

Underlined words

As it tells the story of our time, the *Century* makes readers and writers of us all.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue



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In Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive*, the narrator tells us: "I don't keep a journal. My journals are the things I underline in books."

When I read that sentence, I underlined it. I try to keep a journal, but I manage only intermittent entries. Underlining passages in books, though—I do that every day.

A few years ago I began transcribing the underlined passages I most wanted to remember into a notebook. Medieval readers (monks, mostly) called passages like

these “sparklets,” bits of text so arresting that they seem to sparkle up from the page. Monastic readers transcribed these sparklets in collections called *florilegia*, a word that evokes flowers in a garden. Luiselli’s narrator describes the light such sparklets produce—the light that flickers in our brain when we come across words for something we have experienced but have never had the language to describe. Something we underline so we won’t forget.

I learned about florilegia from watching my father transcribe a verse from each of the handful of psalms he reads each day in a notebook. Writing the date at the top of each page, he writes down whatever verse speaks to him in that moment. Lately I’ve been thinking that those notebooks are not only collections of verses but also a kind of journal. Like passages underlined in a book, they offer a window onto my father’s life on any given day.

The creation of florilegia, whether through underlining or transcribing, shows how fluid the boundary is between readers and writers. Transcribing other people’s sentences eventually creates a new text, words set down next to other words in a new order. Such collections can also be constructed through speech, blurring the boundaries between reading, writing, and speaking.

Recently, a student dropped by to see me during office hours, a huge bag slung over her shoulder. She set it down on the floor beside her and, like a literary Mary Poppins, began pulling an extraordinary number of books out of it.

“Stephanie,” she said. “Can I read you a few things?”

When she began reading lines of poetry and passages of prose to me, she barely needed to explain what she was doing. We’ve been in class together every semester since fall 2020, on Zoom and off. The passages she read to me echoed the questions we’ve been turning over and over since we began studying together, holding them in fresh light, extending them in unexpected ways. Listening to her read passages that had shone out of her reading over the past few weeks was a continuation of a conversation we’ve been having for two years and another way of telling the story of the time we’ve been living through.

Telling the story of this time is something we are all doing together, underlining and transcribing the galvanizing events, the sorrows and losses, the bits of language that capture things we’ve felt but couldn’t articulate. We tell this story in classrooms and in families, among friends, in churches and around kitchen tables, passing words

and music, images and silence back and forth, giving shape to a fragmented time.

This magazine is one of the places where readers and writers work together to give an account of the moment. Opening this magazine is like having a friend sit down with her bag of books and begin reading to you the passages that are helping her see her life and the life of the world more clearly. From the letters both from and to the editor on the first pages to the meditations on works of visual art on the last, the *Century* invites us in every issue to look together at the world around us and to feel together the claims it makes on us.

In the [May 18, 2022 spring books issue, Amy Frykholm pressed Toni Morrison's perennially banned novel *Beloved* into our hands](#) once more and read us her favorite passages. She wanted us to see that Morrison was challenging us “to name the unnameable and make an account of the unaccounted for” in our history and in ourselves. She wanted us to recognize this as the work of reckoning, work we are all called to do for the future. This is the kind of writing the *Christian Century* offers—writing that helps us find in scripture, in literature, in images, in poetry and prose what we need, not only to tell the story of our time but to imagine ways of moving into a more just future. Writing that makes readers and writers of us all.

I've been fortunate to have a small part to play in the *Century's* project by writing for the Faith Matters column over the years. It's been a privilege to write for the devoted readers of this magazine, among whom I count myself. It's been an honor to learn from Steve Thorngate and Debra Bendis, the editors with whom I have worked most closely. This will be my last Faith Matters column. But I look forward to remaining in the fluid space between reading and writing as I underline the sentences of the next generation of writers who are bearing witness to our time in these pages.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Underlined words.”