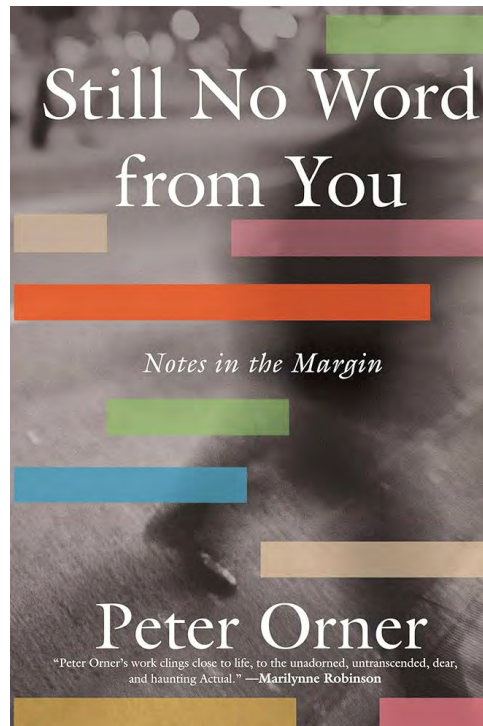


A READING LIFE

BY ANDREW MARTINO



Still No Word from You: Notes in the Margin, by Peter Orner who was a Fulbright Scholar to Namibia in 2016-2017

Still No Word from You is an excellent chronicle of how lives are built, lived, and remembered, not necessarily in a linear fashion, but in moments, recalled when we least expect it. The text is filled with joy, suffering, love, hate, indifference, and a host of other emotions that continue to plague the human mind and soul. In this memoir mixed with literary criticism, Orner, an award-winning author and editor, writes clearly and concisely, yet he delivers an impactful and poetic sense of what it means to exist, to be. Divided into six sections, “Morning,” “Mid-Morning,” “Noon,” “3 P.M.,” “Dusk,” and “Night,” *Still No Word from You* presents us with an encapsulated life distilled to a cycle of one day. The 107 chapters that make up the book are short, digestible musings on the interior of life.

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Orner begins with an early memory of sitting in the kitchen with his mother watching Nixon's flight from the White House: "On a black and white TV in the kitchen, my mother and I watched Richard Nixon's helicopter slowly rise. My mother stood at the sink doing dishes" (3). This is precisely the sort of "random" memory that comes back to us freighted with meaning, an historic event juxtaposed with the most banal of household chores. The beginning chapters of this book deal with mostly personal memories about Orner's childhood and family history. Soon after these personal memories, he throws his readers a curveball. "Some stories don't get lost," he tells us, "they get repeated into oblivion" (10). It's a strange statement, at once ambiguous and direct—but it may be the very thesis that informs the book. The widening gap between past and present can only be bridged by stories, family histories that get passed down from generation to generation. Oblivion here can also signify the alteration of those stories from family history into family myth where certain aspects, certain truths, become unfocused and, therefore, take on different meanings.

Parts of the books we read become as much a part of us as the empirical experiences we go through in life. Orner declares that "Certain books, rare ones, you go on reading whether you are reading them or not" (155). Indeed, the staying power of those texts that have meaning for us do become a fundamental part of our lives. The fecundity of the reading life is a soil forever rich with the promise of new experiences and new memories.

The privileging of the reading life is a prime directive in Orner's world, even eclipsing ties to family and place. In fact, the act of reading seeps into his sleeping self as well. Consider the following: "Lately, I've begun to read in my sleep. I'll drop off in the middle of a sentence, and I'll keep going. I don't mean that I fall asleep reading. I mean I keep reading after I fall asleep. Ghost sentences" (136). The muscle of memory brings forth the murky words that wash ashore as we begin to fall asleep while reading (a sensation I think all readers can relate to) and refocuses itself into something more spectral, something uncanny in the sense that Freud defines the term. There is a profound repetition to reading while one is falling asleep. We read sentences over and over, nodding off to pick up the thread again and again. Later, Orner remarks, "I'm repeating myself. Always, lately, I'm repeating myself. Again, the hunger to return to places that are gone from the Illinois earth" (274)

Reading is, essentially, the repetition of life. But could we not also say that life is the repetition of reading? Narrative gives form and meaning to events that occur randomly in our lives and in society. The books we read, Orner reminds us, stay with us, but not as dead things, monumentalized once the last page is turned, but as living things, adding to our experience and the richness and complexities of life.

Orner begins and ends his book with memories of his mother, and the last chapter is a recollection, half remembered, he shares with his brother. One night during their youth, during a raging blizzard, their mother didn't come home. The two brothers piece together separate memories, and in those memories resides the significance of the title, referring to the frightening fear of abandonment by the mother. But more than a bookend reflection, it's Orner's literary heritage that impacts him so forcefully that he moves through space and time, always aware that he has companions. Orner's reflections on Woolf, Pasolini, Faulkner, Cheever, Babel, Kafka, Hansberry, Singer, and many others are constantly haunting the author.

For me, the most resonant, impactful sentence in the book is the one I quoted earlier: "Certain books, rare ones, you go on reading whether you are reading them or not." I suspect Orner is telling us that the reader is the hero of the story, our story, everyone's story.

Peter Orner, *Still No Word from You: Notes in the Margins*. New York: Catapult, 2022. 302 pages. \$26.00.

BIOGRAPHY

Andrew Martino is dean of the Clarke Honors College at Salisbury University where he is also professor of English. He has published on Roberto Bolaño, V.S. Naipaul, Natalia Ginzburg, Albert Camus, Paul Bowles, and others. Martino is a regular reviewer for *World Literature Today* and *Reading in Translation*. He was an IEA Fulbrighter in France in 2021, and is a Fulbright Campus Coordinator at Salisbury University. Most recently, he was inducted as a National Collegiate Honors Council Fellow. He is a co-host of the film podcast, *The Classroom Critics*, and is the author of the blog, *C'era una volta* (apmartino.wordpress.com).

