Study Guide: ***In the Shadow of Girls in Blossom***
(Oxford World's Classics, 2025; translated by Charlotte Mandell; introduction by Edward J. Hughes; notes by Adam Watt)

Session 1, Nov 7, 2026
Pages 3–65 (Madame Swann's Circle)

The narrator's parents host the diplomat M. de Norpois. The boy is allowed to see the actress Berma and is disappointed. Norpois offers little encouragement for his literary ambitions. The narrator gains entry to the Swann household, becomes intimate with Gilberte, and observes Odette's transformed social world and Swann's diminished status.

Discussion topics
1. How does the dinner with Norpois expose the gap between the narrator's private ideals (literature, the Swanns) and adult social judgment?
2. What does the Berma episode reveal about the difference between anticipated and experienced art?
3. How has Swann's marriage altered his social position and the family's view of him since *Swann's Way*?

Session 2, Nov 21, 2026
Pages 66–128 (Madame Swann's Circle)

The narrator becomes a regular visitor at the Swanns'. He lunches with Bergotte, studies Odette's drawing-room and her changing toilette, and experiences the intense, fluctuating emotions of adolescent love for Gilberte. Social rituals, gifts of flowers, and the Champs-Élysées continue to shape his obsession.

Discussion topics
1. How does Bergotte's conversation affect the narrator's understanding of literature and of himself as a potential writer?
2. In what ways does Odette's salon and appearance continue (or revise) the portrait begun in "Swann in Love"?
3. How does Proust depict the instability of the narrator's feelings for Gilberte—hope, jealousy, idealization?

Session 3, Dec 5, 2026
Pages 129–190 (Madame Swann's Circle)

A quarrel with Gilberte leads the narrator deliberately to break off contact. He continues to visit Odette for a time, then withdraws. The section closes with reflections on the irregular process of forgetting and the gradual fading of an exclusive passion. The part ends with the narrator's emotional detachment.

Discussion topics
1. What does the "irregular process of oblivion" suggest about the nature of love and memory in Proust?
2. Why does the narrator continue seeing Mme Swann after deciding to stop seeing Gilberte?
3. How does the ending of Part One prepare the shift from Parisian drawing-rooms to the open space of Balbec?

Session 4, Dec 19, 2026

Pages 191–259 (Place Names: The Place)

Two years later the narrator travels with his grandmother and Françoise to Balbec. The actual church and seaside fail to match the exotic images he had formed from names and descriptions. He is initially miserable in the unfamiliar hotel until his grandmother comforts him. Early observations of hotel life and the changing sea begin.

Discussion topics

1. How does the encounter with the real Balbec church dramatize the conflict between imagination (the name) and perception (the place)?
2. What role does the grandmother play in the narrator's emotional and sensory adjustment to the new environment?
3. How does the seascape begin to function as a site of shifting light, time, and attention?

Session 5, Jan 2, 2027

Pages 260–328 (Place Names: The Place)

The narrator meets Mme de Villeparisis, renews acquaintance with Bloch, and is introduced to Robert de Saint-Loup. He forms an intense friendship with the young aristocrat. Early, puzzling encounters with the Baron de Charlus occur. Social hierarchies at the Grand-Hôtel and the surrounding coast come into sharper focus.

Discussion topics

1. How does the friendship with Saint-Loup revise the narrator's assumptions about aristocratic manners and sincerity?
2. What first impressions of Charlus plant later mysteries of character and sexuality?
3. In what ways does the hotel function as a microcosm of class observation and mutual scrutiny?

Session 6, Jan 16, 2027

Pages 329–397 (Place Names: The Place)

The "little band" of young girls appears on the beach. The narrator is captivated by their collective vitality and by Albertine in particular. He is introduced to the painter Elstir, whose studio and conversation transform his way of seeing both landscape and people. Desire, jealousy, and artistic perception interweave.

Discussion topics

1. How does Elstir's art teach the narrator a new mode of perception that differs from both social convention and pure imagination?
2. What is the significance of the girls appearing first as a group rather than as distinct individuals?
3. How do the narrator's shifting preferences among the girls illustrate the mutability of desire?

Session 7, Jan 30, 2027

Pages 398–466 (Place Names: The Place)

The narrator's relationship with Albertine deepens and remains ambiguous. Further encounters with the little band, continued lessons from Elstir, and the approaching end of the season bring the Balbec sojourn to a close. The volume ends with the narrator carrying forward new experiences of love, friendship, art, and the gap between names and places.

