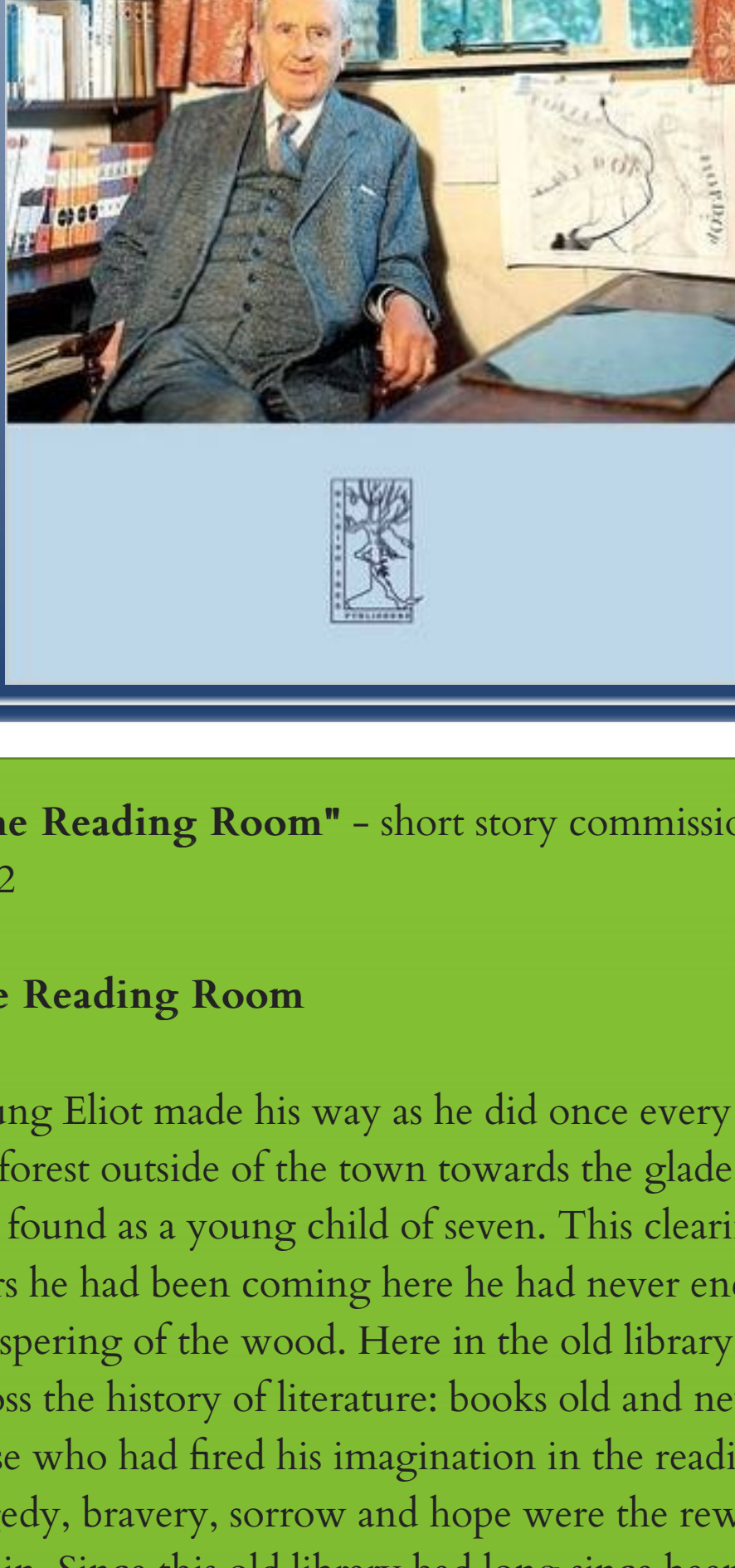
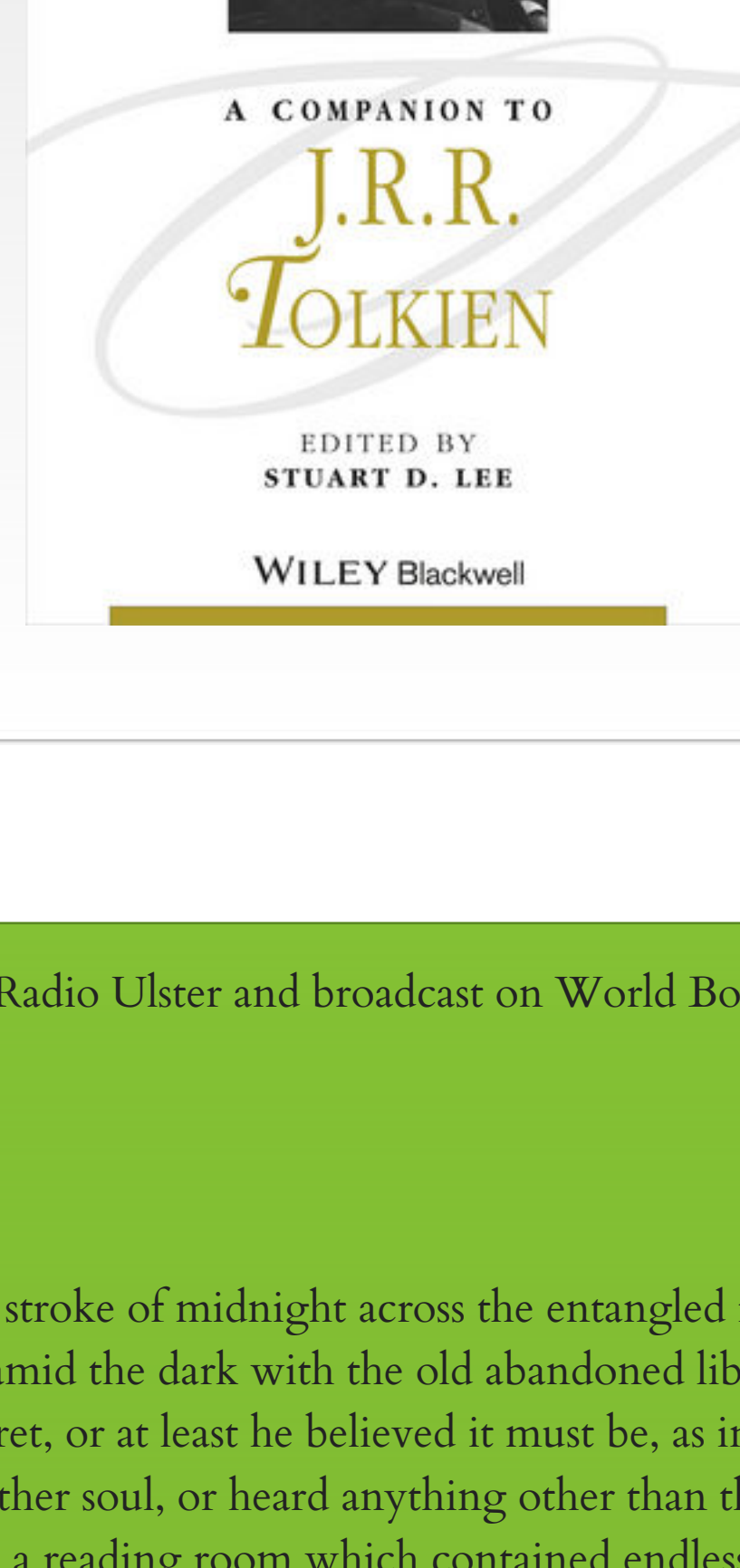


