



TAPROOT

Issue 16: Shelter

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Recommended Reading: *Shelter*

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There was a chair in the front room of my childhood home that did not go with the pale floral sofa, but was put there because there wasn't space for it anywhere else. The chair was very ugly because it was made of dark brown corduroy, but also it was ugly because it was the chair my great-grandfather had died in while watching TV. However, this chair held the most perfect scooped shape for my young girl self to burrow into, and the corner of the room it occupied was often the only quiet space in a suburban house that held five children under the age of ten. I have a distinct—though not strictly true—memory of escaping to this chair daily with a book and handfuls of chocolate chips from the freezer, throughout the entire first summer the chair spent in our home. What is important from this continues: book, escape and burrow, daily.

Books have been my constant companions. They've seen me through boredom, loneliness, being overwhelmed. They've offered amazing adventures when I wasn't living thoroughly enough in my own. They've answered questions I was too shy to ask, and created more of them than could ever be answered. They've prodded me toward a more expansive awareness and understanding. They've kindled effort, energy, curiosity.

When I ask my students to write down their thoughts on a piece of writing we've read as a class, what I really want to know is their visceral response—what they felt and maybe saw reflected in the mirror held up by the words on the page. Perhaps every other sentence elicits, "That is exactly how it is!" Perhaps they feel nothing in it is right or familiar. Later, we converse in the shared language of the literary canon we've built in our time together; it's my favorite language to speak. The thing that I want most for them to know is that books hold both of these experiences—personal and communal—and that the process of connecting the two can be the process of seeking home and always finding shelter.

One of the ways I best love to choose a book is an intentional selection based on an enthusiastic and trusted recommendation, and here I hope to offer you several of these.

Ordinary Love & Good Will

by Jane Smiley

The first gift these twin novellas offer is their compactness. Not because of any desire to rush through the book and be done with it—Jane Smiley's controlled grace and precision on the page create a space that I always want to spend more time in (and her latest novel-sized saga, *Some Luck*, satisfies this want wonderfully)—but, rather, because in days that are often filled with tasks and projects that never feel truly complete, there is enormous comfort to be had in taking in a story, from beginning to end, in one thoroughly absorbed sitting.

Though not overtly linked, *Ordinary Love* and *Good Will* each deal with the domestic on a scale that is both large and intimate. *Ordinary Love* belongs to Rachel, a character who seems to occupy that mythical role of mother as the hub of her family. The opening pages see her tending to household cares—"buffing the kitchen floor with an old cotton turtle neck"—while meditating on her five grown children, each in their own turn.

Throughout the novella, which is structured around two days at the end of summer, Rachel's every move around her family seems especially careful. This caution, we discover, is a long-held response to a moment early in her motherhood, when, motivated by what she describes as uncontrolled desire, Rachel fell in love with a neighborhood man and lost access to her children entirely. She has spent the past twenty years reconstructing, piece by piece, what was destroyed when her husband learned of the affair, sold the family home, and took their children abroad. The task



that remains is to share with her children the full truth of all that surrounded their parents' divorce.

Good Will puts forth a familial happiness as imagined and shaped by Bob Miller on his small, self-sustained farm in rural Pennsylvania. Bob's dearly held luxury is the rejection of modern convenience for a few choice freedoms, and the details of his small family's life are seductive: the tidy workshop of tools obtained entirely through trade or good luck; Bob's wife at the loom with a mug of tea steaming in the sunlight beside her; the straw tick his son sleeps on, which the three of them stuffed together.

It isn't the conscious choosing of this beautiful, separate life that ultimately tempts fate, but rather an ignorance allowed by this willful separateness, which forces its flaws to the surface when Bob's young son commits a violent and seemingly racially motivated act against a classmate. For this man whose every move is so carefully thought out and planned—by design, the Millers do not own a car or a telephone and rarely have more than ten dollars to their name at any given time—the sudden, forced realization of the inherent, inevitable ignorance this life has effected is brutal.

Hope lies, I think, for Bob—and perhaps for us—in Rachel's reflection on the active effort necessary to “accept the mystery of my children, of the inexplicable ways they diverge from parental expectations, of how, however much you know or remember of them, they don't quite add up.”

The Orchardist

by Amanda Coplin

I read *The Orchardist* in a day or two, lying in bed in a friend's yurt after a very hard winter, in a moment that was beautiful but also very uncertain. The texture of the world immediately around me—the smell of wood smoke and fried bacon, coffee cooling on the bed stand, yellow light suspended on the canvas walls until the sun was all the way down—felt remarkably close to the book's tiny turn-of-the-century homestead nestled in the Cascade foothills. None of this was necessary, though, to become completely caught up in the gorgeous haze of Amanda Coplin's prose.