Discussion topics

1. How does the ambiguous intimacy with Albertine both fulfill and frustrate the narrator's longing?
2. In what ways has the Balbec summer altered the narrator's understanding of time, beauty, and social possibility compared with the Paris of Part One?
3. Looking ahead, what lasting figures and themes (Albertine, Saint-Loup, Charlus, Elstir, the sea) seem poised to shape the volumes to come?

****Sources****

- Plot outlines and structural divisions: standard scholarly summaries of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (e.g., Wikipedia "In Search of Lost Time"; critical overviews of the two-part structure "Autour de Mme Swann" / "Noms de pays : le pays").
- Thematic emphases (names vs. places, adolescence, art, forgetting): consistent across major English-language introductions and annotations to the volume.

Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu [in Search of Lost Time,* 1913-1927*]* represents the pinnacle of the modern psychological novel, offering a recursive exploration of consciousness that aligns with our Meetup's commitment to advanced intellectual inquiry. By undertaking this sequence, the group engages with a profound "evolution of ideas" concerning the fluidity of temporal perception and the architecture of the self.

In *The Swann Way*, the "Overture" establishes involuntary memory—exemplified by the iconic Madeleine—not merely as nostalgia, but as a phenomenological retrieval of the "total" past. The volume's bifurcated structure, transitioning from the pastoral childhood impressions of "Combray" to the sophisticated pathology of desire in "Swann in Love," provides a comparative study of how social artifice and internal obsession shape our ontological reality. Proust's prose, characterized by its labyrinthine syntax and Bergsonian treatment of duration, demands a slow, analytical pace. The work serves as a nuanced meditation on the "intermittencies of the heart" and the redemptive power of aesthetic experience to reclaim a life otherwise lost to the entropic flow of chronological time.

Reading Schedule: ***The Swann Way*** (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 2023. ISBN: 9780198871521)

Translation: Brian Nelson | Sessions: 7, ***August 1, 2026 to October 24, 2026*** [alternate Saturdays]

This schedule focuses on the foundational first volume, providing the structural breakdown and thematic echoes required for rigorous group discussion.

Discussion Schedule: *Swann's Way* (Marcel Proust)

Date	Text Selection	Section	Core Thematic Focus
Aug 01, 2026	pp. 7–47	Combray I	Involuntary Memory & Epistemology: The Madeleines, the Bedtime Drama, and the Construction of Nostalgia
Aug 15, 2026	pp. 48–108	Combray II	Spatial & Social Topography: The Church of Saint-Hilaire, Aunt Léonie, and the Rituals of Provincial Life
Aug 29, 2026	pp. 108–174	Combray II	The Dual Trajectories: Méséglise (Swann's Way) vs. Guermantes Way; Initial Aesthetic Awakening
Sept 12, 2026	pp. 177–234	Swann in Love	The Pathology of Desire: Social Stratification at the Verdurin Salon and the Genesis of Obsession
Sept 26, 2026	pp. 234–295	Swann in Love	Art as Erotic Catalyst: Vinteuil's Little Phrase, Jealousy as Epistemic Drive, and Idolatry
Oct 10, 2026	pp. 295–353	Swann in Love	The Dissolution of Passion: Estrangement, Ephemeral Recovery, and the Illusion of the Ideal
Oct 24, 2026	pp. 357–397	Place-Names: The Name	Nomenclature & Imagination: The Architecture of Phantasm, Paris Gardens, and the Shift to Reality

Structural Breakdown & Reading Notes

Session 1: Aug 01, 2026 (pp. 7–47) — *Combray I*

- **Narrative Anchor:** The overture of insomnia; the drama of the bedtime kiss; the famous Madeleine episode.
- **Key Analytical Themes:**
    - **The Dual Self:** The tension between voluntary memory (*mémoire volontaire*) as a mere cerebral archive and involuntary memory (*mémoire involuntaire*) as the catalyst for true temporal recovery.
    - **The Maternal Axis:** The psychoanalytic dynamics of the child's dependence, maternal authority, and the father's unexpected concession as the first rupture in moral order.

