

Reading Guide for *Every Past Thing* by Pamela Thompson

About the Book

Every Past Thing is written from history, but for the most part its pure fiction. It was inspired by a painting -- "Mourning Picture" -- which for years has haunted visitors to the Smith College Museum of Art, where it hangs. It is reproduced on the cover of the novel. At essence, this is a story about learning to connect and live in the present, by dealing with a profound loss. It is a novel about deep and complex family relationships, and questions the possibilities of any two people ever really knowing one another.

Edwin Romanzo Elmer -- a 50 year old painter and successful inventor -- hails from the rugged and beautiful hill country of western Massachusetts. In 1899, he moves with his wife Mary to New York City for a year to study art. Mary is 39, a devotee of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Edwin's older brother Samuel -- who has a past with Mary -- has lived in the city for 10 years and is paying for everything. The narrative unfolds over the course of the first week of November, their first week in New York City, as Mary examines the past in what she calls her Green Book, trying to record something of her life, both before and after the death of her daughter Effie, who died at the age of ten in January 1890. She's also trying to find her long lost love Jimmie Roberts, who as a 17 year old pre-med student had spent the summer at their house when Mary was 24 and Effie a little girl of four. Edwin and Samuel had built this house -- a huge Italianate affair -- with their own hands, after returning home wealthy in the silk thread business from Cleveland. Edwin and Mary turned it into a 19th century style bed and breakfast every summer to accommodate the city dwellers who traveled into western Massachusetts to Chautauqua with the transcendentalist Charles Elliot Norton. Mary and Jimmie had corresponded for several years afterwards as he became a doctor and anarchist -- a friend of Emma Goldman's -- caring for the poor in the slums of New York City. She looks for him at Schwab's, a famous anarchist hang out in the lower east side, the return address on all his letters. At Schwab's she is befriended by Frank Tannenbaum and his sister Susanna: charming, smart and attractive, Bohemian activists, Susanna the age that Effie would have been, had she lived. Frank is dropping out of engineering school and on his way to the Philippines to report on the misdeeds of the Teddy Roosevelt administration. He is also deeply attracted to the much older Mary.

Other important characters in the novel are Nellie, an African American housekeeper and dear friend to Mary, who disappeared without a word with her husband to New York City after bearing Samuel's child. Mary is also trying to find her. Alice is Samuel's "trophy wife," who Edwin is hired to paint a portrait of during the week of the novel. Samuel's daughter Maud, who is furious with him for this marriage, is on her way to Seattle to teach school the next week.

About the Author

Pamela Thompson graduated from Yale in 1987, where she edited the university's feminist review, *Aurora*. After several years of teaching and traveling while living in San Francisco and Brooklyn, she headed to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she took the MFA, studying with John Edgar Wideman. While in Amherst, she wrote a (still unpublished) novel about two Americans -- a woman studying Arabic and a sculptor -- living on a beach in southern Turkey during the 1991 Gulf War. It won the annual Slosberg Prize for Fiction and Poetry. Soon after, she met the potter Mark Shapiro and moved to Worthington, in the foothills of the Berkshires, near the home of the Elmers of *Every Past Thing*. They have two children. For the past decade, she has worked as an editor at Interlink Books/Olive Branch Press, a publishing house specializing in books about the Middle East and translations from Arabic. *Every Past Thing* is Thompson's debut novel. See interview with the author, as follows.

Interview with the Author

Where did you grow up and go to school?

I grew up mostly in upstate New York, only about an hour from New York City, but it seemed very far away in those days, a bit more country than it is now. A crucial detail of my growing up there is that my dad was a minister and the church was the center of the town, with a huge Green around it. I'm sure that experience informs everything I've done since. . .

So you were what we called a PK when I was growing up, a Preacher's Kid. Were you a juvenile delinquent?

(chuckles) That's what everyone wants to know – "PK's, aren't they the worst?" I think I was very good, really, although my parents might say something else. I think reading was my rebellion. I was in some other world, and I very readily and happily left for college. I went to Yale, not that far away geographically but of course worlds away culturally...