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"The Reading Room" - short story commissioned by BBC Radio Ulster and broadcast on World Book Day 2012

The Reading Room

Young Eliot made his way as he did once every month, at the stroke of midnight across the entangled floor of the old forest outside of the town towards the glade, the clearing amid the dark with the old abandoned library he had first found as a young child of seven. This clearing was his secret, or at least he believed it must be, as in the ten years he had been coming here he had never encountered another soul, or heard anything other than the whispering of the wood. Here in the old library, he had found a reading room which contained endless books from across the history of literature: books old and new – and in these books were his friends, the characters he had met, those who had fired his imagination in the reading. To him these books were a treasure trove of adventure, where tragedy, bravery, sorrow and hope were the reward of any reader who travelled through the pages with hero or villain. Since this old library had long since been forgotten by the important dignitaries of the town, who filled their time now in high debate on low subject matter, there was no light or heat. But Eliot would come prepared with candle, many layers of clothing, gloves and filled sandwiches.

Tonight though as he approached with unlit candle in hand, he noticed something different: a glow of light coming from the upstairs reading room. He could have been struck with fear, he could have turned to run, but his fondness for the place galvanised his sense of adventure. Undaunted, as he entered the library, he took off his gloves putting them into his pocket...and lit his candle with matches he kept about him for that very purpose. Now with all the furtive stealth of a cat burglar he made his way up the old dark spiralling stairway towards the room – the source of the light and the happiest days of his now ending childhood.

