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NY CULTURE

A Proust Marathon Kicks Off

Read Proust in Just 20½ Hours at 'Swann's Way: A Nomadic Reading'

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By ANDY BATTAGLIA

Nov. 6, 2013 8:55 p.m. ET

Reading Proust properly is a project for a lifetime, but acquainting oneself with the first volume of his masterwork, *madeleines* and all, should take just 20½ hours.

That is how much time is set aside for "Swann's Way: A Nomadic Reading," a seven-night [marathon reading event](#) starting Friday at the Wythe Hotel in Brooklyn and ending at the French Embassy next week. The final reading occurs on Nov. 14, the 100th anniversary of "Swann's Way," the first volume of Marcel Proust's "In Search of Lost Time," also known as "Remembrance of Things Past."

"The primary experience of it should be silent, to oneself and by oneself," said Lydia Davis, an author and "Swann's Way" translator. "But people are so passionate about Proust, so close to what he's doing, that it's also good to read aloud."



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Translator Lydia Davis *Getty Images*

Antonin Baudry, cultural counselor of the French embassy in New York, helped wrangle some 80 writers, editors and other literary types to lend voice, in English and French, to Proust's words. The ranks of readers will also include comedian Mike Birbiglia (Friday), students from the Lycée Français (Sunday) and the inventor of the croûte, Dominique Ansel (Tuesday).

"With many different voices," Mr. Baudry said, "at some point you start to hear another voice behind all the others: the voice of the writer."

Lorin Stein, editor of the *Paris Review*, said he's excited to revisit a book he first read while working as a gardener, on lunch breaks and after he ventured home on summer afternoons. "It immerses you in a prolonged and intimate conversation with a very refined and articulate mind, with a great

sense of humor and worldliness and sophistication," he said. "There's something uncanny in the way you're allowed to get lost in the labyrinth of this man's obsessions and his clear-eyed vision of the world that he lost."

Mr. Stein will read on the first night, at the Wythe Hotel. After that, the reading series wanders to venues such as the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx and theaters, galleries and clubs in Manhattan and Queens.

"I was never fond of Proust. For a long time I thought he was a bit boring," said Laurent Binet, an author coming from Paris for the event. His conversion occurred only recently, when revisiting the psychological torment of "Swann's Way."

"Maybe the French dig deeper and scratch stronger the wound," Mr. Binet added. "And of course we all love stories about adultery and cheating—that's very French, I guess."

The novelist Ben Lerner attributed the author's appeal to the way his reflections on

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memory prove ever-present. "Proust writes so brilliantly about time—its passing, its stretching—that he's always relevant to the present as it slips into the past," he said. "Proust is the great example for me of a writer who can show how our most intimate moments link up with historical rhythms."

Mr. Lerner will read on the final night at the French embassy, where the "Nomadic Reading" series was conceived.

"Before discovering Proust I was dedicated to math and science," said Mr. Baudry, who programmed the series as part of the [embassy's larger Proust centennial celebration](#). "But what I found is I learned much more with Proust about human nature and the world than in any science or nonfiction. He's alive in the minds of the thinkers and authors who actually try to think the world right now."

'Swann's Way' Readings

Readings will be in English and French, and some events require RSVPs. Visit frenchculture.org for more information.

Nov. 8, 7 p.m.: Wythe Hotel, 80 Wythe Ave., Brooklyn

Nov. 9, 10 a.m.: Soho Rep, 46 Walker St.

Nov. 10, 11 a.m.: New York Botanical Garden, 2900 Southern Bronx Blvd., Bronx

Nov. 11, 7 p.m.: Oracle Club, 10-41 47th Ave., Queens

Nov. 12, 7 p.m.: Simone Subal Gallery, 131 Bowery

Nov. 13, 10 p.m.: Le Baron Chinatown, 32 Mulberry St.

Nov. 14, 7 p.m.: French Embassy, 972 Fifth Ave.

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