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News that Inspires

Staying Alive: Mary Oliver on How Books Saved Her Life
by Maria Popova

"There are perhaps no days of our childhood that we lived as fully," Proust wrote in contemplating why we read, "as the days we think we left behind without living at all: the days we spent with a favourite book." And yet childhoods come in varied hues, some much darker than others; some children only survive by leaving the anguish of the real world behind and seeking shelter in the world of books.

Among them was the poet Mary Oliver (b. September 10, 1935), who recounts the redemptive refuge of reading and writing in her essay "Staying Alive," found in Upstream: Selected Essays(public library) — the radiant collection of reflections that gave us Oliver on the artist's task and the central commitment of the creative life.

Looking back on her barely survivable childhood, ravaged by pain which Oliver has never belabored or addressed directly — a darkness she shines a light on most overtly in her poem "Rage" and discusses obliquely in her terrific On Being conversation with Krista Tippett — she contemplates how reading saved her life:

Adults can change their circumstances; children cannot. Children are powerless, and in difficult situations they are the victims of every sorrow and mischance and rage around them, for children feel all of these things but without any of the ability that adults have to change them. Whatever can take a child beyond such circumstances, therefore, is an alleviation and a blessing.

Rebecca Solnit, in her beautiful meditation on the life-saving vanishing act of reading, wrote: "I disappeared into books when I was very young, disappeared into them like someone running into the woods." Oliver disappeared into both. For her, the woods were not a metaphor but a locale of self-salvation — she found respite from the brutality of the real world in the benediction of two parallel sacred worlds: nature and literature. She vanished into the woods, where she found "beauty and interest and mystery," and she vanished into books. In a sentiment that calls to mind Kafka's unforgettable assertion that "a book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us,"Oliver writes:

The second world — the world of literature — offered me, besides the pleasures of form, the sustentation of empathy (the first step of what Keats called negative capability) and I ran for it. I relaxed in it. I stood willingly and gladly in the characters of everything — other people, trees, clouds. And this is what I learned: that the world's otherness is antidote to confusion, that standing within this otherness — the beauty and the mystery

of the world, out in the fields or deep inside books — can re-dignify the worst-stung heart.

Illustration from The Book of Memory Gaps by Cecilia Ruiz

Oliver approached her new sacred world not just with the imaginative purposefulness typical of children aglow with a new obsession, but with a survivalist determination aimed at nothing less than self-salvation:

I learned to build bookshelves and brought books to my room, gathering them around me thickly. I read by day and into the night. I thought about perfectibility, and deism, and adjectives, and clouds, and the foxes. I locked my door, from the inside, and leaped from the roof and went to the woods, by day or darkness.

[…]

I read my books with diligence, and mounting skill, and gathering certainty. I read the way a person might swim, to save his or her life. I wrote that way too.

Art by Oliver Jeffers and Sam Winston from A Child of Books, an illustrated love letter to reading

In literature, she had her fill of the “clear and sweet and savory emotion” absent from the reality of her ordinary world, until reading alone was no longer enough — writing beckoned as the mighty world-building force that it is. Oliver recalls:

I did not think of language as the means to self-description. I thought of it as the door — a thousand opening doors! — past myself. I thought of it as the means to notice, to contemplate, to praise, and, thus, to come into power.

[…]

I saw what skill was needed, and persistence — how one must bend one’s spine, like a hoop, over the page — the long labor. I saw the difference between doing nothing, or doing a little, and the redemptive act of true effort. Reading, then writing, then desiring to write well, shaped in me that most joyful of circumstances — a passion for work.

With an eye to how the enlivening power of this “passion for work” slowly and steadily superseded the deadening weight of her circumstances, Oliver issues an incantation almost as a note to herself whispered into the margins:

You must not ever stop being whimsical. And you must not, ever, give anyone else the responsibility for your life.

Echoing young Sylvia Plath's insistence on writing as salvation for the soul, Oliver takes a lucid look at the nuanced nature of such self-salvation through creative work and considers what it means to save one's own life:

I don't mean it's easy or assured; there are the stubborn stumps of shame, grief that remains unsolvable after all the years, a bag of stones that goes with one wherever one goes and however the hour may call for dancing and for light feet. But there is, also, the summoning world, the admirable energies of the world, better than anger, better than bitterness and, because more interesting, more alleviating. And there is the thing that one does, the needle one plies, the work, and within that work a chance to take thoughts that are hot and formless and to place them slowly and with meticulous effort into some shapely heat-retaining form, even as the gods, or nature, or the soundless wheels of time have made forms all across the soft, curved universe — that is to say, having chosen to claim my life, I have made for myself, out of work and love, a handsome life.

[…]

And now my old dog is dead, and another I had after him, and my parents are dead, and that first world, that old house, is sold and lost, and the books I gathered there lost, or sold — but more books bought, and in another place, board by board and stone by stone, like a house, a true life built, and all because I was steadfast about one or two things: loving foxes, and poems, the blank piece of paper, and my own energy — and mostly the shimmering shoulders of the world that shrug carelessly over the fate of any individual that they may, the better, keep the Niles and the Amazons flowing. And that I did not give to anyone the responsibility for my life. It is mine. I made it. And can do what I want to with it. Live it. Give it back, someday, without bitterness, to the wild and weedy dunes.

Complement the endlessly nourishing Upstream with Oliver on what attention really means, love and its necessary wildness, and the measure of a life well lived, then revisit Joan Didion on the wellspring of self-respect, Neil Gaiman on what books do for the human spirit, and this animated oral history of how libraries save lives.