnight. "Reading was sacred, traditional, perennial," Ozma writes of their practice. "I could hardly remember when the reading began (we'd read for years before officially starting The Streak) and I certainly couldn't imagine where it would end. Neither could he." Ozma and her father managed to continue their streak uninterrupted for 3,218 nights.

Ozma's project is not without its own contrivances. Its snappy dialogue may represent less her actual childhood self and more the image of a precocious child that she wants to convey. Her prose sometimes feels evasive of emotional territory, and her mention late in the book that as a child she once found her mother on the kitchen floor, having overdosed on antidepressants after an extramarital affair gone wrong, may make a reader wonder whether the texture of her childhood could have been as comic as she makes it sound. She is a wickedly funny storyteller, and the chapter about her fear of the corpse of John F. Kennedy begs to be read aloud: "I couldn't appreciate it then, but it takes creativity to lie shivering and shaking in your bed, wondering if your cats know how to defend you, not against ghosts or the boogeyman, but against the immobile body of one of the most famous and beloved ex-presidents of the United States."

Though Ozma's prose occasionally drowns in anecdote and witticism, her project feels less fabricated than Sankovitch's, perhaps in part because the Reading Streak

is only a grander version of what happens in countless households every night: parents sharing books with children. Ozma and her father have taken a practice that marks many parent-child relationships and elaborated it, adding doggedness and discipline and a dose of eccentricity. Sankovitch's reading commitment, on the other hand, necessitates a luxury—six hours a day to devote to books—that few of us can imagine and fewer could ever arrange. Ozma's book is potentially the story of Everyreader; Sankovitch's most definitely is not.

Ozma also resists the elevated gesture that gets Sankovitch in occasional trouble. Sankovitch never argues with the books or authors or characters that inhabit her days; they are always sources of pleasure, wonder, guidance and hope. Ozma, however, manages to situate reading as simply a natural part of life rather than a transcendent good. She is not afraid to record the times when reading is not a miracle salve, such as the evening her sister leaves for a year abroad and she and her father are missing her intensely. That night they are reading *The Secret Garden*, and Ozma finds that the orphan heroine, Mary, is distant and unhelpful. Mary "could discover a garden or stay in her room and play checkers, for all I cared," Ozma writes. "The fact that she was also coping with loss—a different sort of loss, of course—didn't occur to me. Even if it had, it wouldn't have moved me. She was not real, and reality was weighing heavily on my chest, keeping my attention away from the garden where things had the potential to grow and get better."

The Reading Promise is ultimately a testament to one father's passion for reading and his commitment to passing it on to his children. An elementary school librarian for 38 years, Ozma's father was thwarted in his efforts to read aloud to his students when the principals of the schools where he worked dictated that library time be increasingly given over to computer instruction. He was eventually told to put many of the books that he had carefully chosen into storage and even to remove reading from his lesson plans altogether.

Ozma, who was in college when her father retired, writes with sadness and anger about his defense of books within an educational system marked by testing, digitization and budget cuts: "My father felt as though he were being put on trial, and saw his passion for inspiring children to read become antiquated, quaint—obsolete." She compares his fate with that of a character in a dystopian episode of *The Twilight Zone* who is sentenced to death for being a librarian. Her father "was not about to receive capital punishment, of course, but for a man who had devoted his life to books, watching these items become irrelevant was as close

to a death sentence as he had ever come."

Neither Ozma nor Sankovitch writes of faith, nor do they suggest that they adhere to any belief system at all. Neither fully examines the so-called death of books, nor do they report the good news that literary reading among adults is rising. Still, both hint at the sacredness of the reading act and the almost religious sensations that it can provoke. Both record the sustenance afforded by foraging among books, with their astonishingly nutritive power.