



## Proust & Me Blog

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Proust and Me: this is the first title Roland Barthes considered for the lecture he gave on Proust in the fall of 1978 at the Collège de France, and then at NYU. Not, he said, because "I compare myself to this great writer," but because "I identify myself with him," for 'In Search of Lost Time' is "the narrative of a desire to write."

What is your personal experience with Proust? Have you read all of *La Recherche*? Or where did you leave off, and why? We look forward to the conversation!

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### A La Proust: The Dangers of Writing in Bed



*Proust & Me* contributing writer Lila Azam Zanganeh is the author of *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* (Norton/US; Penguin/UK). Photo credit: Italian Vogue 2012

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*Swann's Way* was published on November 14, 1913. Just two days before, the newspaper *Le Temps* printed an "interview" with Proust. This interview was a fake. It was entirely written by Proust himself. Its heading read: "In the rooms whose shades are almost always shut, Mr. Marcel Proust is lying down. The electric light accentuates his matte complexion, but two admirable eyes full of life and fervor exude light under a forehead buried beneath his hair. Mr. Marcel Proust is still a slave to illness, but one can no longer sense it when the writer, asked to explain himself on his work, becomes animated and speaks." What tender narcissism transpires through these lines, written, no doubt, by Proust himself, as a preamble to an interview with himself! And yet what staying power they have, these words, as every *littérateur* who languishes in bed cannot but think of Proust's sickly complexion, asthmatic lungs and glinting eyes, his suddenly animated pose.

I confess. The first time a novelist friend told me, with a smirk, that he wrote in bed "à la Proust," I was taken aback by his smugness. A moment later it hit me: I, too, have for several months been writing in bed. Either fully lying down, with just my head propped up and my laptop on my legs. Or sitting up, with half-a-dozen pillows stacked behind me. I don't know how it started. I didn't used to be this way. I can't put a precise date to it. Just a few months. Maybe a year. I think it began because my desk was crammed with books, it was impossible to find a space for myself, and there seemed to be already too many books lying on the floor, everywhere. Each time I glanced towards the desk, I felt a slight sense of oppression. So one day I stayed in bed. It was cold outside when I began, last winter. I would hop out of bed, make myself a quick tea and tartines, and hop back in, tray handy on the floor. The breakfast lasted forever, and the writing seemed to flow with more ease and fluency than it did on the desk. The people who visited the apartment, neighbors, friends, handymen, seemed dismayed to find me under the covers as late as 5 or 6PM, surrounded with papers, cakes and half-filled cups. I remember feeling a pressing need to justify myself to the plumber one afternoon. "I, I am a writer..." "I explained sheepishly. He took one skeptical look at me (which basically meant "yeah right, KID!") and mumbled something about the kitchen pipes. Next, I reasoned that in time this regimen would surely prove ruinous, unhealthy and unworthy of the French-born American I had become over the last twelve or so years... Hence I set about exercising towards the end of the afternoon and seeing my friends at night. To this day, and as I am writing this, I continue to write in bed. My windows are often wide-open because of the 110-degree heat in New York apartments at wintertime, and as the weather in Manhattan goes, on most days, there is sunshine. I am still possessed with an overwhelming sense of embarrassment when people around me complain of long commutes and vile office politics. I have my own demons to fight, of course – the everyday terror of failing to write anything of worth and beauty, the torture of long hours agonizing over two or three sentences, or only a little cluster of words, this tenacious feeling of being a witless acrobat gliding over thin air – but on many days, I am secretly thankful that my mattress, unbeknown to most, is a flying carpet.

by Lila Azam Zanganeh

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