

LITERARY NOVEL EXCERPT: THE READER BY SUSHRUT JANGI

Summary: This is a subsection of a larger novel I am working on, whose larger draft is currently at about 70,000 words. The story discusses the narrator of the story going with his friend to a book club - the larger novel is about a doctor who spends his nights on call in the hospital and his days wandering the city, trying to understand people.

**** Pages are extracted from the middle of the story. ****

The Reader

Rarely did I go to book clubs, but Mar dragged me to one assuring me that I would remain under her protection “from the evil eyes of the female literati.” I had only read three-quarters of the novel – enough for me to make comment on its narrative structure and the motives of the protagonist if I needed to; I never believed endings held much value, although Mar, while we walked along Brattle Street, thought endings were the very moment the novel finally flowered into its ultimate aesthetic.

The house was old but obviously premier property on a quiet, leafy outlet far enough from the dormitories that there was no risk of drunken students stealing through its gardens at late hours and throwing bottles at the windows. Its owner was a peri-emeritus professor who taught English at Harvard; we soon learned, however, that she was away on sabbatical in Israel, and she had subletted it to Anne, who was barely out of college, with a journalism degree that had brought her little in the way of vocation. Still, the professor had graciously offered the sublet on discount to any student in the same journalism program that had kicked off her meaningful career years ago. On the kitchen counter Anne had set out plates of brie, slices of baguette,

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Concord grapes, and a bottle of warm Shiraz she had already uncorked, offering a glass to Mar and I. “One of my well-read friends,” Mar said, introducing me to Anne, who smiled wanly from beneath a pair of thick Warby-Parkers too heavy for her fragile nose and artful eyebrows. “That’s high praise coming from Mar – she usually leads our talking points.” Anne brought the wine glass to her rosebud lips. “I tell everyone that I’m enamored of any kind of reader these days,” she said sadly.

Others had begun to settle around the living room – a duet of old ladies on the sofa – a few, younger women scattered around the table, cross-legged on the floor, another on a beanie, and the only other man in the room, Ulf, a stocky German, who sat in a chair, appearing perplexed as to what he was doing there. Lightly a rain begun tapping against the windows Anne kept open to let the staid July heat flow through the room, propelled by old ceiling fans that trembled unevelly as they turned.

“I’ll start then,” Anne went on after a stony silence. “I’ve read a good many books in my life and the more I’ve gone on reading, the less I’ve begun caring about the characters. Nowadays what I want from a story is to get lost in its mood and although all the critics said this book was brilliantly plotted, I never gave myself over to it, not fully, or not wholly, anyhow.”

“But that’s just one element isn’t it?” Mar said, piping up earlier than I had expected. “I do want something happening to the people in the novel that pushes them up against the wall to see how they react. We were talking earlier on the way here,” she said, nudging her head towards me, “and we were having an argument about whether endings were important. I think an ending is a necessary provocation to keep the story off balance.”

“We have a novel in Germany called *Die Wand*,” Ulf said, “in which the reader never learns the fate of the woman at the center of the novel. The story itself is an account of her

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loneliness and isolation and she does not even know if anyone will ever read her story. For me, it was the absence of the ending that gave the book its power. An ending gives the people in the story over to a set and sealed fate; but without a clear ending, they are allowed live on in my mind.”

“That’s an author’s weakness if he fails at last to deliver a sentence on the characters he has imagined,” Mar said. “The author brings them pointedly into being and it’s his responsibility to the reader to craft as deliberate an ending.”

The Shiraz had gone a bit to my head nevertheless I wandered into the kitchen for another glass. In the window above the sink I saw the spires of the old church in Harvard Yard from where I’d recently heard the songs of a choir in evening practice, the melody so divine and foreboding that I had stood in the shadows of the empty campus entranced as I had been at the end of my college days when the whole world seemed as though it had opened itself to me. Only fleetingly did that sense of liberation still come over me, and when it did, I swore never to forget it, until, soon after, I lost my grasp on it, unable to recall the depth of that intensity. I knew that the pursuit of that feeling was what drove many people – like the professor who owned this house – to stay forever within the walls of a campus, where they were protected from the graying out that happened if you wandered too far into the real world.

“You’re being objective,” Anne was saying now, to Mar. “What I want to hear from you is how you felt long after the book was over – what would that feeling be?”

Mar shrugged, glancing at the two old women, who had, until now, hardly said a word, although both looked attentively on the rest of us, as though amused by our arguments. If I ever became an old man, I might do the same; listen to the annoyances and exasperations of the young to pass the time.

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“It’s not at all how I read,” Mar said. “We’ve talked about this before. I don’t consider any kind of art to be greatly emotional for it to be useful to me.”

“But then I think you’re missing the point,” Anne laughed. “Or at least you are missing a lot of the joy that art brings me. I would have considered that a male perspective – but Ulf actually feels otherwise.”

Again – Ulf seemed only rattled – looking at me to throw him a line. “Mar’s not being entirely truthful,” I said. “I don’t see her cry often, but certainly during films, or after reading certain books, or in a concert, I’ve seen that she’s overtaken by the art.”

Mar glared at me – although I had only meant this playfully, without any kind of criticism of who Mar was. In fact, that book club and the arguments that I was hearing and making in my mind, even reading, was a play in itself, the words within a novel arranged besides each other to create an enchantment that was often lost from the work I did every day. Never did a novel reproduce wholly for me the happiness or tragedy or dullness of ordinary life but called out to me as though from behind a wall, and the joy I had was trying to hear, however distantly and imperfectly, what the novel was trying to say to me. But I never said this to the club because I didn’t want anyone to talk me out of my opinion – the others, after all, were clever and thoughtful enough that had I listened to what they were saying I might have changed my mind.