Your major was in women's studies with an emphasis on literature?

That's right. I don't know that I would choose that now, but I got to read what I wanted to read and study literature and culture more broadly. I was very interested in studying film and thinking about the workings of mass media—more than just literature. But it was essential that I studied a discipline that enabled me to think about what Yale was, the history and the facts on the ground. That's what got me through, I think.

I think a reader might naturally be interested in asking you how that area of study came to bear on the subject matter of *Every Past Thing*.

I have always been interested in the kinds of history that don't get written, about people who are invisible. And not just women. It can be about race or class or just inclination -- people who find it difficult to speak aloud, and people who don't. I am interested in the people who are quiet. Those aren't always women, but they often are.

You've said that W. E. B. Dubois' *Souls of Black Folk* was an inspiration for the character of Mary. How so, and what were his connections to Western Massachussetts?

Well he lived in a similar time period and I think he was born in Great Barrington, a bit west of here, so he grew up in the Berkshire Hills. But I guess the way it works for me is to think about the condition of a rural person who feels completely disenfranchised. They are not the people who can matter to the culture. That's the message that they understand for different reasons for each of them, obviously -- the one is about race, the other about gender. I thought of Mary as a would be intellectual. She's curious and she wants to learn, Dubois figured out how to do that. I think that figure of a person trying to find a language within that culture to say "well actually, here I am," is what they have in common.

When you took Mary and Edwin into New York City, why did you put her into that "hotbed" bohemian setting with the world of Emma Goldman, and anarchy?

Well, it's a fascinating time period for me and I just saw so many connections with the Massachusetts facts of their lives, with Mary reading and being a devotee of Emerson. I think there's actually a direct line in American thinking between those transcendentalists, specifically Emerson, and the anarchists and Emma Goldman, although obviously Emma Goldman is also working with a much broader cultural frame as well. But yes, I was interested in following that impulse, and that led me to the anarchist's bar – Schwab's -- which really did exist in that spot. When I last looked at the address a year ago it was a

hookah bar, and when I go to New York City this fall I'm going to check it out. I might even have to go in there and smoke, although it will probably make me sick!

One thing that I really enjoyed about *Every Past Thing* is that the story you tell does have such a wonderful sense of history going for it. You're portraying an America that's still haunted by the Civil War and you carry in the narrative thread that sense of the continuity from the Civil War into the beginnings of what we now call Modernism.

One of the real pleasures in working with history is that the more I read and the more I thought about it, the more I understood these connections in a very intimate way. It feels like you're talking about people in your family. There's a line of Emerson's about how all history is really biography and that has always been how I've learned history – from being an inveterate reader of biographies. So as I was writing just who Mary was, and just who Edwin was – how I conceived of those characters -- I just saw more and more connections to the history that I learned, and understood the Civil War to really not have been very long ago. And that Mary's life, which is not such a long life, she lived only into her 60's, does encompass the Civil War and the beginnings of Modernism and World War I.

You have said that except for the very fact of Edwin Elmer and Mary Elmer and that he was a painter and inventor, and that they did go to New York for him to study art at a certain period of time under the support of his brother Samuel, there's really nothing left behind for us to know about those two people as people. So *Every Past Thing* is really very much a work of the imagination. Could you tell us a few of the things that you knew all along in terms of writing from history about the course of the narrative, and some of the things you did not know in advance as you were writing?

You have to be very accurate about the verifiable course of the person's life. That's the frame of my novel. But then anything else I didn't know. In a way, it's like walking through a graveyard where you see someone's starting and ending dates, and that's where I got the first lines of the novel, about how we know from the start of anything the end... I guess the big facts I was working with in writing were that I knew their daughter had died. When I was looking at the painting ["Mourning Picture"] and understanding it as a work of mourning, I was very interested in thinking about the connection between the making of art as a way of controlling ourselves. I think the central drama for me was that I never knew until I finished writing whether or not Mary would find Jimmie Roberts.

