

THREE HOURS TO DISAPPOINTMENT

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I.

"A beautiful book, a perfect little gem."—*BBC Kaleidoscope*

"A marvelously piercing fiction."—*Times Literary Supplement*

"A solid and satisfying bit of life... Every action in it matters, however small."—*Spectator*

II.

On November 20, 2003 at 7:34 p.m. central standard time, a man enters a large chain bookstore in the heart of his large midwestern city. In three hours, using only what's in the store, he will learn all he can about disappointment.

Into the Title Sleuth computer terminal on the first floor he types the keyword **disappointment**. Selects the category **books**. Eighty matches of which several are repeats. Only one available in the store. Thirty-nine of eighty out of print. One yet unpublished. At second count 37 of 80 out of print. Only one a best seller: *The Bookshop*, by Penelope Fitzgerald.

Looking for *The Bookshop* in fiction, he stumbles on the literary criticism shelf. Believes *Patience and Fortitude* by Nicholas Basbanes might have disappointment in there with patience and fortitude—closest thing in the index to disappointment is dissertation.

p. 482

Maintained alphabetically on one floor alone are 750,000 printed dissertations.

The chutzpah to offer us a thousand dollars for our copy of Walter Benjamin's doctoral thesis.

Four books to the right he sees Walter Benjamin *Selected Writings Volume 4: 1938-1940*—closest thing in the index to disappointment is distance, p. 255.

p. 255

And if changes in the medium of present-day perception can be understood as a decay of the aura, it is possible to demonstrate the social determinants of that decay—

But I promise you, you'll see the sun again—notices the music playing in the store.

We define the aura as the latter.

He takes Benjamin, *The Bookshop*, and another of Penelope Fitzgerald's books and heads upstairs towards the café. Gets caught in the philosophy section—starts checking indices for disappointment.

The Complete Idiots Guide to Philosophy—∅

Metaphysics: The Big Questions—∅

In the index of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations: the German Text with Revised English Translation*, he sees in passing: fibre, cf. artichoke, family, overlap, threat, 67. Artichoke and family together promises to be good—but on p. 67 nothing of fibre or artichokes or families, just this:

Someone once told me that as a child he had been surprised that a tailor could 'sew a dress'—he thought this meant that a dress was produced by sewing alone, by sewing one thread to another.

Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers have no index.

Oxford Companion to Philosophy, the index hops over disappointment. Goes from DIRTY HANDS: agent—relative morality; consequentialism; ends and means; Machiavelli straight to DISCOURSE: Habermas; linguistic turn; structuralism.

He pulls only the thickest books off the shelf, or those whose titles suggest something of disappointment inside.

The Varieties of Religious Experience, Centenary Edition, A Study in Human Nature—

William James—nothing in the index.

William James again—*Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth*—∅

Sustaining Loss, subtitled *Art and Mournful Life* by Gregg Horowitz—∅

He gives up on thick books and picks now by color of spine.

Georges Bataille An Intellectual Biography by Michel Surya—nothing, but the quotes at the beginning (are these called the epigraph?):

I think as a girl takes off her dress. At the extremity of its movement, thought is indecency, even obscenity.

He goes 'round to the backside of philosophy to look among self-help titles.

Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* has nothing on disappointment in the index.

It leaps:

- direct control, 85-86
- discipline, 148, 186
 - as law of life, 199
 - in time management, 157-58.

Self help proves fruitful.

The Artist's Way: *A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* by Julia Cameron. In the index: Disappointments. See also Loss(es) unmourned, 129-130.

He notes the plurals, follows her suggestion and sees also:

- Loss(es), artistic, 129-130
 - acknowledging and sharing, 129-130
 - admitting and mourning, 129-134
 - droughts and, 170
 - gain disguised as, 134-137
 - moving ahead after, 136-137
 - self-discovery and, 81
 - sense of, 83

p. 129

If artistic creations are our brainchildren, artistic losses are our miscarriages.

This propels him out of self-help. He takes the books he'd carried up from downstairs to a corner table far from the café counter. He opens *The Afterlife*. Essays and criticism by Penelope Fitzgerald. He scans the table of contents—chooses the chapter about Sarah Orne Jewett because he once came across her name in some context, looked up who she was, and now can't remember.

On page 16 begins a review of Jewett's *The News from Dunnet Landing—Sarah Orne Jewett: Novels and Stories*.

This short novel is her masterpiece, no doubt about that, but it's difficult to discuss the plot because it can hardly be said to have one. It was one of those close friendships known as "Boston Marriages." We know it, we've been there—breaking the immense silences. A dreadful small place to make a world of. Don't write about things and people. Tell them just as they are. Write to the human heart. On a coast which wasn't laid down or charted, where the crew saw, or half-saw—Write to the human heart. Some of them tales hangs together tolerable well.

