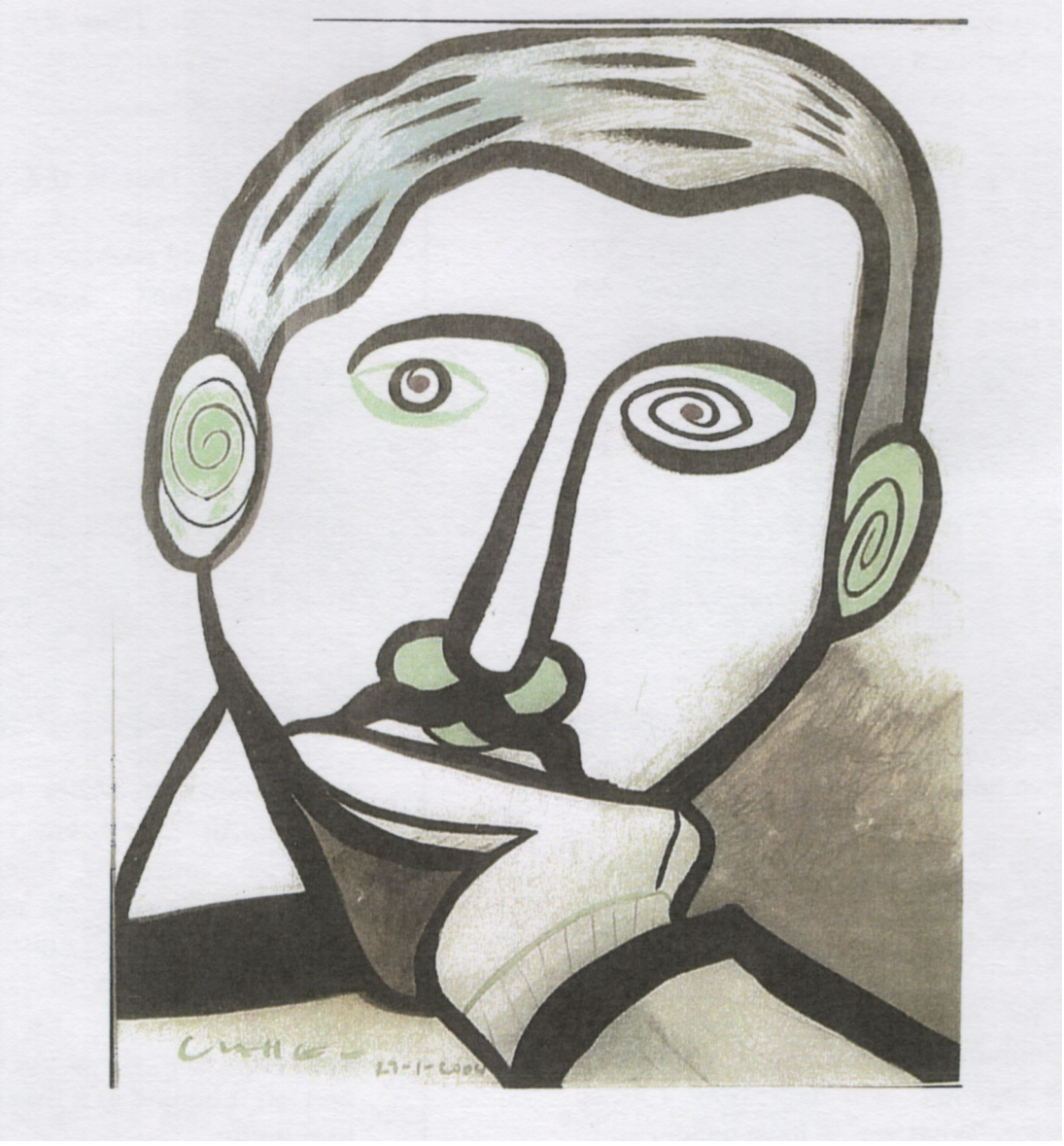
PROUST SAID THAT

Issue No. 10 **November 2020**



The Pandemic issue: Sheltering in Place, The Spanish Flu of 1918, Maira Kalman, The Penguin Classics Translations, Boeuf Stroganoff, Proust Sightings, *Et Cetera*

Letters From Our Readers

The inimitable Dr. Really? sent me a handwritten letter, our preferred and inefficient means of communication, thanks to the intentional disruption of the USPS, in which he wrote:

"I found a copy of *On the Road* in a Little Free Library on Geary, and finished it this morning, to dicover on page 304 of 327 pages that Dean Moriarity was equated with Proust! Haha!"

Also in the envelope from Dr. Really? was a Xerox of page 304, where Kerouac wrote: "...suddenly I noticed the hush in the room and looked around and saw a battered book on the radio. I knew it was Dean's high-eternity-in-the-afternoon Proust."

Alex Segal reports, from his ritual re-reading of Oscar Levant's *Memoirs of An Amnesiac*, these two findings:

"At home I regressed into an absolutely ponderous fear of leaving my Proustian bedroom and going into the outer world."