Let's talk for a minute about how the novel started for you. Can you tell us about first encountering "Mourning Picture" in the Smith College Museum of Art?

I first found the picture because I was in grad school in Amherst and took an art history class covering the period of time that my novel is set, the Civil War through the turn of the century. We had to write a long paper and I was just really haunted by this painting when I saw it in the museum and I kept thinking about that. I had also just moved to the hill towns not a half an hour from where the Edwin Elmer house is. It's still there and its incredibly beautiful. The people who live in it have painted it to exactly match the painting. I was also thinking about representations around that time in photography of people with their houses. There were some traveling photographers who I mention in the book who went around photographing people who would bring all of their important possessions out of their house and would sit on the lawn in front of their house in their best clothes, sometimes holding their horses by their reins -- really interesting kinds of self presentations. I was thinking about "Mourning Picture" in that context -- how a family is choosing to represent itself in this age of photography.

When I saw the painting I was finishing a novel [still unpublished] and from the very beginning I think I had a sense of "Oh, that will be my next novel. I will write about that painter and his wife and how they come to terms with their grief." And all of my reading for a number of years, five maybe, was devoted to the secret idea that I was writing this novel, so I didn't read anything that was written after 1900 for probably three years. But a decade later when I started writing the novel and had small children of my own, I really had no such idea that I could say anything about anyone's grief anymore.

In response to the grief over their daughter's death?

I think I've always been attracted to writing about whatever it is that plagues me or terrifies me most, and that was it, at that point. I think so many parents know that fear -- these moments when they're watching over their child at night and they can no longer sleep themselves from the worry, or the actual need for vigilance. We spent a lot of time in the hospital with our son, and those opening pages to the novel are drawn from sitting beside Amos and looking at him and seeing that thing that I wrote about. How he seemed to have been reduced to just two colors, the incredible pallor of his skin and his hair, his eyebrows, his eyes, all were the same brown. So that's very literally taken from this looking at him with utter fear and, I think, even though I'm not at all religious in any way, this utter prayer that he would be okay. And he was and is.

Although Charles Eliot Norton was in Western Massachusetts at the time of the novel holding his Chautauqua's, how did Ralph Waldo Emerson -- his writings, his thought and transcendentalism -- get into the mix of the actual novel, with Mary's being a devotee and reader of him?

Well, Emerson is of course a towering figure, and for me one of the fascinations about him is just how incredibly generative he was with so many people. And being iconical, or canonic, he is a figure who is more talked about than actually read. I find in actually reading Emerson that this guy is so lively! The absolute vivid poetry of the best of Emerson and the wildness of it, the quirkiness! And I think that's not the idea of Emerson that people get about him in popular discussion of who he is. I wanted to just think about how Emerson could be alive for someone. His was a force that really changed people.

It strikes me that *Every Past Thing* is about Mary learning to come to live in the present by finding a way to put the past to rest after all those years of wild grief over the death of her daughter, which has really done a number on her marriage to Edwin and on every part of her life. Does it strike you as ironic that Mary has, in the ten years since Effie's death, effectively been deaf to the central message of Emerson, which you use as the epigraph of the novel -- "The sun shines today also," and why would we dress the present in the masquerade of the past? Isn't that what Mary has been doing in her grief?

I would read it slightly differently than that. When I think of Mary as a character, one image especially comes to mind, which I find so Emersonian. It's her quality of saying Yes, and her thinking of herself as the girl who answers the knock at the window. I am thinking about the kind of people who radically accept what they're given. They are always compelling people who do this and I did see Mary as a compelling figure in this way. There's all sorts of unflattering ways of looking at it, like she's willing to climb out her window to meet whatever man shows up out there, and you can just say it like that. But what happens to that person when what comes is their daughter dying? Where would you live and how would you live and wouldn't you perhaps really think about another world the way she does and really think about how the dead can live? I think that that's part of her interest in Emerson, this feeling that she can feel that Emerson is with her and so she can feel that Effie is with her. And is that really living in the past? Those were some of the things I was thinking about.