William Talmadge has lived and worked alone in his orchard in the Pacific Northwest for much of his life. Tragedy took his given family when he was very young, such as it did in those days, and what tenderness for the world that is left in him he applies to the quiet and thoughtful cultivation of a hand-built Eden of apples and apricots and plums. It is this tenderness that he readily holds out to two runaway girls who one day steal fruit from his stand in town, and gradually latch on to his steady generosity. The story winds forward from here, with the introduction of a true villain and the desperation his cruelty instills.

There are moments of rather heavy breathing in the plot of *The Orchardist*, but they never quite veer into melodrama, primarily due to Coplin's poetic persistence and the depths to which she brings us into her characters' inner worlds. This is really a story about the intentional and compassionate formation of a family, chosen and fought for.

Garden Anywhere: How to Grow Gorgeous Container Gardens, Herb Gardens, Kitchen Gardens, & More—Without Spending a Fortune

by Alys Fowler

I bought *Garden Anywhere* with the last bit of credit I had at our local bookstore in Spokane, Washington. At the time, we had a bit of yard tacked on to the apartment we were

renting, and I couldn't resist the lush, color-filled photographs of Alys pattering around in bold sundresses and wool sweaters, poppies spilling out of oversized cans at her Wellington-clad feet. Before I really had a chance to dig in to her book, however, we moved cross-country to Brooklyn, and my garden plot shrank to the space on the fire escape outside our kitchen window. Fortunately, *Garden Anywhere* was created for just this.

It can be difficult to feel connected to a back-to-the-land movement when you don't have any land. Alys Fowler demonstrates, in a voice that is both practical and passionate, how anyone might work with the space, budget, schedule and sunlight they've got to grow a variety of lovely and edible plants. A repurposed wine crate of lettuces will by no means create complete self-sufficiency, but it can yield several servings of tender salad leaves for a fraction of the cost of purchasing greens at the grocery. In Brooklyn, I found inspiration in *Garden Anywhere* to craft a micro-bed of peas and nasturtiums in an old porcelain sink my husband found on the curb. And in Portland, Oregon—where we are now calling a bit of yard our own—I find myself nurturing a connection to the long-term cycles of our growing space, letting go of the potted garden I tended to when I wasn't sure how long we'd be in a given place, and turning instead to Fowler's thoughts on companion planting, propagation, and homegrown compost. It has been a comfort, through these past transient years, to have in *Garden Anywhere* a single book I can turn to for comprehensive (but not glutinous) guidance in maintaining a bit (or a lot) of garden, no matter where it is.

The Secret Garden

by Frances Hodgson Burnett

The Secret Garden holds an interesting place in our collective memory, I think, as a much beloved story that has been somewhat separated from its original text. I know that I read it at some point in my childhood, but what I remember best are the mist-filled moors of the film adaptations. The book begins familiarly, however, in faraway India, where Mary Lennox is orphaned by a cholera outbreak. Her aloneness is not worrisome to her: she is a sour and selfish child who has never been wanted or loved. Mary is sent to England to live in the manor house of a reclusive uncle who can offer her shelter but very little else. With a good deal of unsupervised time to herself, and free reign over her uncle's extensive grounds, Mary soon finds the walled garden that is both backdrop to and impetus for the work that quietly transforms her into an exuberant “real” girl who engages fully with life.



Coming back to Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* now, what resonates most for me is the straightforward manner in which she handles the difficult questions of childhood, especially a childhood stunted by lack of inner nourishment. The film adaptations of this story might charmingly display the magic of a garden coming back to life, the roses returning to Mary's cheeks, but it is the book that takes us inside the characters and shows the complicated world within. As an adult reader, I also can't help but connect the bit of earth Mary requests, to “plant seeds in—to make things grow—to see them come alive,” to Virginia Woolf's “room of one's own.” I agree with these authors: having a space that we can claim as our own, a sanctuary in which we can think and grow and come alive, is important to our development as real, complete and engaged persons.

In

by Nikki McClure

My local library in Portland has a special shelf for “lucky day” books—books that have reservation lists over a hundred patrons long, a few copies of which are set aside for whoever chances upon them at the right moment. *In* was a very happy “lucky day” find for me.

Crafted with Nikki McClure's signature paper cuts, *In* tracks the imaginative play of a small boy who insists on staying in for the day—until he is tempted to explore the outdoors. The minimal text is perfectly matched to the richly specific images. There is so much that feels familiar in this book: the use of simple objects at hand to create a playscape, pajamas worn all day, the natural in and out breath-rhythm that little ones crave. *In* offers a quiet reminder that, having taken the opportunity to ground ourselves within, we are more thoroughly equipped to engage the world without.

