

Passage I

PROSE FICTION: This passage is adapted from *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* by Anne Fadiman (©1998 by Anne Fadiman).

Long ago, when George and I were not yet married but seemed to be tottering in that general direction, we gave each other our first Christmas presents. Of course, they were books. This now seems very fitting since we both went on to be published authors. Sometimes I think that it was our love of books that drew us to one another. Knowing that I liked bears, George gave me *The Biography of a Grizzly*, by Ernest Thompson Seton. Modestly sequestered on the third page was the following inscription: *To a new true friend*. No Talmudic Scholar, no wartime cryptographer, no deconstructionist critic ever scrutinized a text more closely than I did those five words, hoping that if they were just construed with the right emphasis, they would suddenly reveal themselves as a declaration of undying devotion.

Knowing that George liked fish, I gave him *Old Mr. Flood*, by Joseph Mitchell, a slim volume of stories about the Fulton Fish Market. The author had autographed the book himself in 1948, but did I leave well enough alone? Of course not. I wrote: *To George, with love from Anne*. Then I mistranscribed a quotation from Red Smith. And finally—on the principle that if you don't know what to say, say everything—I added fifteen lines of my own reflections on intimacy. My cumulative verbiage, not to mention the potency of my sentiments, exceeded George's by a factor of approximately twenty to one. It's a miracle that the book, its recipient, and the new true friendship weren't all crushed under the weight of the inscription.

George married me anyway and has retained his affection for both fish and Joseph Mitchell. My words were preserved for good. Unlike the card that accompanies, say, a sweater, from which it is soon likely to part company, a book and its inscription are permanently wedded. This can be either a boon or a blot. My inscription did not improve *Old Mr. Flood* in the same way that, for example, *To Miss Elizabeth Barrett with the Respects of Edgar Allan Poe* improved *The Raven and Other Poems*. However, with each book

bought as a present, I continue to inscribe my own words on the flyleaf of the book.

Proper inscription etiquette is done on the flyleaf instead of the title page, which is traditionally reserved for a book's author. I learned this only recently, after having defaced dozens of other writers' title pages. I should have cracked the code years ago, since the Books by Friends and Relatives section of our own library contains a profusion of title-page inscriptions, all illicitly deployed. My father inscribed *Famous Monster Tales*, an anthology to which he contributed a preface when I was a sullen fourteen-year-old, *For Anne, from that old monster, Daddy*.

A distant rung down from the "presentation copy"—an inscribed book actually presented by the author as a gift—is the "inscription copy," a book inscribed at the owner's request. Before the advent of store-sponsored book signings, most readers got a book inscribed by mailing it to the author and praying that it would make a round-trip. Yeats once asked Thomas Hardy how he handled these requests. Hardy led Yeats upstairs to a large room that was filled from floor to ceiling with books—thousands of them. "Yeats," said Hardy, "these are the books that were sent to me for signature."

Maggie Hivnor, the paperback editor of the University of Chicago Press, once told me that when she adds an out-of-print title to her list, she calls the author and asks for a pristine copy that can be photographically reproduced. "The author is usually a man," she explained. "In a few weeks, a beautifully kept copy of his book arrives, a little dusty perhaps but otherwise absolutely perfect. And on the title page it invariably says *To Mother*."

Now *that's* a real inscription. The best thing about it is that until the editor's call, the book that it ennobled reposed precisely where it should have: in a place of honor on Mother's shelf. And there it shall return. How melancholy, by contrast, are the legions of inscribed copies one finds in any used-book rack, each a memorial to a betrayed friendship. Do the traitors believe that their faithlessness will remain a secret? If so, they are sadly deluded. Hundreds of people will witness it, including, on occasion, the inscriber. Fortunately, the very finest

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inscriptions, like the finest love letters, rarely pass out of a family.

85 The best inscription I've ever gotten is on the title page of *The Enigma of Suicide*, by George Howe Colt. It reads (how far we have come, George, since our true friendship!) *To my beloved wife...This is your book, too. As my life, too, is also yours.*