

NOTES FROM: *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, by Italo Calvino

SUMMARY: You are about to begin reading my summary of the book, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, by Italo Calvino. It's a postmodern masterpiece, but can be confusing if you're reading this while distracted. So go and close the door and pull the blinds. Turn off your notifications and tell your coworkers that for the next ten minutes, you're not to be disturbed for any reason...

Alright, the previous paragraph will make more sense if you've read the first page of this book already. But *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* is yet another example of why postmodern fiction is infinitely better than postmodern philosophy. It was my first introduction to the work of Italo Calvino, and it completely altered what I thought I knew about what books could do.

From the opening paragraph, Calvino pulls you right into the story, speaking directly to you, convincing you to ignore all distractions, give him your undivided attention, and immerse yourself in the story. At the end, he pulls off even more magic tricks (this summary contains spoilers, by the way), and just leaves you in awe. I loved it.

If on a Winter's Night a Traveler contains ten interconnected stories, the titles of which (it's revealed) combine at the end to form a complete sentence. That's one of the pleasant surprises in store for first-time readers of this "book about books."

The meta-narrative features two readers who are gradually, inexorably brought together by stories, during which time the first reader attempts to solve a literary mystery involving missing chapters. He buys a new book at a bookstore, but is distressed to discover that the second chapter is missing - the pages are all blank. Thus begins his search, which leads him to start and stop ten additional novels, each a part of a literary labyrinth that culminates in an ending that comes out of nowhere and drops like a hammer blow.

All ten novels that the first reader starts and stops are nothing like each other - different plots, styles, ambience, author - and each of them ends with a cliffhanger. Calvino constantly surprises the reader (and you, the meta-reader), catching you off-guard with abrupt twists and turns that lead you, carefully, imperceptibly, onward to a deeper mystery. I didn't even know words could do that, until Italo Calvino showed me how.

Even though the book has a beginning and an end, it's infinite - timeless, inexhaustible. I can't imagine that it would hit with the same force on a second reading, and I'll have to admit that not everyone will "get" Calvino's style at all. But I thought it was brilliant, and you can now return to work, seeing as you're almost finished reading my summary of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, by Italo Calvino.

“You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, ‘No, I don’t want to watch TV!’ Raise your voice - they won’t hear you otherwise - ‘I’m reading! I don’t want to be disturbed!’ Maybe they haven’t heard you, with all that racket; speak louder, yell: ‘I’m beginning to read Italo Calvino’s new novel!’ Or if you prefer, don’t say anything; just hope they’ll leave you alone.”

“So, then, you noticed in a newspaper that *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* had appeared, the new book by Italo Calvino, who hadn’t published for several years. You went to the bookshop and bought the volume. Good for you. In the shop window you have promptly identified the cover with the title you were looking for. Following this visual trail, you have forced your way through the shop past the thick barricade of Books You Haven’t Read, which were frowning at you from the tables and shelves, trying to cow you. But you know you must never allow yourself to be awed, that among them there extend for acres and acres the Books You Needn’t Read, the Books Made for Purposes Other Than Reading, Books Read Even Before You Open Them Since They Belong to the Category of Books Read Before Being Written. And thus you pass the outer girdle of ramparts, but then you are attacked by the infantry of the Books That If You Had More Than One Life You Would Certainly Also Read But Unfortunately Your Days Are Numbered. With a rapid maneuver you bypass them and move into the phalanxes of the Books You Mean to Read But There Are Others You Must Read First, the Books Too Expensive Now And You’ll Wait Till They’re Remaindered, the Books ditto When They Come Out in Paperback, Books You Can Borrow From Somebody, Books That Everybody’s Read So It’s As If You Had Read Them, Too. Eluding these assaults, you come up beneath the towers of the fortress, where other troops are holding out: The Books You’ve Been Planning to Read for Ages, the Books You’ve Been Hunting for Years Without Success, the Books Dealing With Something You’re Working On At The Moment, the Books You Want To Own So They’ll Be Handy Just In Case, the Books You Could Put Aside Maybe To Read This Summer, the Books You Need To Go With Other Books On Your Shelves, the Books That Fill You With Sudden, Inexplicable Curiosity, Not Easily Justified. Now you have been able to reduce the countless embattled troops to an array that is, to be sure, very large but still calculable in a finite number; but this relative relief is then undermined by the ambush of the Books Read Long Ago Which It’s Now Time To Reread and the Books You’ve Always Pretended To Have Read And Now It’s Time To Sit Down And Really Read Them. With a zigzag dash you shake them off and leap straight into the citadel of the New Books Whose Author Or Subject Appeals To You. Even inside this stronghold you can make some breaches in the ranks of the defenders, dividing them into New Books By Authors Or On Subjects Not New (for you or in general) and New Books By Authors Or On Subjects Completely Unknown (at least to you), and defining the attraction they have for you on the basis of your desires and needs for the new and the not new (for the new you seek in the not new and for the not new you seek in the new). All this simply means that, having rapidly glanced over the titles of the volumes displayed in the bookshop, you have turned toward a stack of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* fresh off the press, you have grasped a copy, and you have carried it to the cashier so that your right to own it can be established. You cast another bewildered look at the books around you (or, rather: it was the books that looked at you, with the bewildered gaze of dogs who, from their cages in the city pound, see a former companion go off on the leash of his master, come to rescue him), and out you went.”

“You open the book to page one, no, to the last page, first you want to see how long it is. It's not too long, fortunately. Long novels written today are perhaps a contradiction: the dimension of time has been shattered, we cannot love or think except in fragments of time each of which goes off along its own trajectory and immediately disappears. We can rediscover the continuity of time only in the novels of that period when time no longer seemed stopped and did not yet seem to have exploded, a period that lasted no more than a hundred years.”

