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### [Come Sit By Me](#)



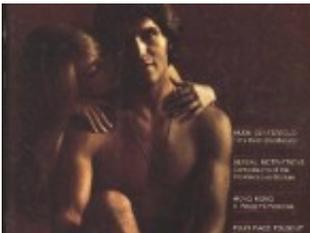
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## [Come Sit By Me: A Literary Alternative to Missed Connections](#)

By [Elyse Moody @ 4:15 pm](#)



I'm single again — for the first time since I moved to New York City — and I've been thinking a lot about how to meet people. Specifically, I've been thinking a lot about how to meet interesting guys.

Sometimes I fantasize that I'll be doing two weeks' worth of laundry and collide with the love of my life while moving my whites from the washer to the dryer, but that hasn't happened yet. And I'm not opposed to online dating per se, but I've tried it before, when I lived in Washington, DC, a few years ago. One K Street lawyer, upon introducing himself to me at the

sleazily lit subterranean wine bar he'd chosen for our meeting, groped me plain as day while "helping me with my scarf." Cue my quick break for the exit. And the bike mechanic/librarian/grad student I actually liked disappeared without so much as a text message. I wouldn't deem it a success.

Where did I end up meeting my most recent boyfriend? In a book club.

So I've been asking myself some basic questions: What do I like? Reading. What am I looking for in a date? Someone who enjoys books and talking about them, and who can strike up good conversations with strangers. An idea started to gel. Maybe if I'm choosy about what I read on my longish interborough commute, the right guy—one with superlative taste who's curious enough to make a move—will be drawn to me by the tractor beam the open book in my hands emits.

I ran this idea by my therapist, and she started nodding excitedly. "Books are such a great crutch," she said. "I think of them like props."

Exactly.

So this strategy's been clinically endorsed. I've reviewed my journals, made a list of the most attractive qualities of potential soul mates past (setting aside their less desirable traits—e.g., substance addiction, monomaniacal narcissism, commitment phobia), and distilled it into archetypes of the charming men I hope to meet, if fate wills it, somewhere in the New York City public transit system. Here they are—along with the books that will compel them to engage me (or you!) instead of their iPhone.

## 1. The I'd-Rather-Be-Outdoorsman

### Book Bait: [\*Desert Solitaire\*, by Edward Abbey](#)

My friends still talk about Daniel.\* (Any reference to him is accompanied by the gesture of holding one's hands up more than a foot apart.) My friendship with him morphed into something physical during his senior year and my junior year of college. He spent his summers fly-fishing in Idaho and his spring break volunteering on farms in Nicaragua. And he could be romantic: He once drove me up to a mountain overlook to polish off a box of wine. Daniel didn't have a very good memory, but if he forgot his key card, he was strong enough to climb to the second-story balcony of his apartment to let himself in through the sliding-glass door. Enough said.

Do men like this exist in New York City? And if so, do they read? (The only book I remember Daniel cracking was *I Hope They Serve Beer in Hell*, by Tucker Max.) Surveying my bookshelves for appropriate material, my gaze fell on *Desert Solitaire*. It ranks alongside Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in the eco-lit canon; anyone who loves nature and being in it will appreciate Abbey's detailed descriptions of pristine Utah, before paved roads and RVs. Plus, it's about a season spent drinking beers alone at Arches National Park, a dream job from a bygone time for anyone who's ever plotted an escape from the city. Hey, you, with the Chacos and sexy calves! Take me camping upstate?

## 2. The Highbrow Lawyer

### Book Bait: [\*Herzog\*, by Saul Bellow](#)

Confession: I've never read Saul Bellow. And I'm fairly certain that's why my relationships with men who profess to adore his writing never have worked out. One such Bellow superfan, a former fellow writing tutor (now a lawyer) struck me as a great catch: He was Ivy League smart, Southern, a Tom Waits enthusiast (I can still remember listening to *Closing Time* in his bed), and a *New York Review of Books* subscriber, and we wore the same size bluejeans. That might've been convenient if it had lasted into the winter. He insisted that I read Saul Bellow. Maybe there's something I'm missing?

Katie Roiphe, writing for Slate on the occasion of Bellow's death in 2005, characterized the totemic Bellow woman as, "infinitely generous, colorful, voluptuous, pliable, passionate, beautiful, full of appetite, slightly exotic, or actually foreign,

with a great appreciation of the intellect, and a penchant for lingerie.”

OK... I could be that woman. In an effort to channel her, I'm going to start with 1964's *Herzog*, widely considered Bellow's masterpiece. The book critic Julian Moynahan wrote that in it, Bellow's protagonist finds balance, incredibly, in instability. Funny, that's just what I need to discover for myself. Hello, fellow straphanger in the skinny jeans and the Gillian Welch concert T-shirt. Is that what you're looking for too?