Session 2: Aug 15, 2026 (pp. 48–108) — Combray II

- **Narrative Anchor:** Aunt Léonie's room; the window as an observational stage; the architecture of Saint-Hilaire.
- **Key Analytical Themes:**
    - **Micro-Sociology of Provincial Isolation:** Aunt Léonie's ritualized invalidism as a microcosm of bourgeois self-absorption and control.
    - **Spatial Temporalization:** How the architecture of the Combray church embeds centuries of French history into physical stone, bridging private memory and collective heritage.

Session 3: Aug 29, 2026 (pp. 108–174) — Combray II

- **Narrative Anchor:** The two walks (Méséglise/Swann's Way vs. Guermantes Way); the hawthorns; the encounter with Gilberte; the steeples of Martinville.
- **Key Analytical Themes:**
    - **Binary Geographies:** The dichotomy between the sensual/bourgeois world of Swann and the aristocratic/unattainable realm of the Guermantes—two paths that structure the protagonist's entire worldview.
    - **Literary Vocation:** The epiphany at Martinville; the transition from passive sensory reception to active linguistic translation (the narrator's first written piece).

Session 4: Sept 12, 2026 (pp. 177–234) — Swann in Love

- **Narrative Anchor:** Retroactive narration of Charles Swann's affair with Odette de Crécy; introduction to the "little nucleus" of the Verdurin salon.
- **Key Analytical Themes:**
    - **Bourgeois Snobbery vs. Aristocratic Elegance:** The inverted social hierarchy within the Verdurin circle, where intellectual conformity is enforced under the guise of artistic liberation.
    - **Visual Aesthetics & Projection:** Swann's aesthetic intellectualization of Odette, viewing her not as an individual but through the lens of Botticelli's Zipporah (*Jethro's Daughter*).

Session 5: Sept 26, 2026 (pp. 234–295) — *Swann in Love*

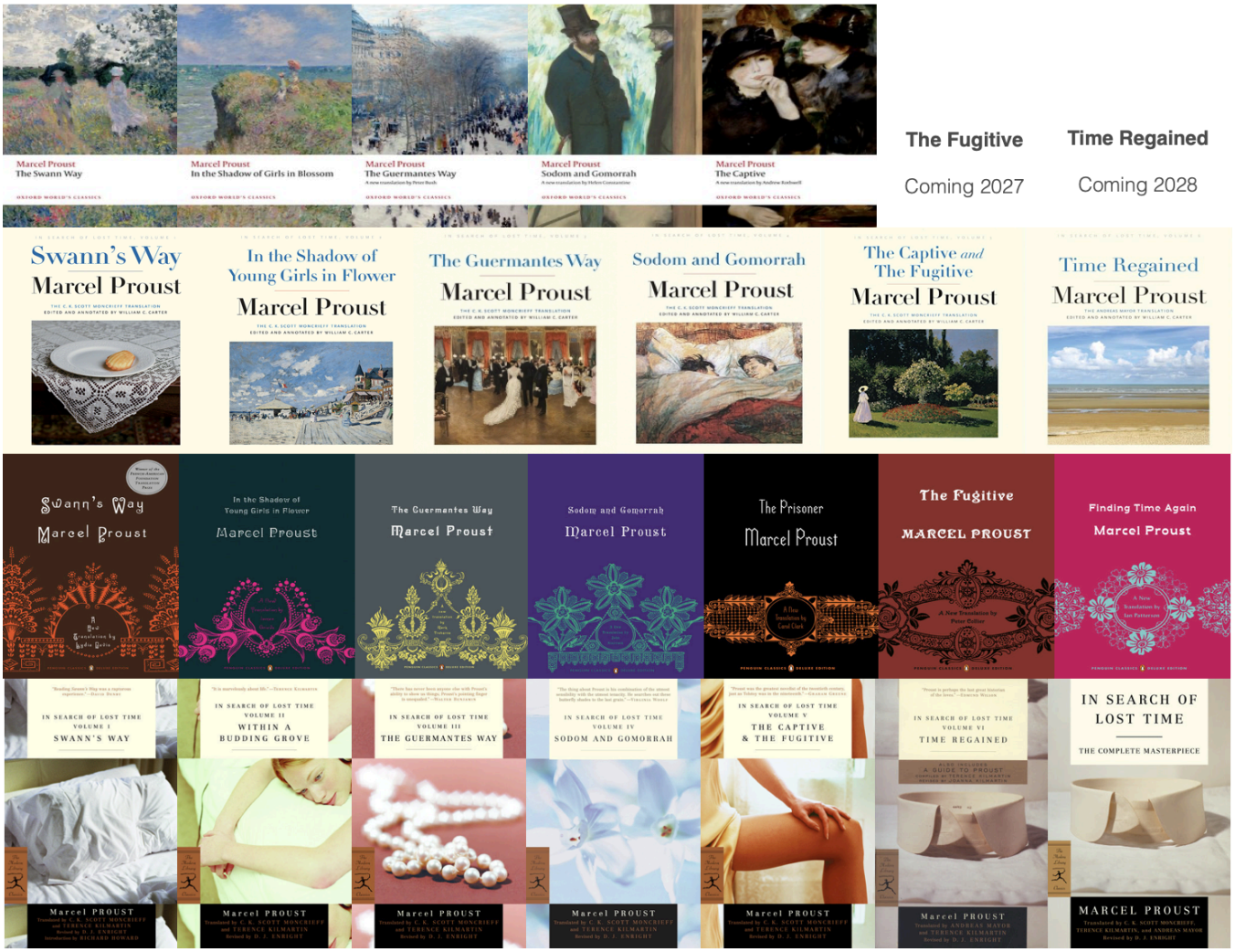
- **Narrative Anchor:** Vinteuil's "national anthem" of love; the escalation of Swann's obsessive jealousy; nocturnal searches through Paris.
- **Key Analytical Themes:**
    - **The Transcendent Function of Art:** Vinteuil's *Little Phrase* as a motif that captures the transient essence of emotion, serving as the archetype for Proust's view of music as a language beyond words.
    - **Jealousy as Hermeneutics:** Jealousy acting as a perverted form of intellectual curiosity, compelling Swann to become an investigator of minute details and lies.

