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Just Thinking, 05/26/03:

The Year of the Ring

by Justin Katz

Well, it's taken the better part of a year, but I've finally finished reading J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Reading has become yet another of those activities that I enjoy too much to actually find time to do. However, Hollywood motivated me toward uncharacteristic indulgence, in this case, by making a trilogy of movies that I would surely see based on a book that I intended to read someday. At the very least, I decided, I should make time to read the corresponding sections of the book before the cinematically processed versions glowed in my living room.

I barely made it through the "The Fellowship of the Ring" in time for the DVD release of the movie, and the filmmakers tricked me by extending their telling a full chapter into the "Two Towers" section of the book. Having been thus confused, I felt compelled, the day after watching the unknown scene, to resume my journey through the book ahead of schedule. With the seal broken on Tolkien's second section (which, I must confess, I feel the movie people to have partitioned more wisely), I went ahead and finished those three-hundred-some pages. For additional motivation, I told myself that it was not impossible that my wife and I would make our way to a movie theater for the first time in years; the wait for a sequel does often seem exasperatingly protracted when the credits of the original are in the process of rolling by.

We didn't go to the movies. Therefore, I found myself fully a year ahead of the film's take-home release and put the book aside, clogging the only outlet of my "to read" pile. Periodically, other books would catch my eye for a variety of reasons and, not being very expensive, would find their way to the bottom of my stack as collected knowledge — or rather, collected pre-knowledge.

And thus did things stand until February of this year and my first doctor appointment (only for a routine visit) since the turn of the millennium. Knowing that there would be some waiting, and not being a fan of soap operas or daytime game shows, I brought along *The Lord of the Rings*. I read much more of the book than I'd expected, that morning, before storming home incredulous that I'd sat in a fifteen-by-fifteen foot room with a variable number of other people for two full hours, with the doctor still half an hour away, at a minimum.

From then to about a week ago, I'd picked at the pages, here and there. Last week, with the sun of spring finally making its appearance (before going back into hiding for a period longer, even, than my pointless waiting room visit), I decided to finagle some life into my life. I picked up the book and reached the end yesterday.

The benefits of reading over viewing are commonplaces, although many people do not act accordingly. Most centrally, books interweave themselves with the reader because the reader must bring imagination and personal experience to the interaction. I believe that this one factor is at the bottom of such distinctions from video as "taking away the middleman between the reader and the author" and "offering more depth of insight."

Another fundamental advantage of reading is the very thing that makes it seem so incompatible with modern life: the investment of time. To be sure, most readers will not take months on end to read most books. Nonetheless, very few readers can devour any given book in the two hours that it takes for the average movie to run its course. Written pages also work their

way into the mind as a result of the additional concentration that they require. And, despite the further level of focus, books can follow a person around in a continual process of living and reading.

In some ways, this past year could be considered, for me, *The Year of the Ring*. Somewhere in each day came the thought of pushing my way through the pages — whether lamenting my inability to fit it into my schedule, planning to make time, or succeeding at sitting down with the hobbits, elves, dwarves, and men. Now, their lives are finished, to this reader. There's something sad, albeit satisfying, about the final words of a book and the realization that it can never be read for the first time again. The first time, the story is experienced; the second time, it's retelling a memory.

It is true that books can be reread, usually yielding some gift held in reserve the first time through, but my life being what it is, there will not likely be a *Year of the Ring II*.