### 3. The Shy Financier

#### Book Bait: [\*Still Life With Woodpecker\*, by Tom Robbins](#)

A sweet I-work-at-a-bank-type guy once asked me if I'd read Tom Robbins. Well. I'd just left my complete Robbins collection (minus *Still Life With Woodpecker*) on my brownstone's stoop because my new bookshelves couldn't accommodate it. I'd sped through all his novels on high school beach trips. Unlike the book my mom gave me in lieu of explaining sex (*Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*, by Judy Blume), Robbins' novels—*Woodpecker*, in particular—made sex sound fun. I might never read *Jitterbug Perfume* again, but *Woodpecker*, definitely.

Another reason to hang on to *Woodpecker*: It contains practical advice for my Brooklyn-based love life: “Who knows how to make love stay?” Robbins writes. Tip number one: “Tell love you are going to Junior's Deli on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn to pick up a cheesecake, and if loves stays, it can have half. It will stay.”

By asking my opinion on Robbins, this fellow clearly wanted to hint at the free-spirited sexual hippie-beast inside him that might peek out after another IPA or two. Fast-forward two months—a text! “Enjoyed *Jitterbug* a lot better.” So much for that.

I still think the methodology is sound. Reading *Woodpecker* in public is advertising that you believe in the “sudden rush of magic” Robbins writes happens when two people meet and fall in love. Hey, you over there in the tortoiseshell wayfarers. Do you believe in magic?

### 4. The Conservationist Turned I-Banker

#### Book Bait: [\*Mountains Beyond Mountains\*, by Tracy Kidder](#)

I met Tyler\* at my college bookstore, where I had a work-study job. He had a blond ponytail and blue eyes and story after story about his summer working in Mozambique. At his cabin in the Shenandoah Valley, he showed me Africa photographs and popped open PBRs and danced with me to Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*. Besmitten, loveshot, I e-mailed him an Elizabeth Bishop poem, “Questions of Travel”: “And have we room /for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?” Let's just say we didn't.

Tyler visited campus once after he graduated. Running into him felt like meeting a new person. The old Tyler had given away all his clothes except for a T-shirt printed with Michelangelo *putti* and a pin-tucked linen button-down. The new Tyler wore an Hermès silk tie. The new Tyler cut his hair above his ears.

The point is, there may very well be a rock-climbing, “Sweet Thing”—humming, third-world-traveling adventurer sitting next to me, disguised in an expensive dark suit, wishing he were in Mozambique instead. In *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, a doctor named Paul Farmer travels to Haiti, Peru, Cuba, Russia, evangelizing the NGO-friendly doctrine that “the only real nation is humanity.” It's powerful enough to tempt a man to reconsider that un-lived life—and perhaps take someone else along, if they're game for it. Reading Kidder suggests just that. Hey, Mr. John Varvatos: My hiking boots are ready when you are.

### 5. The Migratory Southerner

**Book Bait:** [\*A Curtain of Green and Other Stories\*, by Eudora Welty](#)

One October night, I left a party with a friend who put his denim jacket around my shoulders, the way nice Southern boys do. We walked to his house, where sheets of loose-leaf paper covered every surface—the couch, the floor, the desk. He read me part of one of his stories about Appalachia. *Jacksonville City Nights* played loud. We talked about Eudora Welty. I slept there. To say I had a crush on him after that would be an understatement of biblical proportions. But I never did anything about it—except write a hundred-page-long paper on Eudora Welty.

Welty is a writer's writer steeped in the South. Because of that, I equate familiarity with her short stories and novels to a certain kind of vetting. More people seem to know Flannery O'Connor; if they've read *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and can make witty reference to Hulga's wooden leg, that's a signifier and a turn-on in its own right. But meeting someone admiring of Welty is like spotting a rare bird.

Any self-respecting Southern writer should recognize her byline. *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories* is my favorite. It contains her best (in my opinion) stories: "Why I Live at the P.O.," "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," and "Death of a Traveling Salesman." They're full of gossip and turns of phrase that prick up your ears, they're so lively and specific, not to mention her dark humor. The communities where these stories take place make me feel so lonesome for home that I almost want to move back. Then I remember there aren't any jobs and sigh. My best hope is finding someone in NYC who's similarly nostalgic and as appreciative of Welty's ear for language as I am.

In a twist on the *Steel Magnolias* aphorism, I offer: "If you have something smart to say, come sit by me."

Photo via the [Underground New York Public Library](#).