Session 6: Oct 10, 2026 (pp. 295–353) — *Swann in Love*

- **Narrative Anchor:** The soirée at the Marquise de Sainte-Euverte's; the revelation of Odette's past; the eventual decay of Swann's passion.
- **Key Analytical Themes:**
  - **Social Comedy & Vanity:** The satire of the High Faubourg Saint-Germain society contrasted with Swann's internal desolation.
  - **The Tragicomic Conclusion of Passion:** Swann's realization that he spent years of his life on a woman who "was not my type"—the ultimate commentary on the subjective, self-generated nature of romantic love.

Session 7: Oct 24, 2026 (pp. 357–397) — *Place-Names: The Name*

- **Narrative Anchor:** The power of proper nouns (Parma, Florence, Balbec); games at the Champs-Élysées with Gilberte; the Bois de Boulogne in autumn.
- **Key Analytical Themes:**
  - **Nomenclature vs. Reality:** The semiotic weight of names and how mental images generated by language inevitably collapse when confronted with geographical and material realities.
  - **Temporal Instability:** The closing reflection on how places are not static locations in space, but thin slices among contiguous impressions that form a single moment in time.



Discussion Guide

The following synopses and advanced discussion topics are structurally aligned with the pagination of Brian Nelson's 2023 Oxford World's Classics edition of *The Swann Way* (496 pages total, with text spanning approximately pages 7 to 430).

Session 1: "Overture" (pp. 7–47)

Synopsis

The novel opens with the Narrator's profound disorientation upon waking, establishing the theme of shifting planes of consciousness. He recalls his childhood in Combray, specifically the agonizing "bedtime drama" where he desperately awaited a goodnight kiss from his mother. The trauma is aggravated by the presence of Charles Swann, whose evening visits banish the mother to the parlor. Decades later, the middle-aged Narrator experiences a sensory epiphany when tasting a madeleine dipped in lime-blossom tea. This moment of involuntary memory shatters his habitual amnesia, causing the entire landscape of his childhood town to unfurl from his cup.

Discussion Topics

1. **The Architecture of Disorientation:** How does Proust's opening meditation on sleep challenge Cartesian models of stable self-hood? Examine how the physical movement between rooms and beds functions as an ontological destabilization of the Narrator's identity (pp. 7–12).
2. **The Maternal Kiss as Currency:** Analyze the transaction of the goodnight kiss (pp. 28–35). Does the father's sudden capitulation to the Narrator's nervous distress mark a victory of the child's will, or does it initiate a lifelong pattern of psychological codependency and emotional masochism?
3. **The Epistemology of the Madeleine:** Contrast the concept of *voluntary memory* (intellectual, selective, yet dead) with *involuntary memory* (sensory, accidental, and vital) on pages 43–47. How does this distinction reframe the artwork's purpose from historical chronicling to phenomenological retrieval?