There are any number of marriages in this book and the portrait that's given of marriage is, shall we say, problematic. Does this reflect your own point of view about marriage, or was there something you were trying to work through in using marriage as a kind of metaphor?

You know, I never really wanted to get married, and there was always something that I suppose troubled me about the idea of marriage. But I think its not just marriage, its how you have a relationship with any person who matters, over time. How you can be intimate, really intimate for a long period of time. So *Every Past Thing* is about mothers and daughters and sisters and brothers and brothers and brothers as well.

And like marriages within marriages? Mary and Samuel have a past, and there's always the unspoken – Secrets! Mary says secrets are our only solidity, that the unspoken is a web that holds us in place, and she asks the question, "Are secrets the frame we build our lives upon?" A marriage is supposed to mean a coming together and instead, the picture of marriage and relationships in general in this novel is the fact that we can't ever know each other, that we remain strangers.

Well I don't feel so pessimistic about marriage, thanks to my husband. But maybe I did for a very long time. I think there are different kinds of marriages and I'm writing about a different period of time. The historical burden of what marriage has meant for women is acute, and I think still plays out in the conversations on the playground with other mothers. There's complaint that is sort of ancient. But I think it's not that exciting to talk about, compared to secrets being the essential nature of human beings. I did want to think about how people are alone, and how people preserve their aloneness, and that does have to do with secrets. And major life changing secrets or tiny ones, whenever those things are said then actually the frame, the stiffness of whatever was happening kind of crumbles. So secrets do give us the illusion of solidity, I think.

You said some place that your interest as a writer is in rendering consciousness. Could you expand on that?

It seems to me that the place of the novel now lies in doing things that other forms can't do so well. The thing that film does so magnificently is dialogue and action. Why do dialogue and action when you could make a film if that's what you want to do. Which is not to say that *Every Past Thing* is devoid of either dialogue or action, but they are not the central moving things of the book.

You've also got characters that you can't know that way in this book. Were you interested in that, too? In placing them off against the other?

One thing that I really knew always in writing the novel is that we'd never know anything from Samuel's consciousness. Samuel's a key figure for both Edwin and Mary—in their marriage, in their lives, and we can't have what they can't have, either. I also knew that we wouldn't have Nellie's point of view, that it would be understood to be beyond Mary and beyond Edwin, and that would be the nature of the pain about those relationships. I sometimes thought of the other novel it would be if it were Nellie's book because of course she could have a novel, and that would be maybe more interesting to me than Samuel's point of view.

If someone were to say to you that *Every Past Thing* is a novel about the very *saidness* of the unsaid, what would be your response to that?

What I think about when I try to answer this question is actually the story of what happened to Mary's writing, versus the story of what happened in my writing this novel. To me, it felt like a huge drama that Mary was trying to write this Green Book and that she had an idea about setting out to write something that she hadn't managed to write before, but it's not at all clear what it is going to be. Is it what she'll say about what she learned from her grief? Is it a family history? It's not quite clear. As I was writing the book I felt early on that her progress would parallel mine and that I would learn in writing the novel what she learned in writing the Green Book and that those voices would somehow be mixed together. At a very liberating moment I realized that Samuel was right about Mary, that in fact she couldn't actually finish the Green Book, and that she's not precisely a writer but is more like Samuel in that more of her art in the world has to do with conversation and thinking aloud and doing things, also. She really makes things, and that's more who she is.

Like Edwin! Isn't that ironic? The only way he could say his grief and his love for her is to create this painting, and what does he say when he presents it to her?

I've done the best I could.

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And does that mean he's apologizing somehow to Mary for his failure to respond adequately to her grief, or does it mean that this painting, Mary, is the best I could do to tell you my love for you, and our shared grief?

