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It's Not You, It's Me: How to Dump a Book

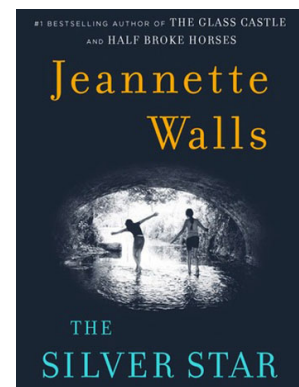


“Summer reading list” after “summer reading list” has seduced me at this point in August. For all the articles and email-forwards on the subject, it might seem that summer is the only time anyone reads. Or perhaps it is the time when one feels one should read – a throwback to required summer reading in high school.

This week I finished a book that wasn't doing it for me. “My sister saved my life when I was just a baby. Here's what happened.” That's the first line. I should have stopped there, because my interest had already flagged. It sounded like somebody's college essay. But friends were reading *The Silver Star*. I'd read good reviews of it. And more importantly, Jeannette Walls wrote it! Her memoir, *The Glass Castle*, was a *New York Times* bestseller for over six years because it was truly amazing. One of the most poignant, engaging and well-written books I've ever read. How could I not read her recently published first novel too?

I was like the actress in the horror movie who couldn't resist going into the dark house with the open door even though everyone in the theater was shouting at me, “No! Don't go there!” For the days and days it took me to trudge through this book, I was irritated and lacking in purpose. I yelled at my husband and exceeded the recommended dosage of Advil. I watched more episodes of *Chopped* and more scenes of *Pitch Perfect* than I care to admit, because at the end of the night I'd look over at the book on my bedside table and think, “Meh. I'll read tomorrow.”

The Silver Star is a solid novel about two sisters who travel by themselves across the country to live with their hermit uncle when their mentally ill mother goes off the deep end. They get into all sorts of scrapes, outwit a sexual predator, come to know their long lost family, and begin to appreciate small-town life. You might love this book. But for me, the characters felt bland. Walls already did a marvelous, nuanced job of describing her own mentally ill mother in *The Glass Castle*. But the mother in her novel feels like the watered-down version with a little saccharin thrown in. I prefer the espresso, straight up.



I always read with pen in hand, underlining passages that strike my fancy, that teach me something, that are unique, or that just plain sound good. But, in this book, I laid down no

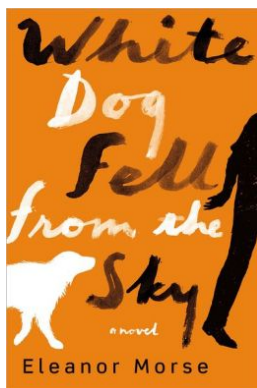
ink. Not a single drop. Nothing surprised me. And Walls's heavy-handed attempt at using emus (yes, emus!) as symbols at the novel's end was the final nail in the coffin.

Why, oh why, did I let this book slip past the first date? *White Dog Fell from the Sky* had been sitting right there under my nose all along, patiently waiting on my bookshelf. "Ah!" my soul whispered, as I devoured it. At last, a masterpiece again. I wish I had noticed you a week ago and spared my liver the Advil. This is how reading should feel. Like magic. It should lift you up and drop you down and turn something inside out that you thought you already knew. Thank you, Eleanor Morse!

White Dog begins with an arresting chapter about a black man who is dumped out of a hidden compartment in a coffin. He has just escaped via hearse from 1970s Apartheid South Africa into Botswana for political reasons and now must make a new life for himself. He becomes the gardener of an American woman who works for the Botswana government, and the relationship they forge as he endures imprisonment and she a star-crossed love affair is the basis of the book. It was made for someone like me who also loved *Cocktail Hour* *Under the Tree of Forgetfulness* and *Out of Africa*.

While *The Silver Star* was bogged down with emus, *White Dog* was inhabited by stampeding buffalo and dogs that love humans and cats named Magoo and quelea birds that all seemed to make sense, that felt organic and that leant greater meaning to the text. I found my pen tracking line after line in *White Dog*, coating the pages in notes and highlights. Morse's language was captivating and fresh, her observations about Botswana and South Africa intriguing and disturbing, and her characters full-bodied and deep. I'll give you a taste of some of the passages that made me pause and think:

- She was "hard to love but easy to like from a distance."
- "These days, people live in the world as though they are precious vessels, separate, each holding something that must be guarded. But his grandfather taught him something different. We are doorways, openings into something greater than ourselves, something that we don't understand."
- "His body was sturdy, like an answer."



White Dog Fell from the Sky had a few imperfections. The rather overwrought love affair in the book felt like a distraction. And it is yet another story in which a black man must rely on kind white folk to get him through. There's a tad too much tragedy. But, because the book feels electric, almost on fire, in so many other ways, I could not put it down. It righted my ship. It restored my faith in a good turn of phrase and in my own writer's soul. We simply clicked, *White Dog* and I. This may sound like a melodramatic exaggeration, but it is exactly how I felt. The book practically cured me of my Lyme disease.

You may love *The Silver Star* and hate *White Dog Fell from the Sky*. It is not my place to tell you what to like or not like. I am writing instead to give you permission to put down

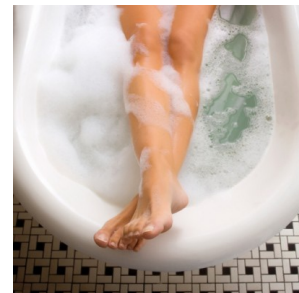
that book you don't care for. Toss it in the weekend bonfire, give it to the cousin you never liked, donate it to a library that really needs books, any books. Unless you are a student who actually has to finish summer reading work, you are reading a tome that has been your lifelong dream to complete, or your job requires you to read a specific book, then you have no business reading anything that is drudgery, especially in the summer. If the book you're reading makes you resort to web surfing, reality television or painkillers, this is a sign. Abort. Abort. Abort.

Trust your reading sensibilities. Be easier on yourself. Read what moves you. Read what teaches you something you actually want to know. If you read what you enjoy, you will read more. Try bringing books home from the library in bulk. Have four or five sitting on the bedside table like matches in your Match.com account. Another first date is always just a click away. That way, when you are on page forty of a book your boss recommended and you feel like you're being made to eat your spinach, then you'll have another author to turn to without skipping a beat, without reaching for the TV remote.

Thirty pages are plenty to talk to your boss about at the next cocktail party. I had a friend, now a professor, who sailed through the Harvard English program with honors by reading just the first and last chapter of most books.

It is true that some books are shy; they might not reveal their greatness until you get to know them better. Some books are classics that are worth plodding through. But don't be afraid to miss these books for now, to save them for another time when you might be more open to them. And don't be afraid to dump something just because it's famous or hot. I've given up on some pretty faces: *Empire Falls* (too bored), *The Master and the Margarita* (too confused), *The Corrections* (too contrived), *Mating* (can't even remember why I put that down), Keith Richard's autobiography (too Keith), *The Power Broker* (too many pages), *Time's Arrow* (too sci-fi), and *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (too many details).

Early in the summer, while soaking in the very first bath I'd made time for all year, I read the first couple chapters of *Above All Things* by Tanis Rideout. It seemed to be on everyone's summer reading list, and I normally love books about Everest. But the dialogue in the book seemed flat, the writing too constrained, and the characters unsympathetic. Maybe it was the steam in the room relaxing my brain too far, but I tossed the novel overboard and enjoyed the Sabon bath salts instead. Honey Peach. It was exquisite.



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