“So here you are now, ready to attack the first lines of the first page. You prepare to recognize the unmistakable tone of the author. No. You don't recognize it at all. But now that you think about it, who ever said this author had an unmistakable tone? On the contrary, he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And in these very changes you recognize him as himself. Here, however, he seems to have absolutely no connection with all the rest he has written, at least as far as you can recall. Are you disappointed? Let's see. Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost, as when a person appears who, from the name, you identified with a certain face, and you try to make the features you are seeing tally with those you had in mind, and it won't work. But then you go on and you realize that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the author, it's the book in itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing yet what it is.”

“The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph. In the odor of the station there is a passing whiff of station cafe odor. There is someone looking through the befogged glass, he opens the glass door of the bar, everything is misty, inside, too, as if seen by nearsighted eyes, or eyes irritated by coal dust. The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences. It is a rainy evening; the man enters the bar; he unbuttons his damp overcoat; a cloud of steam enfolds him; a whistle dies away along tracks that are glistening with rain, as far as the eye can see. A whistling sound, like a locomotive's, and a cloud of steam rise from the coffee machine that the old counterman puts under pressure, as if he were sending up a signal, or at least so it seems from the series of sentences in the second paragraph, in which the players at the second table close the fans of cards against their chests and turn toward the newcomer with a triple twist of their necks, shoulders, and chairs, while the customers at the counter raise their little cups and blow on the surface of the coffee, lips and eyes half shut, or suck the head of their mugs of beer, taking exaggerated care not to spill. The cat arches its back, the cashier closes her cash register and it goes pling. All these signs converge to inform us that this is a little provincial station, where anyone is immediately noticed.”

“I am the man who comes and goes between the bar and the telephone booth. Or, rather: that man is called 'I' and you know nothing else about him, just as this station is called only 'station' and beyond it there exists nothing except the unanswered signal of a telephone ringing in a dark room of a distant city.”

"For a couple of pages now you have been reading on, and this would be the time to tell you clearly whether this station where I have got off is a station of the past or a station of today; instead the sentences continue to move in vagueness, grayness, in a kind of no man's land of experience reduced to the lowest common denominator. Watch out: it is surely a method of involving you gradually, capturing you in the story before you realize it - a trap. Or perhaps the author still has not made up his mind, just as you, reader, for that matter, are not sure what you would most like to read: whether it is the arrival at an old station, which would give you a sense of going back, a renewed concern with lost times and places, or else a flashing of lights and sounds, which would give you the sense of being alive today, in the world where people today believe it is a pleasure to be alive."

"You, reader, believed that there, on the platform, my gaze was glued to the hands of the round clock of an old station, hands pierced like halberds, in the vain attempt to turn them back, to move backward over the cemetery of spent hours, lying lifeless in their circular pantheon. But who can say that the clock's numbers aren't peeping from rectangular windows, where I see every minute fall on me with a click like the blade of a guillotine?"

"These remarks form a murmuring of indistinct voices from which a word or a phrase might emerge, decisive for what comes afterward. To read properly you must take in both the murmuring effect and the effect of the hidden intention, which you (and I, too) are as yet in no position to perceive."

"Beneath every word there is nothingness."

"And as for women, at my age you have earned the right not to feel like getting involved in new troubles."

"One reads alone, even in another's presence."

"I, too, would like to erase myself and find for each book another I, another voice, another name, to be reborn; but my aim is to capture in the book the illegible world, without center, without ego, without I."

"When you think about it, this total writer could be a very humble person, what in America they call a ghost writer, a professional of recognized usefulness even if not of great prestige: the anonymous editor who gives book form to what other people have to tell but are unable or lack the time to write; he is the writing hand that gives words to existences too busy existing."

"You fasten your seatbelt. The plane is landing. To fly is the opposite of traveling: you cross a gap in space, you vanish into the void, you accept not being in any place for a duration that is itself a kind of void in time; then you reappear, in a place and in a moment with no relation to the where and when in which you vanished. Meanwhile, what do you do? How do you occupy this absence of yourself from the world and of the world from you? You read."

"My case is different. I'm an infiltrator, a real revolutionary infiltrated into the ranks of the false revolutionaries. But to avoid being discovered, I have to pretend to be a counterrevolutionary infiltrated among the true revolutionaries. And, in fact, I am, inasmuch as I take orders from the police; but not from the real ones, because I report to the revolutionaries infiltrated among the counterrevolutionary infiltrators."

"Renouncing things is less difficult than people believe: it's all a matter of getting started. Once you've succeeded in dispensing with something you thought essential, you realize you can also do without something else, then without many other things."

"Every new book I read comes to be a part of that overall and unitary book that is the sum of my readings. This does not come about without some effort: to compose that general book, each individual book must be transformed, enter into a relationship with the books I have read previously, become their corollary or development or confutation or gloss or reference text. For years I have been coming to this library, and I explore it volume by volume, shelf by shelf, but I could demonstrate to you that I have done nothing but continue the reading of a single book."

"If on a winter's night a traveler, outside the town of Malbork, leaning from the steep slope without fear of wind or vertigo, looks down in the gathering shadow in a network of lines that enlace, in a network of lines that intersect, on the carpet of leaves illuminated by the moon around an empty grave - What story down there awaits its end?"

"Do you believe that every story must have a beginning and an end? In ancient times a story could end only in two ways: having passed all the tests, the hero and the heroine married, or else they died. The ultimate meaning to which all stories refer has two faces: the continuity of life, the inevitability of death."

"Now you are man and wife, Reader and Reader. A great double bed receives your parallel readings. Ludmilla closes her book, turns off her light, puts her head back against the pillow, and says, 'Turn off your light, too. Aren't you tired of reading?' And you say, 'Just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino.'"