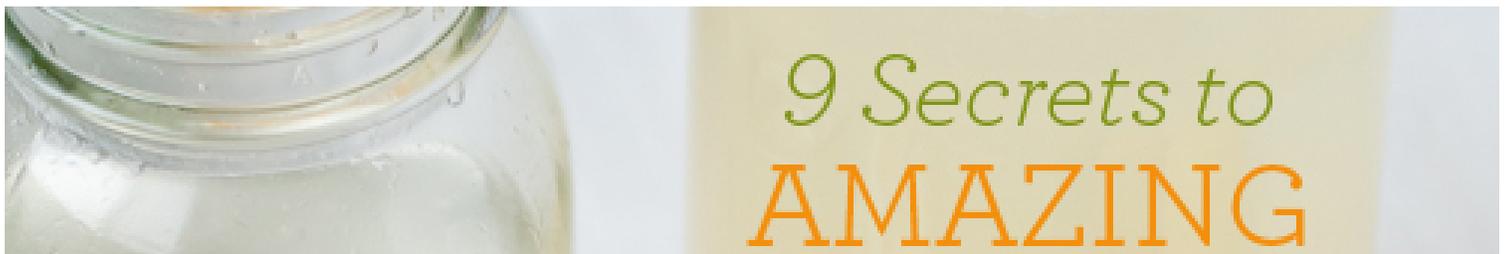
*Elyse* has written for (published and forthcoming): *ELLE*, *BBC Travel*, *Creative Nonfiction*, and *The Daily Beast*, among other publications. She lives in Brooklyn Heights.

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[Lu2](#)

"Steel Magnolias"? :(  
--D. Parker

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:22 pm](#)

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[brightlybee](#)

@Lu2 I thought that quote was attributed to Alice Roosevelt Longworth? No matter, I'll always read it in a Clairee Belcher voice anyway.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 5:44 pm](#)

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[Lu2](#)

@brightlybee You're probably right. I only knew it wasn't original to Steel Magnolias, surmised it was Dorothy Parker, and found (spurious) confirmation on the web in my haste to post my nasty little note. :)

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 5:56 pm](#)

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[Vicky](#)

This is a nice idea in theory but good fucking god I don't want anyone to talk to me while I'm reading.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:25 pm](#)

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[stonefruit](#)

@Vicky Or, honestly, while I'm commuting.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:27 pm](#)

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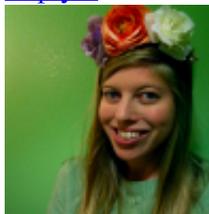


[Lily Rowan](#)

I was really disappointed when the guy standing directly in front of me on the subway was reading the same book I was, but didn't want to chat about it at all -- but it's true, usually I don't want anyone interrupting me when I'm reading OR talking to me during my commute.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:49 pm](#)

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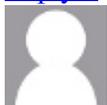


[drydenlane](#)

@Vicky This week, while reading on the bus, a guy continued to talk to me, asking me first if we could go to dinner, then if I had any drugs, if I could give him some money, if i wanted to go to a hotel room. HELLO, I am reading. :/

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 7:18 pm](#)

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[Lu2](#)

I like the idea of finding just the right book to attract attention from a certain kind of person. I've never been approached on the basis of a book, except for one time when a douchebag approached me as I was sunbathing in a two-piece swimsuit on my apartment building's roof and reading Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology. He feigned interest and asked to borrow it. That whole encounter was a real head-scratcher to me.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:28 pm](#)

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[princess rainbow](#)

@Lu2 I was once reading on the subway Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's Epistemology of the Closet, a book pretty obviously about some serious queer theory, when some dude asked me about it and then tried chatting me up for awhile. I mean, I know

I don't look gay, but come on! It was puzzling and frustrating. Worse, no ladies ever talked to me while I was reading it...

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:51 pm](#)

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[lobsterhug](#)

@Lu2 Back when I took the commuter train, a conductor asked me what I was reading and it happened to be *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. There followed an awkward conversation that only ended when we arrived at my destination.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 5:01 pm](#)

[Reply »](#)  0



[Lu2](#)

@lobsterhug @princess rainbow I like your stories!

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 5:07 pm](#)

[Reply »](#)  0



[bocadelperro](#)

@princess rainbow when I was learning German in college, I read a lot of books published by Reclam--which is the German equivalent of the Penguin Classics, except that the covers are super-plain and made of yellow construction paper. They're also generally about the size of a largeish smartphone, so I often kept them in my coat pocket. Apparently pulling out a tiny yellow book in a coffee shop is catnip to a certain kind of undergrad male, and they never understood why I was so grouchy to be interrupted.

Eventually I stopped going to coffee shops to study and my German improved vastly.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 5:20 pm](#)

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[meetapossum](#)

I think my preferred Robbins book bait would be *Fierce Invalids*, but I still haven't read *Woodpecker*. I went on a huge Robbins kick when I first got to New York. It captured my flighty optimism about the city really well.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:28 pm](#)

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[joythemanatee](#)

I like this idea! For my brother, actually, as I am already married... but my brother commutes by car, so that doesn't work... let's figure out a system of hooking up cool people we know. Anybody in the --- area looking for an awesome guy??