About his hospitalization, Levant wrote: "The communal hospital existence and being banded together was depressing. I asked the doctor, 'What would have happened to Marcel Proust as a patient in this place?"

'That would be a situation,' he replied."

But I should have the courage to to reply to those who came to see me or tried to get me to visit them that I had, for necessary business which required my immediate attention, an urgent, a supremely important appointment with myself.

—Time Regained

Proust Said That is the sporadic and unofficial organ of the equally unofficial, and perhaps largely defunct, Marcel Proust Support Group—formerly of San Francisco, but now international, since our last iteration was only on Twitter.

Our switch to online-only interaction is necessary in a pandemic. It seemed there could hardly be a more pertinent time to do an issue of Proust Said That, since Proust perfected the art of sheltering in place, in his cork-lined room, surviving the 1918 Spanish flu.

Huge thanks to Maira Kalman, Nora Sawyer, Alex Segal, and Ian Patterson for their wonderful contributions to this issue. The cover art was the gift of the Chilean artist, Andres Ovalle, a houseguest at the former MPSGHQ, 1907 Golden Gate. He painted this portrait of Marcel P at the kitchen table and left it behind as a thank you for the hospitality.

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Sheltering In Place:

Proust's Decade in a Cork-Lined Room

Proust's room, recreated in the Musee Carnavalet, on Boulevard Hausmann, and at Illiers-Combray

As of March of 2020, San Francisco was in lockdown and the number of Covid-19 victims began its exponential climb. We were told what we had to do to avoid getting it, and sheltering in place, at home, was a primary requirement. As I contemplated these guidelines for the next year of my life—or horrifically, more—I could think of no better mentor in this struggle than my literary idol, Marcel Proust. Sheltering in place is part of his legend.

Proust didn't begin life as a recluse. In his youth, he fully appreciated—if found relatively below expectations— summer resorts, dining out, events, and climbing the social ladder to join the most elite salons of Paris in the Gilded Age. In every place he ventured, from childhood on, he trained his microscopic vision on every person, place, or thing, so that he could tell us all about it, down to the finest detail.

In the process, he realized that so many of the things he longed for, or aspired to, were sadly below expectations. High society teemed with minimal intellect. Beauty in its various manifestations, and the fine arts, remained valuable in his estimation.

Proust's health was always problematic. He was asthmatic, and had other health concerns as well, which made staying at homethe preferred option. Socializing was part of his research, in his investigation of the human experience, so even after he found it wanting, he continued to do it, but on increasingly less frequent occasions. However, since he was a chronic night person, he was usually the last to arrive at events, just when the hosts were hoping to retire. If he was going to abandon sheltering in place, it took him hours to get himself to do it, by which time there would be fewer people to deal with.

The nocturnal Proust was having trouble sleeping during the day, at one point in 1910, when there was a lot of noisy construction going on in his neighborhood. Biographer Richard Painter tells us that Proust had written a pastiche, in 1909, about people who lined the walls of their bedrooms with cork to keep out the noise. Hmmm. Yes.

He left workers to do the cork lining, and went to Cabourg while the work was being done. His health was getting worse, and he could no longer go to the beach. His outings were reduced to rides in closed automobiles, to keep the asthma at bay. He mostly stayed in his room to continue work on the novel.

Returning to Paris, he found the cork-lined room much to his liking, and he rarely left it, until his building was sold and he was forced to move in 1919. He saw fewer and fewer people, who might come to call; he'd have his housekeeper, Celeste, tell visitors that he wasn't well enough to see them. He became scrupulous about avoiding social contacts, with very few exceptions, using ill health as an excuse to decline onerous social invitations, even when he actually felt well enough to attend.

The only person Proust saw every day, during his years in the cork-lined room and in his last three years at the Rue Hamelin address, was Celeste. She was his able and tireless assistant, performing a broad range of services, from waiting hours to deliver his morning coffee to pasting additional materials in his manuscripts. He would call for her every night, and speak about whatever was on his mind, or give instructions for what needed to be done. Proust was in bed, facing the footboard, and Celeste stood behind it for as long as he wanted to talk. They were socially distanced, almost exactly six feet apart.

A Word About this Issue:

I've recently upgraded to the current version of Microsoft Word, which always requires some adjustment for a person without any tech abilities whatsoever, such as myself. The Word program was ideally suited to my desktop publishing needs in the '90s. It has become more and more complicated since, and now it performs a million sophisticated functions for which I have zero use, and all the simple ones are mysteriously renamed, or found elsewhere than before. Of course there is no manual.

(continued on page 15)

The 1918 Spanish Flu: Proustian Hygiene and Survival Tactics

A formidable germophobe shows us how it's done

In the current coverage of the COVID 19 pandemic, parallels are often drawn to the devastating Spanish flu of 1918. As of this writing, we're nowhere near the horror of the 1918 pandemic, which killed roughly 675, 000 Americans, and an unknown number of victims worldwide.