Session 2: "Combray" I (pp. 48–112)

Synopsis

The Narrator reconstructs the social fabric of Combray. Dominated by the eccentricities of his invalid great-aunt Léonie—who monitors the town's trivial movements from her window—the household operates on rigid routines of devotion, dining, and class hierarchy. We observe the family's meticulous social sorting, particularly their willful ignorance of Charles Swann's high-society connections in Paris due to their refusal to look beyond his provincial status. The text highlights the family's deep-seated habits and structural domestic life.

Discussion Topics

1. **The Panoptic Window of Tante Léonie:** Analyze Léonie's room as a microcosm of social surveillance (pp. 68–75). How does her refusal to participate in life, paired with her obsessive need to categorize every passerby, mirror the role of the novelist or the cultural critic?
2. **Provincial Bourgeois Hermeneutics:** Examine the family's reaction to Swann's aristocratic associations (pp. 52–60). How does their insistence on maintaining a rigid domestic hierarchy reflect what Pierre Bourdieu would later identify as class *habitus* and a defense mechanism against social disruption?

3. **Habit as an Anesthetic:** Proust describes habit as a heavy curtain that conceals the terrifying unfamiliarity of existence. Discuss how the domestic choreography of Combray serves as an existential defense system against both individual mortality and historical change.

Session 3: "Combray" II (pp. 113–185)

Synopsis

This section delineates the spatial and philosophical split of the Narrator's universe into the "Two Ways": *Méséglise-la-Vineuse* (Swann's Way) and the *Côté de Guermantes* (The Guermantes Way). The former represents nature, intense sensory experiences, and the domestic life of Charles Swann, where the Narrator catches his first glimpse of Gilberte Swann and witnesses the disturbing scene of Vinteuil's daughter engaging in sadism at Montjouvain. The latter represents the unattainable world of the old aristocracy, epitomized by the Duchess of Guermantes.

Discussion Topics

1. **The Topography of the Mind:** How do the "Two Ways" function as distinct epistemological frameworks rather than mere geographic walking paths (pp. 134–142)? How does this early binary layout shape the Narrator's subsequent intellectual life?

2. **The Profanation of the Father:** Examine the voyeuristic scene at Montjouvain involving Mademoiselle Vinteuil and her companion (pp. 159–165). How does Proust link sadism to a perverse form of filial reverence, and what does this reveal about the relationship between morality, performance, and artistic legacy?

3. **The Epiphany of the Steeples:** Analyze the Narrator's first creative breakthrough while observing the twin steeples of Martinville (pp. 178–182). What does the act of writing down this visual transformation suggest about art's unique capacity to decipher sensory impressions?

Session 4: "Swann in Love" I (pp. 186–270)

Synopsis

Departing from first-person narration, this autonomous novella shifts to a third-person psychological autopsy of Charles Swann's historic love affair with Odette de Crécy, occurring before the Narrator's birth. Initially indifferent to Odette, who is "not his type," Swann finds himself drawn into the vulgar, exclusionary bourgeois salon of the Verdurins. His artistic sensibilities reshape his perception of her: he begins to view her face through the lens of Sandro Botticelli's frescoes, while a "little phrase" from Vinteuil's Sonata becomes the leitmotif and emotional catalyst for his growing obsession.

Discussion Topics

1. **Aesthetic Sublimation and Aesthetic Error:** Analyze Swann's psychological pivot when he associates Odette with Zipporah in Botticelli's *The Youth of Moses* (pp. 222–226). Does this aestheticizing of a person elevate his love, or does it represent an intellectual error that blinds him to her actual character?

2. **The Social Tyranny of the "Little Nucleus":** Discuss Madame Verdurin's salon as a case study in micro-fascism and cultural gatekeeping (pp. 188–202). What ideological rules govern the "faithful," and why must an authentic aristocrat like Swann ultimately be expelled from it?

3. **Music as an Emotional Catalyst:** Examine how Vinteuil's "little phrase" operates on Swann's subconscious (pp. 208–215). How does Proust use music to challenge the limits of language, and how does the motif evolve from a symbol of shared joy into a painful marker of emotional captivity?