As he approached the inner door he could hear voices, some in laughter, and some in deep contemplation of the world and its vicies. He paused for a moment before blowing out his candle light, and gently pushing the door open – it creaked like an old barge caught on the high seas, and as his eyes surveyed the scene before him to his amazement he saw a gathering of people young and old, all dressed in a kaleidoscope of costume and historical clothing. Some he thought he half-recognised, some had familiar voices and mannerisms but he couldn't quite place them. Suddenly one man dressed all in black, his face seemingly in eternal shadow approached, he bowed before Eliot and then called all of the others to order with a sharp clap of his hands. The others stopped what they were doing and turned now to face Eliot. The man in black cleared his throat in an oratorical manner and then in a voice too loud to be just speaking to him alone, addressed Eliot.

"Ah young Eliot, it is nice of you to come, but we all here knew you would" with this he gestured behind him and all the others bowed.

"But who are you? And who are they?" Eliot looked at them all now as they walked into clearer light which shone suddenly brighter from lanterns that seemed to hang in mid-air. The man in black spoke more directly to Eliot now in a softer voice:

"I am the eternal narrator, the voice who has given you many of the tales you have read...when the characters have not told their own tales that is" said the man in black, "of course some tales demanded that the speaker relayed events that affected them directly" he turned now to address a man who stood dressed in rags and had a beard and hair of many, many days growth, "is that not so Robinson?"

"It is indeed, my loneliness on the island as a poor soul cast upon isolation needed to be underscored by my own isolated narration – it was necessary for the tale to be told." The man bowed and retreated from the light.

"Was that...?"

"Indeed it was Mr Crusoe"

"Then these people are all..." Eliot couldn't even finish the question but the narrator anticipated its end.

"...yes, the characters you have brought to life by your very act of reading...for example may I introduce Sherlock Holmes"

As he uttered these words, a tall imposing figure stepped forward in a deer-stalker "you have braved the dark again my dear boy, and we thank you" - "I deduce" continued Holmes "that you wore gloves tonight as you moved across the forest, but that in order to secure nimble dexterity for a task, the lighting of a candle, you removed them before coming to this room!"

"Yes, yes, that is all true...but how could you possibly know?"

"Elementary" said Holmes "to the trained eye it is clear that your face and clothing shimmer under the gentle resting of fallen raindrops. Your hands, however, lack such shimmer, they are perfectly dry, and the wisp of smoke that exudes from your candle betrays a recently extinguished flame. A combination of such observations can only deliver the inevitable truth that you removed gloves upon entering shelter from the rain, for the need of the lighting of your flame to ascend dark stairs. The lack of candle diminishment or burned wax, tells me you did not carry a lit flame on your journey here. It is thus self-evident that you extinguished this flame upon entry to this room."

Some others behind clapped in approval, Holmes took no account instead he walked back into the shade from where he had come.

"Mr Holmes doesn't take praise well" whispered the narrator, at this a woman wearing a yellow flowing dress approached "I am Elizabeth Bennett" she proclaimed "I have pride in knowing you but no prejudice in meeting you."

Voices from behind began to rise in commotion "here get off boy, get out of it!"

"Don't mind that" offered the narrator, "Dodger has been picking everyone's pocket again, Fagin makes him though he's a good lad really."

"Money makes the world go around, who could blame the boy" came a voice from the flickering shadows, "all this humbug about being good and kind – bah – sentimental nonsense!"

"Is that Scrooge?" asked Eliot now fully immersed in the waking world that was unfolding before him.

"Indeed" answered the narrator, "he's like this right up until Christmas Day every year, and then he is the very essence of kindness and charity."

Eliot was now trying to work out who was who in the room, some like Alice, the Mad Hatter and the dormouse were obvious, and others were not. "Who are the two old men who talk endlessly to each other, and keep looking out the window?" Eliot asked.

"That's Estragon and Vladimir..." whispered the narrator "they're waiting for Godot...but Godot never shows up."

Eliot now gazed around the room, and as his eyes adjusted to the half-light, he could see fully a huge cast of characters all deep in conversation or waving to him. In the corner of the reading room a pig and toad in human clothes were discussing politics "Napoleon and Toad of Toad Hall" the narrator whispered into his ear. Elsewhere Eliot could see Long John Silver in mock battle with Aslan the lion, and Willie Wonka hand out free chocolate to Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. Eliot gazed in wonder at the scenes before him but a question suddenly came to him, and he felt he must ask it:

"Why now, why are you all before me now, tonight, and not the other times I have been here?" Everyone seemed to stop what they were doing and all turned to face Eliot. There was silence for a moment and then an impeccably dressed man in a tux stepped forward. His piercing eyes were comforting and assured and yet held a deep fragility:

"Because" began the man "you are a reader of books, in the original form, in a time when too many are turning away, playing these video box games, watching films."

