

**Thomas Padgett**  
**"The Margins of Memory"**

In a hotel bathtub, I sat hunched over, the state or city we were in as nebulous as the late hour. We were in the process of moving. My father had been assigned to an Air Force base in Alaska. A long and exhausting drive from Oklahoma. I fought the weight of my eyelids and strained to focus on the pages in front of me. My head would tilt as I fought the urge to doze. For whatever reason, at that time, I didn't care about the drive's length, my growing fatigue, the distance from my friends, or leaving another place I had grown to call home. The only thing I cared about was finishing the book I had in my lap.

I couldn't tell you which book it was. At the time, all I had was reading. One page after another, over and over like dominoes. I remember finishing a book or two every couple of days on that road trip. From one adventure to the next. No pauses, no breaks. By the end of the trip the backseat of our white Chevy Suburban looked like a library that had been struck by an earthquake. One book, though, caught my attention like none of the others did.

I had planned it out step-by-step. I remember leaving my book on the sink in the bathroom. "I'll be back," I imagined telling it as if it was my only friend. At the time, it probably was. I remember waiting for everyone to fall asleep. I remember sneaking away to rendezvous with the friend I had left behind. I remember choosing the dimmer of the two bathroom lights, fearing the brighter one might wake my parents and end our little reading heist. I remember spending hours with that book, refusing to give into my exhaustion as if waiting till morning would destroy whatever we had. I remember all these events tipping into all the others, yet I can't recall anything about the book itself. I could guess, but that's all it would be. In the whirlwind of moving, the characters within those pages became my steadfast friends, their adventures a comforting constant amidst my own upheavals. The tub and the book were my entire universe that night.

Now, each book I open whispers echoes of that night, a reminder of the refuge I found in that world when my own was changing so much. It's funny, though. Isn't it? How things like that can leave a lasting memory. That was almost fourteen years ago, yet that memory has floated into my mind's-eye every time I've picked up a book since. I get so wrapped in books, I feel I'll lift my head and find myself in that tub all over again. Such an impact, yet all the details have drifted away into the annals of vague half-memory. I wish it wasn't the case but memories move by like an endless sea of tipping dominos. They unfurl into who we are, but when someone asks you, "why do you read?" you find yourself wondering; Is it because of that night when it was the only thing you had, or is it something else entirely that you can't even remember? You don't know which domino tipped into all the others that created the mosaic you hold within your mind. It's like painting without knowing where or why you made the first stroke. Despite all of that, the painting is still special to you, and has so many reasons to be special. I can't tell you why or when I started my painting, but I can tell you why I'm still painting it. I can tell you what it means.

Sometime after that night, books became more than just an escape. More than a way to run from my circumstances. As I said, they were friends but they also became mirrors that helped me understand myself, they became an intrinsic part of my internal life. These aspects aren't what made reading meaningful to me. No, they were byproducts. They were the dominoes after they had fallen. Books followed me into adulthood. It wasn't until then, until I worked in a bookstore, that I truly grasped why all of this meant so much to me.

Surrounded by the silent stories of a thousand books I found myself taking on a new role in my relationship to reading. I was no longer just a consumer. Reading was no longer just a personal experience. No, I was a custodian. A custodian of knowledge. A guide for other's journeys through the pages that lined the shelves I spent my days in. I didn't realize any of

that initially. Even in my early days at work, my view of reading was still quite selfish. I thought of it as something that was personal. A hobby I shared with others, but could only experience on my own. That changed after a single interaction.

It was near the start of my shift that day in September. The store was nearly empty that afternoon. He approached the customer service desk silently.

"Is there anything I can help you find?" I had asked.

"Maybe." He cracked a nervous smile and let out a slight sigh. "I haven't read in awhile. I was just going to ask for some suggestions." A common request. I thought nothing of it.

I quizzed him on his interests, hoping to find something that could catch his attention. His interests weren't too dissimilar to my own. I offered up some of my favorites and told him of a series I was currently reading. A series that had my attention more than most ever had. The first series I'd actually binged in awhile. The first one to keep me up reading all night in a very long time. I managed to sell him on it. He was intrigued by the excitement in my voice. He grabbed the first book, thanked me and left.

Four months passed. It was the middle of January when the sense of familiarity grazed my mind. A tickling of nearly dormant neurons as a customer approached me. As he approached me while I sorted books, recognition clicked the moment he began to speak. "I was in here a few months ago," he said. He recounted the events of our initial meeting. He told me how many books in the series he had read. He had caught up to me and was starting the book that I was in the process of finishing. He remembered details of our interaction that even I couldn't. He mentioned some of my favorite books he was giving a shot. Books I didn't even remember suggesting. All of this sparked an exciting conversation. We talked about our favorite characters from the series. We got into more of my suggestions, he gave me some of his own. It was almost euphoric to have a connection like this despite having only exchanged a few words months prior. Without any hesitation I call that man my friend.

"I wanted to thank you," he said. I assumed he was going to thank me for the suggestion, or the conversation, but no. "You." He took a decidedly serious tone. "You got me back into reading." I was stunned by the sudden sincerity. "I haven't read like this since I was little," and suddenly I was looking in a mirror. In front of me wasn't a customer, but a young man who had found his moment in the "tub" all over again. I managed to acknowledge him, though I couldn't tell you what it was I had said. What I can tell you is that it wasn't enough. I could never articulate to him the profundity his words carried in that moment. The shift he brought to my perspective in the coming days as I looked back on our interaction.

Thanks to him, I finally knew what reading truly meant to me. Reading was never just a captivating pass time or coping mechanism. It was a tapestry of shared experience. To read was to weave and be woven with others. It was a million seemingly insignificant moments between people that shaped who they were or who they would become. To read and to carry a story with you is to be a part of something larger than oneself. It meant being connected to not just the one telling the story, but to everyone who read it. To simultaneously tip the dominoes and to be tipped. To paint and be painted. Experiencing one story means I am a part of another. Reading, to me, means I am connected to the world and so many in it. To other authors, to others readers, to a million people apart and in between, and yes, even to you.