Estimates vary, according to the source, as to how many people actually died. They're as low as 20 million, and as high as 50 million, deaths all over the world. Without modern technology and communications, accurate records were hard to come by. And of course, thanks to modern technology, the accuracy of information can be equally sketchy, depending on your source and their spin. But we know, without a doubt, that the Spanish flu was deadly indeed.

Chic Parisians with mask accessories, 1918

The 1918 pandemic taught us quite a bit about dealing with highly communicable diseases. People were advised to wear masks then, too. However, since there was no social media then to spread paranoid idiocy widely, people were perhaps more inclined to take the advice of medical authorities. It's reported that 80% of San Francisco residents wore masks when asked. It became mandatory when the fatalities climbed anyway.

This is not to suggest that there weren't anti-mask factions in 1918. Of course there were. Contrarians are part of the social fabric, as are con artists, philosophers, storytellers, and healers. In San Francisco in 1918, the opposition formed the Anti-Mask League in 1919, headed by a "Karen" of the day, Mrs. E.C. Harrington, who hated the mayor, James Rolph, and found this useful way to oppose him.

Now hysterical people appear at public hearings to rant about how masks are bad for us, and limitations on our freedom, while they participate, sans

mask, in super-spreader gatherings, and carry on blithely in normal life activities, passing along this unwanted gift to the general public at the local bar or mall. How people could seriously believe masks are dangerous, when doctors and nurses, and people in other professions, wear them all day, underscores the need to re-insert critical thinking skills into school curricula.

The long and short of it is that not enough people wear masks. If the unmasked bothered to investigate, they'd know that Hong Kong, in 2020, had a total of six Covid-19 deaths, among 7.5 million people, because 97% of the population wore masks. The 3% who ignored public health advice were—not surprisingly— mostly Americans and Europeans.

The Spanish Flu was raging in Paris in October of 1918. There were 1,769 deaths from the flu there in one week that month, precipitated by the crowded conditions of soldiers at the front, who were returning to Paris. Two great literary Parisians died of the Spanish flu, Guillaume Apollinaire, who coined the term "surrealist," and Edmond Rostand, the author of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, and the father of one of Proust's friends.

In spite of the severity of the pandemic, and the closeness to deaths in his personal sphere, Proust did not seem particularly deterred from his normal lifestyle: dinner at the Ritz with friends, late at night, and occasional visitors at his bedside in the cork-lined room, although fewer and fewer of them. That had less to do with the pandemic and more because so many of the visitors had grown tedious, like the insufferable de Montesquiou. He avoided crowds, for the most part, in his later years

Celeste's memoir, *Monsieur Proust*, offers a truly behind the scenes look at her employer's habits and rituals to keep germs at bay, which were, not surprisingly, meticulous and highly original. His father was a renowned doctor and authority on hygiene, which cemented Marcel's anxieties about germs early on.

So when the Spanish flu infected Paris, Proust already had ritual behaviors to combat it, which began with the daily hot-water (but no soap, which inflamed his delicate skin) cleansing routine.

Celeste tells us that the bathing ritual involved a fresh towel from the stack to apply to each distinct body part, which he threw onto the stack of laundry to send out. He used about 25 towels a day.

Proust used a commonly available disinfectant for many things, including a mouthwash or gargle, if he felt a slightly sore throat. Celeste said it wouldn't have surprised her to know he washed his hands with water mixed with the stuff.

Before his death in 1922, and long after the Spanish flu pandemic had passed, Proust instructed Celeste to buy a long metal box, in which the mail was placed, along with formol (formaldehyde), so that all letters were disinfected before he read them. In spite of all these

precautions, he still got a less virulent influenza in the early fall of 1922, and went to a huge gathering of Parisian aristocrats and high society in early October. He died on November 18 of that year, but not from the flu.

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It's surprising, then, that the Spanish Flu was hardly mentioned in the oeuvre at all. In *Time Regained*, the narrator is at a party, and a guest "asked me whether I was not afraid of catching the influenza of which there was an epidemic at the moment, whereupon another well wisher reassured me by saying, 'Oh, no, it's usually only the young who get it. A man of your age has very little to fear.'" We have always had disinformation.

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In researching Proust's survival of the Spanish flu pandemic, I consulted all the biographies in my personal library: the superb woks by Ronald Hayman, William Carter, Richard Barker, Andre Maurois, Edmund White, and the mammoth one by Jean-Yves Tadie, as well as Celeste's memoirs. I examined books of his letters that included those found from 1918 and 1919. What absolutely astonished me was that in none of these books did I find any reference to the Spanish flu at all, in spite of the thousands of deaths in Paris, and millions around the world.

Of course, in Proust's case, there were few chances for transmission. He was mostly in his room. He never was obliged to go out for groceries or anything else he needed, with staff to do it for him. His doctor, Dr. Bize, came to him. If he socialized, it was late at night, when the Ritz wasn't crowded. He socialized with people who had his same degree of protection from the virus, people able to avoid public spaces teeming with vectors or foxholes full of bodies.