Sessions 5 & 6: "Swann in Love" II (pp. 271–380)

Synopsis

Swann's infatuation turns into a destructive obsession fueled by intensifying jealousy. Driven away from the Verdurin salon while his rival Forcheville is welcomed, Swann launches a desperate investigative campaign into Odette's hidden life. He intercepts her letters, questions her acquaintances, and conducts late-night surveillance outside her window. The section concludes with Swann's passion slowly dissolving through emotional exhaustion, culminating in his famous dream and the bittersweet realization that he wasted years on a woman who wasn't his type.

Discussion Topics

1. **Jealousy as an Analytical Engine:** Explore Proust's premise that jealousy yields deeper epistemological insights than love or benevolence (pp. 273–285). Does Swann's compulsive search for "truth" reveal anything about Odette, or is it purely a solipsistic construction of his own mind?
2. **The Semiotics of the Window:** Contrast Swann's late-night surveillance of what he thinks is Odette's window with the actual layout of the house (pp. 294–299). How does this comic mistake serve as an allegory for the broader human error of misinterpreting social signs?
3. **The Bitter Wakefulness of the Dream:** Analyze Swann's dream on pages 371–376. How does the subconscious mind synthesize his past trauma, and how does his final line ("To think I wasted years... on a woman who wasn't my type") challenge the teleology of romantic narratives?

Session 7: "Place-Names: The Name" (pp. 381–430)

Synopsis

The narrative returns to the first-person perspective of the young Narrator. Confined to Paris due to illness, his imagination runs wild with the poetic evocations of place-names (such as Parma, Florence, and Balbec), projecting vivid architectural and cultural realities onto these unvisited locales. This fantasy clashes directly with reality when he meets Gilberte Swann in the Champs-Élysées. The volume closes with the adult Narrator walking through the Bois de Boulogne, noting how the passage of time has stripped the landscape of its magic, leaving only the realization that "the memory of a particular image is but regret for a particular moment."

Discussion Topics

1. **The Typography of Desire:** Examine how words and names generate an internal landscape that actual physical travel can only disappoint (pp. 381–392). How does Proust distinguish between the idealized *name* and the flawed, material *thing*?
2. **The Champs-Élysées as a Social Stage:** Analyze the performance of identity and class during the children's games in the park (pp. 394–408). How does the Narrator's infatuation with Gilberte restage Charles Swann's earlier obsession with Odette?
3. **The Ruin of the Landscape:** In the final pages (pp. 422–430), the Narrator laments the transformation of the Bois de Boulogne. How does this conclusion shift the novel's focus from a personal memoir to a broader historical meditation on the transience of cultural eras?

Comparative Perspectives for Discussion

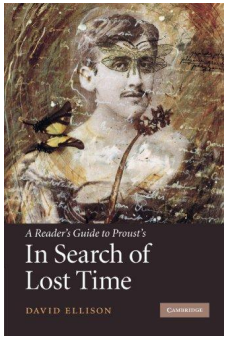
To maintain the "evolution of ideas" focus, consider these secondary thematic echoes during your sessions:

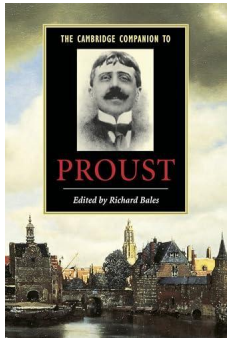
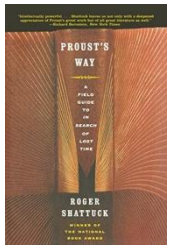
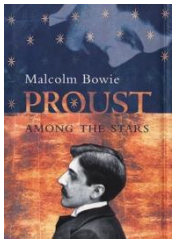
- **St. Augustine & Bergson:** Compare Proust's "internal time" with the *Confessions* (Book XI) regarding the tripartite nature of the present.
- **The Impressionist Lens:** Analyze the influence of Monet and Elstir's aesthetics on the Narrator's description of the church at Combray.

