

## *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*

Reviewed by Aliya Rensch (Literary Arts 2025)

I read *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* by Italo Calvino over the span of a month for class. It absolutely enthralled me, but it was also one of the hardest books I've ever read. This book is hard to do justice in a review because it's such a masterpiece. It's something that would be better read without any outside opinions, but if you just want to hear me review it, let's go.

*On a Winter's Night a Traveler* starts by dropping you into the book. Literally, *you*. The plot of the book starts as follows: you are on your way to buy a book. When you start reading the book, you realize that it just stops after the first chapter. You go back to that bookstore, where you meet Ludmilla. You and Ludmilla go on a wild goose chase to get to the bottom of this all throughout the book, and you two end the book off by falling in love. Now, when phrased like this, it doesn't sound all that interesting. Or maybe it does, I don't know. But it's not the plot that intrigues me, it's the way it's written.

The book actively tries to confuse you with switching perspectives, withholding information, and pointing you to dead ends. The confusion integrates you into the story. The book switches perspectives often, going from second person to third to first. It happens when you, as the main character, read different books inside of this book. It's all very meta and confusing to explain. Which is what it's trying to do! It wants to make you think about what's happening in the story. Calvino puts so many small details that you would miss if you weren't paying attention, like little hidden moments in the books you read. It rewards actually *reading* the book, as opposed to just skimming it. Which

can be hard sometimes due to Calvino's way of writing, but so worth it. I took a lot of breaks in this book, so don't feel bad if you do too!

It's almost like the book doesn't want you to focus on the plot so much as it wants you to focus on the messages and the writing. Calvino wants you to experience it just as much as he wants you to learn from it. Which is kind of a message in the book. We humans have been getting progressively more and more automated. Which isn't a bad thing! But with automation comes laziness. This entire book has the theme that growing technology makes people not want to do things that require work. I think it's even more prevalent now than it was in 1979, when the book was published. In the book everyone was choosing a language class that they could argue in instead of learning the language. It also talks about how books are becoming more mainstream, in the sense that the originality and wonder of books are dying out.

This book had the opposite effect for me. Instead of being just another bland read I was forced to do for class, it was genuinely interesting. It made me think outside of the box of what a book "should" be. Before reading this, I thought a book had to have only one perspective. And nobody used second person if they wanted a successful book. I was baffled that this book not only used both of them, but used them so well. Calvino takes a postmodern approach to this book (and "books" as a whole); he acknowledges the rules while simultaneously breaking them. It's one of the most profound things I've ever read.

That's not to say it didn't have its cons! I reread so much of this book. The writing blends together and it all becomes a blur in some spots, due to the confusingness and absurdity of what is happening in the story. And some of it is just deathly boring. Every once in a while I debated just giving up and getting a zero on this project. That may be due to my lack of motivation, but the book didn't help in any way. Don't get me

wrong, I love this book, but it is a consuming read. I was getting headaches whenever I tried to read it. This could be because I always did it right before bed, but it's a read you need to be fully engrossed in which can be hard to read. In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have read this for an assignment and instead read it at my own pace.

My absolute favorite chapter was the first book, with the same title of the actual book, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. It had this misty feeling over it, and because it was the first book chapter, I had no clue what was happening. It had a quote that I love, that I'm going to share now. "I think of thousands of cities like this, of hundreds of thousands of lighted places where at this hour people allow the evening's darkness to descent and have none of the thoughts in their head that I have in mine; and maybe they have other thoughts that aren't at all enviable, but at this moment I would be willing to trade with any one of them." It captured how I was feeling at the time, and it's just such a beautiful quote. If that doesn't convince you to read this book, I don't know what will.

All in all, *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* is fantastic! I really recommend this book, even with its headache-inducing flaws. It changed my perspective on literature, which I can't say a book has done in a while. I hope you get a chance to read it, or something that sparks the same passion feeling I had while reading.