> ***'Oh, no, it's usually only the young who get it. A man of your age has very little to fear.'***
>
> ***—Time Regained***

When Proust did accept visitors in his cork-lined room, they found visitors' seating beyond the foot of the bed, at least six feet away from their host. He wore gloves in bed, when visitors were allowed, so they couldn't convey germs in a handshake.

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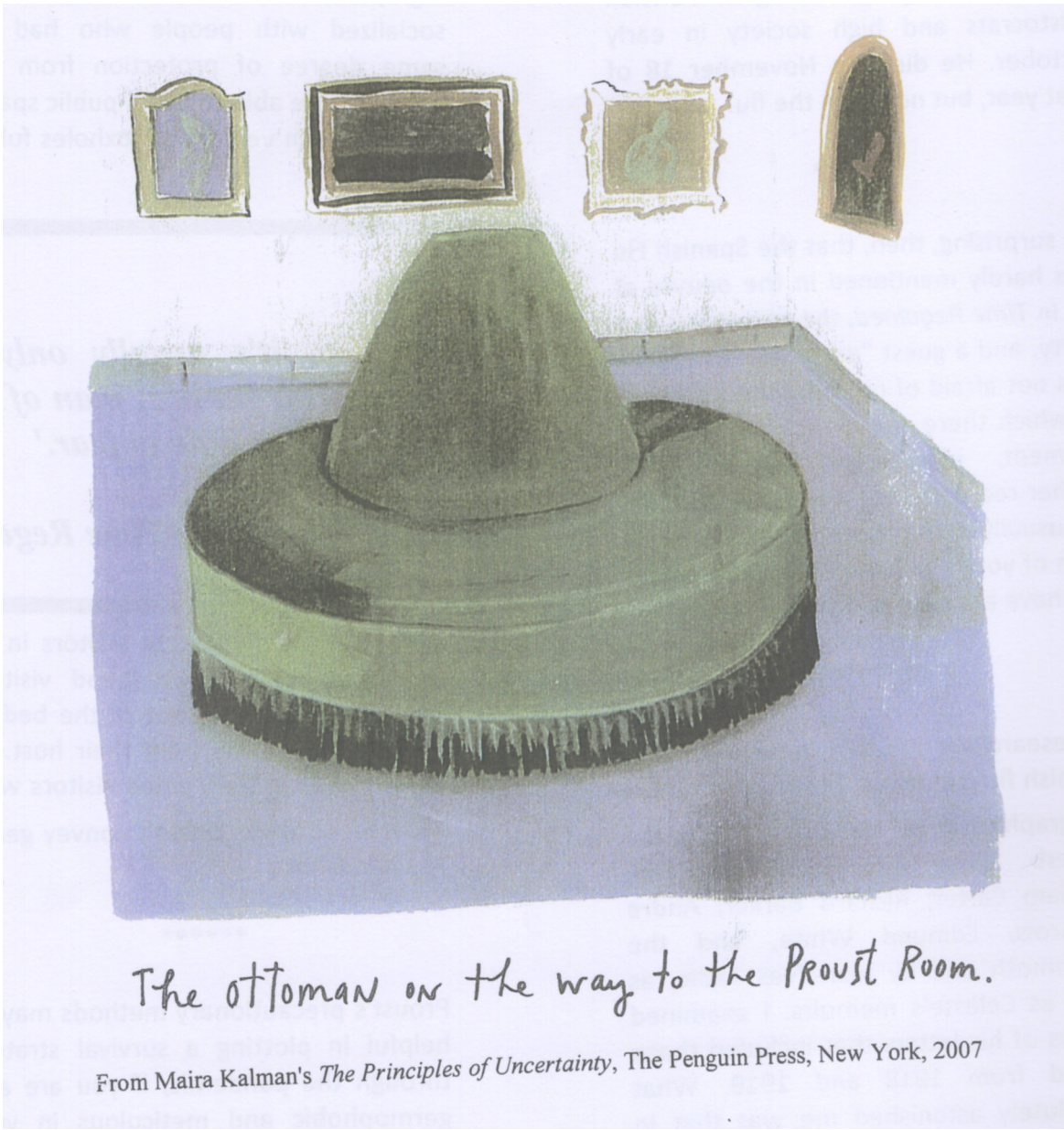
Proust's precautionary methods may be helpful in plotting a survival strategy through the pandemic, if you are also germophobic and meticulous in your rituals. To recap the highlights of Proust's methodology: wash every part of your body separately and use 25 towels a day. Don't forget to cleanse the mail with formaldehyde, and disinfect yourself. Only go out late at night, to avoid crowds, and by all means, when entertaining someone in your bedroom, be sure to keep your gloves on.

