



## Tomato Girl

*Jayne Pupek*

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For eleven-year-old Ellie Sanders, her father has always been the rock that she could cling to when her mother's emotional troubles became too frightening. But when he comes under the thrall of the pretty teenager who raises vegetables and tomatoes for sale at the general store that he runs, Ellie sees her security slowly slipping away. Now she must be witness and warden to her mother's gradual slide into madness.

Told from Ellie's point of view, *Tomato Girl* takes the reader into the soul of a terrified young girl clinging desperately to childhood while being forced into adulthood years before she is ready. To save herself, she creates a secret world, a place in which her mother gets well, her father returns to being the man he was, and the Tomato Girl is banished forever. *Tomato Girl* marks the debut of a gifted and promising new author who has written a timeless Southern novel.

## **Tomato Girl Details**

Date : Published August 26th 2008 by Algonquin Books (first published 2008)

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Author : Jayne Pupek

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## From Reader Review Tomato Girl for online ebook

### Elyse Walters says

Update: Kindle \$1.99 special today. I thought I would share how great this book is... just on sale today. This is the only book the author wrote because she passed away after she wrote it. It's wonderful and worth \$1.99.

I paid more when LisaVegan recommended it to me.

**THIS IS THE BEST BEST BEST BOOK!!!!**

"There are times when words won't make a bad thing better. Those are the saddest times."

READERS WILL LOVED \*Ellie\*. She's 11 years old. We are thankful that she learned about "chalk doors". All children should learn about "Chalk Doors".....

I'll say no more....other than DO NOT MISS THIS NOVEL!!!!

Kudos to the author Jayne Pupek! Brilliant writing! - emotions were on fire!

HIGHLY-HIGHLY RECOMMENDED.....with my friend \*Lisa\* to THANK.....  
....who recommended it to me!

Huge hugs of love to my friends!!!! This book is SOOOOO WONDERFUL!!!

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### Jessie says

There is so much to say about this book but I'll start with DROP EVERYTHING YOU ARE DOING RIGHT NOW AND GO READ THIS BOOK! This book is sad, endearing, emotional, and the characters are ones that you will grow attached to quickly and easily.

11 year old Ellie has so much to deal with, her mama who keeps a dead baby in a jar, her daddy who loves the tomato girl, and all of the secrets she has to keep in order to keep the peace at home and keep up appearances to the people who know her outside her home.

I'm incredibly drawn to Ellie and the way that she deals with the heavy burdens she is given. The story is so intense and raw, and the writing style is simplistic and complex all at once, as it is written from Ellie's point of view so the metaphors are all things that you would relate to as a child but maybe not think of first as an adult.

If you don't take something away from this book, there is something wrong with your soul.

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### Michelle says

Jayne Pupek is a wonderfully descriptive writer. I'd read anything else she wrote. This was such a good book, hard really to describe how the story makes you feel, it's so intense. I think what struck me the most,

besides how very, very accurate her portrayal of an abused little girl feelings were, was that her characters were so real, so human. She captured so perfectly what it's like for a child, to so desperately love someone, even when they're making her suffer so much. And the bargaining with God, the belief that it's her own fault. So many things that show such true insight. Jayne, I bet you were a hell of a social worker. You sure are a hell of a writer.

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### **Ann says**

The voice that greets me in Tomato Girl is so rich and authentic that I am not surprised to find that the author is a native of Virginia. Jayne Pupek is a poet (*Forms of Intercession*) and author, whose writing has appeared in many literary journals. My first thought upon finishing her debut novel was, "How can I ever read another book again?" My second thought: "How can I write a review of this book? What words could I put on paper that would come close to expressing the emotional impact that resonates in the pages?"

Have you ever picked up a book, read the first few pages, and knew this was a book that you wanted to stretch out as long as possible, savoring not only the story but the language? Tomato Girl is one of those novels. The reader will experience the urge to rush ahead and find out what happens, but don't give in to this urge. Tomato Girl is like a fine, aged wine, or maybe a better comparison is a cold bottle of root beer, pulled out of the cooler that sits on the front porch of the General Store.

