

IN PRAISE OF READING IN THE DARK

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



Several years ago, when my son was still small, I was recruited to help chaperone him and his fellow Cub Scouts as they camped

in the woods in the week between Christmas and New Year's.

It wasn't an assignment I relished. The last week of the year promised to be cold and wet, and I would be spending it in a drafty tent rather than curled up at home with a good book.

The final days of December seem to me the best reading time of all. With any luck, the house by then has cleared of extra relatives. In the post-Christmas lull, a weary reveler can quietly turn the pages of the book – or books – left under the holiday tree, the nicest gifts of any season.

Books are the best gifts because, unlike most presents, you get to open them more than once – first, as they're unwrapped, and then each time you read what's inside.

A perfect arrangement, it seemed, and I would be missing all of it to shiver under the stars. As a

*Reading in the dark is a pleasure I discovered
on a long-ago campout.*

consolation, I packed among our all-weather gear a secondhand copy of *Enter, Conversing*, a 1962 collection of Clifton Fadiman's essays. There's probably no more unlikely camping companion than Fadiman, who was a lively cultural critic and inveterate creature of the city. Taking Fadiman to the woods seemed as absurd as inviting Noel Coward to a hoedown.

On our first night among the pines, after we all had retired to our sleeping bags, I pulled out my vintage volume and snapped on a portable light. Then I connected with a compensating pleasure of our rustic surroundings: the joy of reading in almost total darkness.

Some of us first discover that illicit thrill in childhood, reading under the covers by flashlight after our parents order us to sleep. My mother and father had never imposed such a reading curfew, so it wasn't until that winter campout that I discovered the true appeal of reading with a single, tiny bulb.

There is, first of all, a delightful sense of subversion. The rest of the world is asleep, and there you are, fully awake, still burrowing through sentences. I also love how that single beam of light focuses the concentration as it scans each page. You aren't just grasping at meaning in a story; you're *hunting* it.

My wife and I now each keep a small reading light clipped to the spine of whatever book is on our nightstands. In the last moments of the evening, we shut off all the lights but those two tiny lamps. Reading ourselves to sleep, we feel like two miners merrily picking through the darkness, waiting for a diamond to shine up from the page.

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