The Very Proustian Maira Kalman



From Maira Kalman's *The Principles of Uncertainty*, The Penguin Press, New York, 2007

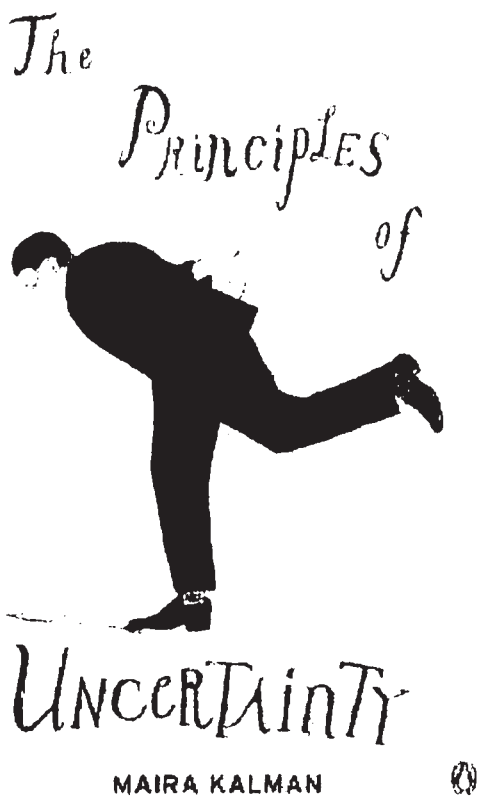
The books of Maira Kalman give me the same wondrous, microscopic immersion in life that I found in Proust, and it didn't surprise me to find Proust in their pages. Just as I was starting to think about this issue, I was midway through Kalman's charming *The Principles of Uncertainty*, and found this drawing from a trip to Paris: The ottoman on the way to the Proust room.

Maira Kalman invokes the same minute understanding of things that Proust does, but instead of many words, she uses fewer, and substitutes deft and whimsical images to achieve the rest. Both these writers zero in on particulars—the first superlative tassel, the uneven paving stone—about human nature, art, history, science, psychology, cultures, ideas, friendship, experience, the

multitude of objects in the world, and whatever else appeals to their all-encompassing intellectual curiosities. The title of the book in which I found the ottoman, *The Principles of Uncertainty*, plays on a theory of quantum mechanics, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

Reading either one of them delivers you to that place in the artist's focus, allowing us, as Proust wrote, "to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is." Kalman allows the reader to forgo the imaginative challenges of Proustian verbal exactitude, by not only telling us what she sees, but showing us as well.

The ottoman on the way to the Proust room seemed an irresistible addition to the tenth issue of Proust Said That, and so I sent an email to Maira Kalman. Much to my surprise and delight, she answered right away, and gave me permission to reproduce her work, for which she has my unending thanks.

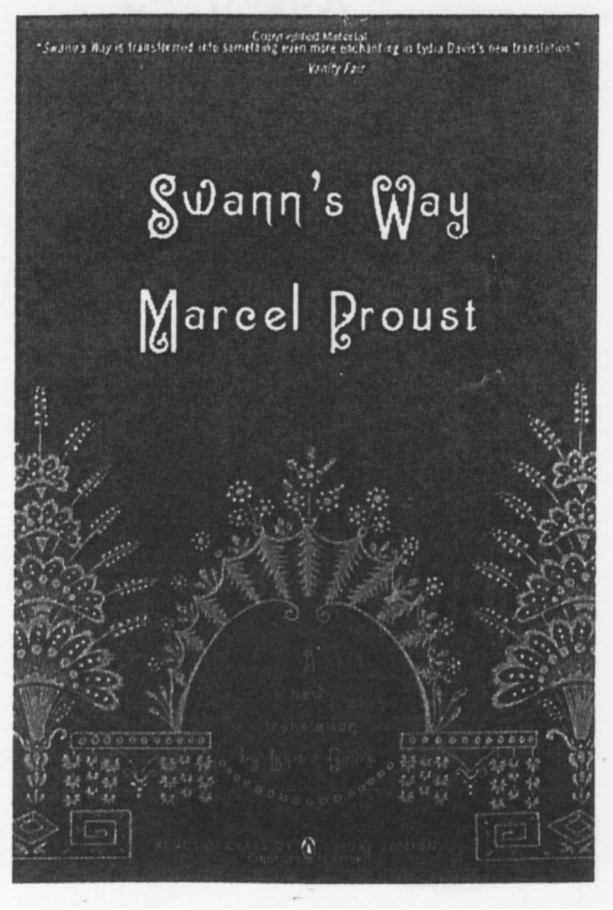


Certainly it was my intention to resume next day, but this time with a purpose, the solitary life. So far from going into society, I would not even permit people to come and see me at home in my hours of work.

—Time Regained

The Online Proust Support Group Fizzled, But We Did Get This:

The Penguin Translations



After pandemic lockdown, we faced the bleak and tepid necessity of living our lives mostly online. We might spend too many of our hours staring at screens, but there was comfort in knowing your could do plenty of things, if you wanted to. Suddenly it was us and our screens. Platforms like Twitter paraded dire warnings about our collection of disasters—political, ecological, sociological, financial, ideological, epidemiological—leaving us in shock mode. I was wondering what I could do to give people some wonderful thing to ease the strain.