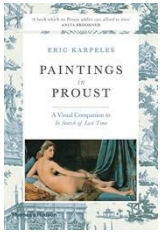
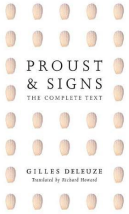
Sources & Methodological References

- **Primary Text:** Proust, Marcel. *The Swann Way*. Translated by Brian Nelson, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford University Press, 2023.
- **Theoretical Frameworks:**
    - Bergson, Henri. *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1910. (Informed the analysis of $durée$).
    - Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press, 1984. (Informed the discussion on social capital and the Verdurin salon).
    - Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cornell University Press, 1980. (Informed the structural breakdown of analepsis and narrative voice).

Here is a ranked table of the leading book-length guides and companions to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Ranking reflects a synthesis of scholarly reputation, reader ratings (Goodreads/Amazon), and how frequently each title is recommended by Proust reading groups and literary sources.

Cover	Title / Author / Year / Publisher	ISBN-13 (paperback)	Description	E-book ?	Price	Notes / Source
	**Marcel Proust's Search for Lost Time: A Reader's Guide** *Patrick Alexander* 2009 — Vintage (Knopf Doubleday)	978-0-307-47232-8	An accessible, irreverent guide offering detailed plot summaries, historical and cultural background, a guide to the fifty most important characters, maps, family trees, and illustrations. The most widely recommended entry-level companion for book groups and first-time readers.	Yes (Kindle)	$9.18 (list $18.00)	*bulkbookstore.com ; Penguin Random House*
	**A Reader's Guide to Proust's 'In Search of Lost Time'** *David Ellison* 2010 — Cambridge University Press	978-0-521-72006-9	Analyzes each volume of the Recherche in order and in detail, without jargon, clarifying but not oversimplifying Proust's imaginary universe. All French quotations are translated, making it a favorite of comparative-literature students.	Yes (Kindle)	~$30–$35 (varies by seller)	*Amazon; Cambridge University Press*

Cover	Title / Author / Year / Publisher	ISBN-13 (paperback)	Description	E-book ?	Price	Notes / Source
	**The Cambridge Companion to Proust** *Richard Bales (ed.)* 2001 — Cambridge University Press	978-0-521-66961-0	A broad, multi-author account of the major features of Proust's work: essays by acknowledged experts addressing the novel's composition, social dimension, language, intellectual parameters, humor, and influence. The standard scholarly companion volume.	Yes	$41.00 (eBook) / $43.00 (paperback list)	*cambridge.org*
	**Proust's Way: A Field Guide to In Search of Lost Time** *Roger Shattuck* 2000 (pbk. 2001) — W. W. Norton & Company	978-0-393-32180-7	An introduction to Proust and a searching reinterpretation of his work by the National Book Award–winning author of Marcel Proust. Covers Proust's humor, optical imagery, literary aesthetics, and the overall design of the novel.	Yes (Kindle)	$8.09 (used-new range: $8.09–$20.79)	*ThriftBooks; Amazon; W. W. Norton*
	**Proust Among the Stars** *Malcolm Bowie* 1998 (pbk. 2000) — Columbia University Press	978-0-231-11491-2	A close reading of Remembrance of Things Past examining Proust's major themes — art, death, sex, politics, loss, guilt, morality — and how his originality lies in the quality of his textual invention. A celebrated work of criticism rather than a plot guide.	Yes (Kobo)	$15.00	*Strand Books; Columbia University Press*

Cover	Title / Author / Year / Publisher	ISBN-13 (paperback)	Description	E-book ?	Price	Notes / Source
	**Paintings in Proust: A Visual Companion to In Search of Lost Time** *Eric Karpeles* 2008 (rev. pbk. 2017) — Thames & Hudson	978-0-500-29342-3	About 200 paintings referenced in the novel, reproduced in full color alongside the relevant passages (Moncrieff/Kilmartin/Enright translation), with concise commentary tracing the narrative. A visual companion rather than a conventional reader's guide. Author lecture: https://vimeo.com/15163812	No (print only found)	$29.95	*Thames & Hudson; Rizzoli Bookstore*
	**Proust and Signs: The Complete Text** *Gilles Deleuze (trans. Richard Howard)* 2000 (this ed. 2003) — University of Minnesota Press	978-0-816-63258-9	Deleuze reads the Recherche as a narrative of apprenticeship in interpreting signs — of persons, love, sensation, and art. The major philosophical/theoretical treatment of the novel; considered one of Deleuze's more accessible works.	Yes	$23.00	*University of Minnesota Press*