I just miss her the same every day. So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end.

Sarah Orne Jewett died in the house where she was born.

III.

The following day, November 21, 2003 at 7:13 p.m. central standard time, our man returns to the store. He has one of his allotted three hours remaining in which to find what he needs. Returns to the Title Sleuth on the first floor. Reenters the parameters of his search. Gets the same 80 entries. Again he counts. Twenty mention God, Bible, or Christianity. Four mention parenting. *It's a Shame About the Rain: The Bright Side of Disappointment* is out of print. *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooners, Heterosexuality, and the Tourist Industry at Niagara Falls* is similarly unavailable. Now on its way, expected to arrive in 3-5 days, *Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud* by Philip Yancey.

He finds religion up on the second floor. Opens *Inside the Mind of God*—in there a story of Bertrand Russell, asked at a dinner party what he would do if upon dying he encountered God:

Why, I should say, "God, You gave us insufficient evidence."

On to *Desiring God*, by John Piper. No disappointment in the index, next closest is Dissatisfied Contentment, 124-5.

p. 124

But since there is often a time lapse between our perception of a person's need and our eventual rejoicing in the person's restored joy, there is a place for weeping in that interval. The weeping of compassion is the weeping of joy impeded in the extension of itself to another.

The Control Freak has no index.

Thomas Merton *The Seven Storey Mountain*, closest thing in the index is Dickens 113, 131.

p. 113

Lawrence picked up a lot of terms like "lumbar ganglion" and threw them all together. Stewed them up with his own worship of sex-instinct to produce the weird mixture which I read as if it were some kind of sacred revelation.

p. 131

They couldn't help being everything I didn't want them to be. At first it was confusing. We threw bits of toast to the ducks while he told us all about Pavlov and conditioned reflexes.

Dag Hammarskjöld's *Markings* has no index, so our man re-uses the 113 (nothing) and the 131 from Merton's index.

p. 131 *Concerning the hardness of the heart—and its littleness*—let me read with open eyes the book my days are writing—and learn.

p. 130 You will find that “in the pattern” you are liberated from the need to live “with the herd.” You will find that, thus subordinated, your life will receive from Life all its meaning, irrespective of the conditions given you for its realization.

Our man overhears another customer asking where Eastern Religion's at? Right there, behind the calendars.

Someone else's question, but it moves him out from Christianity. He opens the *I Ching* at random. He knows that's not how you're supposed to use the book, but he's never had the patience to figure out the thing with coins or the other one with straws. He closes his eyes for a few seconds, to give his augury its due.

18 Gu – Remedying. Literally it means a worm, particularly a parasite in the intestine.
“Work on What Has Been Spoiled.”

Three worms in a container
This situation needs a remedy

Before starting, three days
After starting, three days

It is time to go forward and do something

The son is able, thus the father can be freed from blame

There will be regret

A detached hermit of great wisdom

Wisdom—that one retires after achieving great success

He closes the *I Ching*, moves to psychology.

The Wisdom in Feeling—nothing.

In *The Nature of Emotion—Fundamental Questions* by Ekman and Davidson, he finally gets another hit.

Disappointment

And cognition, 195, 393

And intensity, 393

As signal, 114

p. 114

Goal achievement represents a concern by itself. Almost any goal, once we are committed to it, gives rise to emotions when relevant events are met on the road.

His stomach growls. He should have eaten something on his way over.

Hope and fear, disappointment, anger (including self-directed anger), and dejection are emotions that signal the relationship between progress and expectation regarding one's rate of progress. They have implication for energy investments and ultimately for action termination or goal abandonment.

p. 195

He's not sure he locked his file cabinets before leaving the office.

p. 195

Nothing in appraisal theory says that an object must be recognized before a sense of pleasure or aversion can be felt. Of course, more complex emotions, such as pride, disappointment, jealousy or contempt require extensive participation of cognitive processes.

The book is heavy, awkward in his hands. He's tired.

p. 393

the fact that fans at a basketball game (or viewers of a dramatic film) find themselves responding with interior emotions—

He shifts his weight from one leg to the other, leans against the end of the shelf. Notices how heavy his coat is, how the added weight makes him slump.

It seems not unreasonable to view such affective experiences as disappointment and such non-affective experiences as amazement as examples of dramatic cognitive restructuring, a process in which the magnitude of cognitive change is the intensity of disappointment or amazement.

He finishes reading this last bit, looks at his watch. He's out of time. Done. He puts *The Nature of Emotion* back on the shelf and heads for the escalators.

On the way out he sees a woman he once loved. She sees him but doesn't recognize him, nor does he give her time to. Outside he walks quickly to the train station and within moments disappears underground.