Since we all had plenty of housebound hours to fill, it seemed a great time for people to finally read Proust, if that was on their to-do list. One evening, enthused, I launched the first ever online Marcel Proust Support Group on Twitter. Initially, there was one enthusiastic participant, a friend from the last tumultuous days at New College of California, Nora Sawyer. A very small online support group formed, and for the earlier pages of Volume 1, there was enthusiasm. Then there was none.

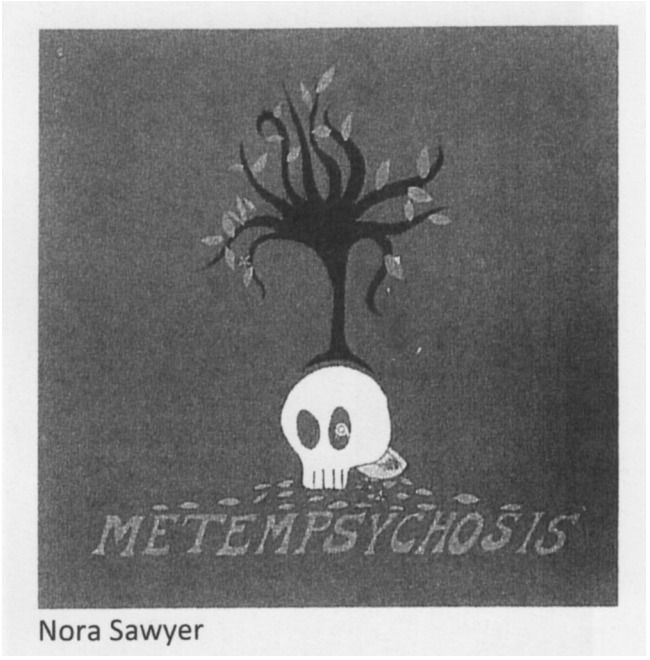
I doggedly met the lack of participating Prousties with a weekly summary of the significance and events of *Swann's Way*, for those who had an interest in what it was all about. There seemed to be as little interest in the weekly report as there had been for a support group, with only the occasional "like" from one of the international devotees. I had to conclude that this wasn't one of my successes.

This was not Proust's fault, or perhaps not even mine. In the US, we're coping with a fascist takeover, the devastation of climate change, the collapse of capitalism, a frightening presidential election, massive unemployment, and the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. Apparently no one needed another big thing to think about at this point in time. We're jointly and understandably overwhelmed.

One fantastic thing happened, as the result of the attempted online support group. As we discussed which version of Proust to read together, Nora, a brilliant artist and librarian, said she had bought the Penguin Classics edition, which I'd been meaning to get for 20 years, but never did. For one thing, it was impossible to buy the whole set in any bookstore, and in my tradition of unpopular

opinions, I've refused to buy anything online, and especislly not from Amazon. I was able, though, to find Lydia Davis's translation of *Swann's Way* at a local indie bookstore, when I called them, and had it delivered by the imperiled United States Postal Service.

Like all of Lydia Davis's work, this translation of the first book of Proust is sensationally good. For the first time, in the nearly 30 years of my Proust addiction, I felt like I was reading a different book altogether—sharper, clearer, and modern. Davis's incisive choice of words inspired Nora to do drawings of some of them and the sensibilities invoked, like this one.



Nora Sawyer

There was one thing about this translation that was significant: no translator had ever made it entirely through what Stephen Hawking said was at the bottom of a black hole: the seven leather-bound volumes of Proust. Penguin wisely decided to have seven translators do a book each.

The first days of reading the Penguin edition sent me back to the moment, in the Before Times, when I first heard about them from Ian Patterson, poet and translator, and a Life Fellow at Queen's College, Cambridge, in 1998. He had read Jerry Farber's excellent article about translations in our sixth issue, and wanted to let me know about the upcoming Penguin version, for which he'd be translating *Time Regained*.

More than 20 years later, I took the liberty of writing to Ian, to ask some questions about the Penguin translations, reminding him of his letter to Proust Said That. He was in the process of moving from Cambridge to a small, bucolic village in Suffolk, where the marvelous PD James set some mysteries. Once he got settled, he graciously answered some questions.

The idea of seven superb writers and translators gathered to do this monumental work made me envision brilliant conversations over cocktails. I asked if the work had been convivial. "At the start," Ian said, "there were great plans for collaborative conviviality, two-week get-togethers in exotic academic locations where we could mull over difficulties, standardize the translation of key terms and generally have a good Proustian time. But nothing ever came of it." He also said, "Cocktails were not involved, or if they were, I wasn't."