"Gatsby's right" added an old man with a very long beard all dressed in garments of ashen grey. "The book is the thing; it is the very lord of the ring of imagination." The old man's eyes carried a kindling fire, a deep wisdom, and a veiled threat of a sorrow that might yet come to pass.

"What Gandalf and all here are trying to say" interrupted the narrator "is that we need you, to give us purpose and life." He saddened and a sombre mood descended on the gathering "and now in thanking you – we must leave just as this living memory leaves you and becomes an echo in your mind, manifest as your love of books as a child.

When you wake from this, your 18th birthday will have fallen, you will be a man, and the dreams and imaginations of childhood will fade and fall. The wood of forgetfulness will take your imagination and replace it with duty, task and the worries of an adult life."

"No, no I will never forget this" enthused Eliot "this is, this is unforgettable..."

"Ah but you will forget..." replied the narrator motioning for Eliot to follow him out into the wood,

for the wood is lovely dark and deep,

And you have promises to keep,

And miles to go before you sleep,

And miles to go before you sleep.

As the narrator, or was it the wood spoke these words Eliot felt himself drift off, off into life and adulthood and all the forgetfulness a busy life can bring

"Scenes from a Gentle Apocalypse" - poem published in Reflexion Vol 6

Part I

The Sleuth upon the bicycle

Found no footprints under stream.

With a heavy heart he abandoned

The Investigation that had dreamed:

That he, in this thunderstorm, could carry on the fight

Against circumstantial evidence that was uncommonly polite.

The walker by the water,

Grown taller by the rain,

Could see the lamp light flicker

Across the sentimental plain.

In the breath between two heartbeats

He gathered up his hope,

And stepped into his suitcase to set himself afloat,

(Upon tides of indecision and gargantuan disgrace

The elder myth of elder wine

Written clearly on his face).

The servant of the pendulum,

With little time to spare,

Was passing in a bottle neck

And swaying here and there.

The fallacy of certain truth

Was poison to his ears –

But he bought each piece of evidence

Whilst choking in the years:

Of empty deeds and worthless creeds, of iron words and ...?

Well...you know! Screams he should've SCREAMED –

But long ago he'd made a pact to suffer and be damned

And sold his soul for part control

Of some grimy little scam.

Part II

Meanwhile by the gully mouth

A Guillemot hit ground.

Fallen from the open sky: headlong and inbound.

But no-one seemed to take account of his crushed and crippled wings,

The Earthly maze had no time today for such inconsequential things.

Birds upon a higher wing circling overhead,

Wondering why the sky had failed their troubled little friend.

After eons of discussion and scholarly debate

They decided it was an anachronistic vagary of fate.

(Years before the Sleuth had solved a similar type of case

In which Chance had fixed old Circumstance,

Leaving eggs upon his face).

Two Lovers upon a craggy tor

Watched this cinema unfold,

While their love was played in union

By a travelling band of gold.

So they danced upon their happiness

Glad that joy was theirs alone,

But Verisimilitude had other plans,

And collapsed the frontal bone –

The Lady here in question

Begged only of Romance

But still left in search of stronger stone

And a dancer that could dance.

The spurned unfortunate soothed himself,

Striking mercy from his list,

And drew up plans so that he could land

A Doppelganger's kiss.

Part III

Now Certitude and Clarity

Arrived upon the scene,

And declared with a stern pomposity,

"There is nothing here – to seal!"

Turning into cardigans

They buttoned up their lips,

And picked a thread of ale and bread

Whilst waiting on their ship.

"Ahoy there!" Cried the captain's voice

From behind a wall of mist

But Clarity had already gone

And Certitude was pissed.

Far off in the distance

The Sleuth hatched a wily plan:

He'd cycle back in the death of fact

And draw footprints in the sand.

Then returning with all mourning due

He'd declare the riddle solved,

And everyone would raise a child

To his resilience and resolve,

But his bicycle was unimpressed

And refused to turn a wheel

The Machine it seemed had outlived its means:

It had begun to think and feel,

So everyone across this land

Is shackled to their fate,

All searching in the Holy Dark

For some light to desecrate.

You see stories of deliverance here

Are few and far between,

And all a captive soul can do

Is knuckle down and dream.