I really feel that sentence of his is the kind of artist's statement at the end of finishing anything. I've done what I could and at the same time I see its failure, see the glimmer still of what I wished that it could have been, which in this case is the fundamental wish that it could bring Effie back. You know it's an impossible wish, but you've done the best you could. I think it's a sentence that allows the next thing to happen, and I think that what Mary's looking for is the ability to say that. It's a different kind of thing, it's not the same as making a painting, but the way she's present at the rally or the way she's present that night to what follows at Schwab's -- for her it's I'm here and actually fully trying to enact the things I know.

And for Mary it's like writing something is to end it. It's gone. If she writes down everything about Jimmie Roberts, then he's out of her mind and he's gone to those words on the page. Am I reading that right?

I think that's absolutely true and goes back to what we were saying earlier about if a secret is spoken it's not something rigid and holding, it's not a frame anymore, it's not holding anything in place. So the change comes, or the new thing comes. There is drama for me in what Mary does discover in writing, which is maybe the thing she needs to discover during that week -- that she needs to say what happened with Jimmie Roberts.

So that she can live in the present, so she can enjoy Frank and Susanna for who and what they are and take pleasure in meeting this wonderful, beautiful young woman who is the same age that Effie would be had she lived and to find a sense of renewal and continuity there. That she's finally able to pick up life where it is, after being frozen in her grief for so long.

I think she's opening the window.

-- Interview conducted by Kay Callison

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Questions for Discussion

1. What was your immediate response to this novel? Is there anything in your personal experience or of anyone you know that is similar to what happens in the novel, such as the death of a child, or staying in a bad marriage? Or families with secrets? If so, how did that affect your reading of the novel?
2. How would you describe the tone of the novel? How would you describe the painting that is reproduced on the cover of the novel? Can you see how it might inspire someone to write a novel about it?
3. Think about the setting, or settings, of the novel. What do you think Thompson was trying to do in taking “country folk” into “The Big City?” What is it about Edwin that makes him so unhappy with New York City, and why is Mary so “in her element” there?
4. How would you describe this novel to someone who asks you what the book is about? What do you think happens to Mary on the “inside” during the course of the narrative?
5. Although Thompson doesn’t use this exact phrase, she apparently is committed to the validity of what we might call the life of the mind, or of the imagination, as a way of seeing the world. How would you describe the relationship between Life and Art as it is portrayed in this novel? What do **you** think Edwin meant when he said “I’ve done the best I could,” when he presented “Mourning Picture” to Mary? Are there other scenes, or moments, in the novel that can be interpreted more than one way?
6. How do you evaluate Thompson’s sense and sweep of history in this novel?
7. Thompson says that she felt compelled to stay true to the actual facts of the frame of Mary and Edwin’s lives. Given the story she created out of the bare facts of their lives, does Thompson’s choice to have Mary go back to Massachusetts with Edwin ring true for you?
8. How would you describe the portrait of family life and marriage as presented in this novel? How would you describe Mary and Edwin’s relationship? What do you think a marriage between Mary and Samuel would be like? If Thompson is using marriage as a metaphor for something larger, what do you think that would be, and why?
9. To what extent is this novel Edwin’s story, as opposed to Mary’s story? How do the two stories – Mary’s and Edwin’s – complement each other?
10. Think about what Thompson says about what the novel can do that film cannot. Imagine that you want to create a movie based on this novel. What problems would you encounter?
11. Can you think of a novel you really enjoyed that was turned into a not so good, or really bad, movie? What do you think the problem was in that case? Can you think of a novel you really enjoyed that was successfully filmed? Why do you think it translated well from the page to the screen?

Recommended Reading

Lost Son, by Mark Cunningham

“*Experience*,” and “*Nature*,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson (essays)

“Threnody,” “Bacchus,” “Give All to Love,” and “Days,” by Ralph Waldo Emerson (poems)

Portrait of a Lady, by Henry James

Housekeeping, by Marilynne Robinson

Brookland, by Emily Barton

The Hours, by Michael Cunningham

To the Lighthouse, by Virginia Wolff

Miss Macintosh, My Darling, by Marguerite Young

Reds, a film by Warren Beatty