I asked how this extraordinary edition came about. Once again, I had some fantasy that the group of translators decided to pitch Penguin together—like when the director, writer, cinematographer, and actors sitting around a Parisian cafe table decided they wanted to make *Children of Paradise*— but that's not what happened. Penguin got in touch with Ian's friend and colleague at Cambridge, Chris Prendergast, to edit the series, and he chose the translators for the various books. ""Mark Treharne had been a colleague of his [Prendergast's] in the Faculty of French at

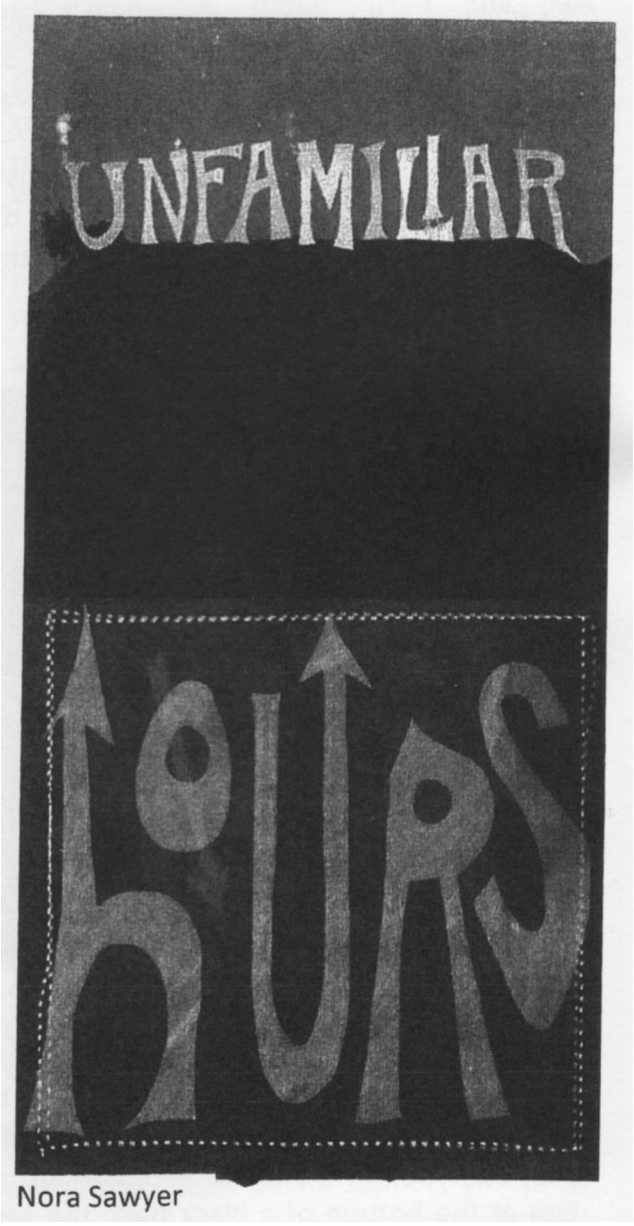
Cambridge, and Carol Clark was in the French Faculty at Oxford. Lydia Davis was an obvious choice, as was John Sturrock, both experienced and accomplished translators. James Grieve in Australia was a bit of a wild card."

Serious Prousties will probably have heard about the kerfuffle over new translations of the titles for this edition. It took us time to get over the change to *In Search of Lost Time*, even though it was better, so alterations were likely to stir reactions. I asked about the new titles and their origin." Mostly," Ian replied, it was the individual translator who chose the title (although Penguin US wouldn't allow Lydia's title, *The Way by Swann's*, for the US edition) but James Grieve's preferred title, *In a Rosebud Garden of Girls*, was (quite rightly) vetoed by Chris Prendergast."

The tangled world of books offers people who produce them, like writers and translators, no end of difficulties, and the story of why we couldn't get a whole set of the Penguin translation until recently is one of them. It involves an American pop star who became a Republican politician, his only notable legislation a law to extend copyrights, The Sonny Bono Act.

Some of you may remember Sonny Bono as the less memorable half of Sonny and Cher, who showed up around the mid '60s. When Sonny passed the legislation, he no doubt had an interest in preserving his own copyrights.

That meant that the book Ian Patterson published in 2002, and wasn't even released in the US market until 2018, entirely missed the fanfare of the first three volumes' splash. I asked Ian how this had affected him. " It certainly impacted my revenue. I was furious with Penguin when I dicovered they'd overlooked the copyright position. I haven't had any American money yet, and I suspect Penguin have not done a great deal to advertise the availability of the last three books."



Nora Sawyer

Searching for a bright note, I asked if there was any black humor among the translators regarding the inability to survive translating the last volume. "Not really," he replied. "Most of the dark humour concerns the

translator of the last volume, and as that was me, and as the translators had very little contact with each other, it was really up to me to make the jokes about it to myself."

I asked if there were any great stories to tell about the work, and Ian told two.

"The first is something that happens to all translators, especially translators of works that have been translated more than once or twice: I had decided at the outset not to consult any other translations of my volume until I'd finished the whole thing, and had been working on my version for a few months when I got completely stuck on one sentence; I just couldn't find a way to make it work in English the way I wanted. I struggled for two or three days without making any progress, until suddenly the whole thing came to me and I wrote it down at once, desperate to get it on to paper before I forgot it. Feeling extremely pleased with myself I decided to make an exception to my rule, and see how badly the other translators had handled it. But as I looked up that page in each of the earlier versions, I discovered they all had exactly the same wording it had taken me three days to find, absolutely word for word the same. After that I was less wary of looking at the other translators' versions."