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:46 pm](#)

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[LittleMeteor](#)

I can confirm that this works...ish. I was reading *\_Even Cowgirls Get the Blues\_* (Robbins) and met my college boyfriend. He walked up, said it was his favorite Robbins novel, and then I made him participate in all of my volunteer activities in order to woo me. Arty, writery, a little hyperactive, but a super sweet guy.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:47 pm](#)

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[lobsterhug](#)

I fear I am too old to read Robbins for the first time and I regret not reading him in college when my roommate was obsessed with his books.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:52 pm](#)

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[Roxanne Rholes](#)

@lobsterhug The secret is just to pretend you're too young, idealistic, and stoned to realize that Robbins is actually kind of a dick. Just let it flow through you and enjoy the magickey stuff and the ridiculous writing and the insane characters. Don't get too critical and you can have an excellent time with him!

ETA: I have been a fan of Tom Robbins ever since I found my mom's copy of *Skinny Legs And All*, at which time I was far too young for the material. I don't mean to sound like I'm talking shit on the guy. He's super fun. Just not perfect!

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 5:26 pm](#)

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[LaLoba](#)

@lobsterhug I thought being in college was too old to start reading Tom Robbins when I first tried *Jitterbug Perfume*. That one is very silly, scattered, and at times littered with misdirected prose. However, it is indeed such a fantastical jungle cruise of a novel that I am willing to forgive a lot.

A couple years ago i finally read *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* and I still believe it's a book on a different level that's quite complex, troubling, and shockingly bold.

But still . . . maybe read them in private if you are over 19?

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 6:01 pm](#)

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[highfivesforall](#)

@lobsterhug Another secret, I think, is to almost completely disregard the plots. Robbins is great at making you feel feelings and visualize his scenes, but the greater message he seems to be trying to send with most of his plots is not so impressive to grown-up me. College me was all over that shit, but now I still appreciate the books for their silliness, wordsmithery, and joy. Some of the plot devices are fantastic, like the inanimate objects that lead rich lives in *Skinny Legs and All*, but the overarching plot is almost boring compared to everything else. (Also do NOT read *Half-asleep in Frog Pajamas*, it is an anomaly of terribleness.)

P.S. Roxanne I still have your copy of *Villa Incognito*!

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 6:21 pm](#)

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[lookuplookup](#)

I can definitely confirm that my partner and I would never, ever approach each other based on reading material. He cares as much about my contemporary non-genre fiction as I do about his paperback bio-terrorism thrillers.

A couple weeks ago I went out to a cafe on my lunch hour and spent the whole time meditatively repeating, "Please don't try to talk to me, please don't try to talk to me," when I ended up in close quarters with a guy reading *The Tin Drum*.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 4:55 pm](#)

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[rathermarvelous](#)

I like the idea of mythologizing past loves with books, but I'd never be interested in anyone with interests too similar to mine. I'm one of those Groucho Marx types--I'll never join a club that would have me as a member.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 5:01 pm](#)

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[mczz](#)

@rathermarvelous Me too. But I guess that's mostly because I'm currently reading Lauren Graham's novel, and this is fairly indicative of my reading tastes.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 5:57 pm](#)

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[sophia\\_h](#)

I'm married and I have the opposite issue with observing my fellow commuters' reading material -- I wanted to make up little bookmarks with links to far superior BDSM fanfic to give to all the women reading 50SOG last summer, and I wanted to tell the guy reading Game of Thrones with a TV show cover "nooo, pull out now, save yourself, the series has gone to a terrible place."

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 6:06 pm](#)

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[frumious bandersnatch](#)

## NO WHAT DO NOT TALK TO ME WHILE I'M READING

IF I am holding it on my lap (or looking up from reading AND we make eye contact and I smile/look friendly), THEN you may say something. Please keep it on the book for at least a little or I will think I got tricked into being hit on. BUT if I respond monosyllabically and don't contribute to the conversation after you drop a few comments/questions, politely say "nice talking about one of my favorite books/authors/subjects for a while! Sorry to interrupt you" and DON'T GET BUTTHURT.

I sympathize with trying to meet men but I am so fucking sick of men thinking their desire for companionship--even though that's a really nice thing--is more important than my book.

Posted on [July 10, 2013 at 6:16 pm](#)

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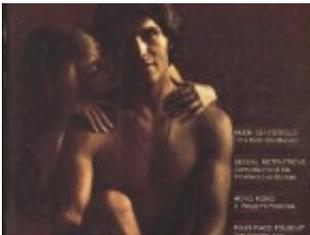
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