The second story is a most fitting closure.
"The other thing was not really to do with the translation, but it was something Proust would certainly have appreciated. Soon after I'd started on the translation, I had a one-month fellowship at the Harry Ransom Centre in Austin, Texas. My apartment was a goodish distance from there, so I sometimes took a bus in the mornings rather than walking. One day I was sitting on the bus, deep in my Pléiade edition of *Le temps retrouvé*, with its extra thin paper and dark covers, when as she walked past me to get off at her stop, a large black women bent down towards me with a benign expression, pointed to the book and said, 'I'm so glad to see you've been saved!'"

The Russian Incursion
at Belle Epoque Parisian Dinner Parties:

Boeuf Stroganoff

Alex Segal initially refused to draw boeuf Stroganoff because he said it didn't look like anything. He relented and provided this modernist version of something that looks like nothing.

At this moment, when Russia occupies an unpleasantly engorged part of American anxiety, it seems fitting to offer a recipe from that culture—a reminder that the Russian people have produced a lot of really great things in the arts, and they also gave us a fine and hearty cuisine. If you have reservations about eating beef, for environmental reasons or because you're vegetarian, you'll be happy to know that Bouef Stroganoff made with just mushrooms, vitually any kind, is equally delicious.

Before launching into the cooking part of this article, a word about Russia: we have to remember that the Russians have long been beleaguered, by one thing or another, like serfdom, communism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the last few decades of government by organized crime. The people don't seem to have much cheer. For years, my friend Dr. Rolph and I went to San Francisco's old Cinderella Bakery and Restaurant, where the same dour women unsmilingly took our orders hundreds of times. But at one point, we had scheduling conflicts for lunch, and didn't go for months. When we finally walked back in, after this long absence, the waitress expressed her pleasure at seeing us again with a straight-lipped, "Where you been?"

The Russian people have had to deal with a lot and have a right to their current cultural glumness, a reasonable reaction to life in a mobocracy. However, during swathes of Russian history, the rich, the powerful, and the aristocrats enjoyed periods of high life and culture, and St. Petersburg was long a gem in the sophisticated traveler's itinerary. At some point in the meeting of grand cultures, Bouef Stroganoff made its way into French high society dinner parties, as did the country's other marvels, like their composers, painters, and writers.

It's unfortunately not going to be served at any dinner parties at my house until the pandemic is over. This version of the dish, somewhat loosely adapted from Shirley King's excellent *Dining With Marcel Proust: A Practical Guide to French Cuisine*—which used dinner party quantities of ingredients in the original recipe—is reduced down to enough for three to four servings, for these unsociable times.

Boeuf Stroganoff

1 pound beef tenderloin tips
1 medium onion
4 ounces mushrooms
3/4 stick of butter
1/2 cup sour cream
salt and pepper
(pinch of mace)

Cut the meat into thin slices along the grain, sprinkle them with flour and pepper, and flatten the bits with a kitchen mallet.

Slice the onion into thin semicircles, and saute in a frying pan in about 2 Tbsp. butter, until they're golden brown. Add salt and pepper.

Wash and slice the mushrooms. In a clean skillet, saute them in another 2 Tbsp of butter. (Butter is a central ingredient in this dish, one of the reasons it's so good. You can do it with a vegan butter substitute, too, and some of them are actually excellent.) For authenticity's sake, I used the real stuff.

When the mushrooms are cooked through, scrape them into the pan of onions, with a bit more salt and pepper, and add yet another two tablespoons of butter to the pan. When it begins to sizzle, add the strips of beef, searing and turning to get both sides, which will brown quickly.

When the meat is cooked, add the mushrooms and onions, and saute the ingredients together. Add some water (about 1/4 cup or more), and deglaze the pan, letting the water cook down.

Put 1/2 cup sour cream in a bowl. Add water from the pan, a spoonful at a time, stirring well after each addition. Four hot liquid infusions should be enough. You can't just add the sour cream to the other ingredients because it will curdle. You have to heat it gradually before you add it to the meat, onions, and mushrooms. Stir everything together well, adjust the seasoning, and add a pinch of mace, if you like.

This dish is generally served with rice. I also serve it with green vegetables, which may be very un-Russian, but it offers a slight antidote to all the butter you've consumed in a serving of Boeuf Stroganoff..

"Do allow me to have a little more,"he added, with a gesture that requested another helping... "I would be interested to see how your Vatel acquitted himself of quite a different dish—beef Stroganoff, for example."

—In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower

A Word About this Issue:

The current version of Microsoft Word entered my life right before the pandemic lockdown. There was no possibility of huddling with a techie friend over the computer screen to learn how to use it, given social distancing. As a consequence, this issue was largely assembled with scissors and glue, in the late night hours after a day of packing to move. If something appears slightly off kilter, you now know why.

...no sooner had Albertine set off on her drive than I was revivified, if only for a few moments, by the exhilarating virtues of solitude.

—The Captive