The story begins in Granby, Virginia in 1969. Ellie narrates the story from a first person point of view. This allows the reader a front row seat to the events taking place. The voice of Ellie is that of a typical 11-year-old girl, who loves spending time at her daddy's General Story, where she makes herself useful. It's the complete dedication to and love for her father, Rupert Sanders, that captures my heart. He is the solid foundation in her life. Her mother, Julia, dips in and out of moods that confuse Ellie, but that also reveal fierce love and loyalty. Ellie understands she has two mothers - the sad one and the happy one - with only a fine line separating the two.

Ellie follows her father's lead in managing Julia's mood swings. Even though she questions his methods, she finds a way to justify them in her mind. Soon her fragile excuses come crashing down around her when she sees her father is consumed with lust for the Tomato Girl, a pretty young teenager, who comes to take care of Julia after an accident. Pupek writes with such compassion that even the worst characters in this book are understood.

In so many ways this simplistic yet intricate cast of characters captures a time in history when so many were removing their rose-colored glasses, and for the first time, actually seeing the lives they inhabited. The town becomes a living breathing place. Ellie, Clara, Julia, and even Tess are not merely characters, but close friends. I long to know what happens to Ellie when she's grown, what will happen after I finish the last page.

Tomato Girl has the potential to become a best seller, if given the proper exposure. Just one other novel has touched me in the same way as Tomato Girl, a novel that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1962: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I do not make the comparison lightly. I can't begin to praise the author's language enough. She writes:

"Although it was dark, a street lamp shone bright enough for me to see the small clusters of blooms. I heard a cooing sound, then saw small gray wings flutter in the middle of the bush. When I reached out to touch the bird, she flew away. As she lifted into the sky, I held my hands up to try and grab her. Her wings beat faster,

and she flew out of reach. She called out once more, and then, a single pale feather floated into my hands."

Readers, you must buy this book. It is a novel that you will read more than once and keep on your shelves as a classic.

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### **Lolly K Dandeneau says**

\*\*\*\*\*UPDATE Where was I when Jayne died in 2010? I just found out and feel really sad. She was such a wonderful writer, and even replied to me kindly. I hadn't realized, I was searching to see if she had written anything new. I am really sad. This has been a throw away day.

Wow, I did not expect this story to turn into what it did. I found it gruesome and tender. I longed to climb into the book and rescue Ellie, to pull her out of the derangement surrounding her mother and away from the selfishness of her father. Pupek humanized the 'other woman' (the tomato girl) so well that while wanting to hate her, I had to feel sorry for her instead. Ellie's mother's madness breaks your heart throughout and having seen madness in my life I think Jayne Pupek did a fantastic job writing about it.

I especially loved the spiritual magic sprinkled in with the character Clara as well as the racism that she slipped in. I thought this would be a sweet chick lit read but I was wrong. Tomato Girl is an engrossing read for men and women alike. It is one of the saddest books I have read in a long time, and I cannot wait to be 'unsettled' and 'deeply touched' again by this gifted writer!

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### **Jayne says**

COS Productions has made a video/book trailer for Tomato Girl. Please take a look on my GoodReads Profile or go to YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-foLb...>

Thanks!

Jayne

Disclaimer: I'm partial to this book because I wrote it.

People who enjoy stories in the Southern Gothic tradition will likely enjoy "Tomato Girl." The book will be released later this month, but is available now for pre-order at Amazon, B&N, and Powells. Many thanks to those of you who have already added it to your 'to read' lists.

Review by Beth E. Andersen - Library Journal

The wonder of it all is that Ellie Sanders was able to maintain her charming, tenderhearted outlook for the first 11 years of her life. She and Rupert, her strong, protective father, have their hands full managing her mother Julia's wild bipolar mood swings. Then Rupert brings home Tess, the beautiful, epileptic 18 year old who provides tomato plants to Rupert's store. Pregnant Julia has fallen down the basement stairs, and Tess is

there to care for the family. Then every kid's worst fear becomes Ellie's reality. She struggles mightily to manage the kind of cruel confusion caused by parents who force their children to cover for their mistakes. Rupert loses the battle of decency, succumbing to the unique idiocy of blinding infatuation, leaving Ellie alone with her mother while he flees the law with Tess. Only the loving kindness of an elderly black couple saves Ellie from the ensuing cascade of tragedies, a salvation complicated by the racial divide in Ellie's Southern community. Pupek's debut is a wrenching, stunning, and pitch-perfect novel that captures the best of Southern literature's finest storytelling colors. Highly recommended.

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### **Kirsten says**

Jayne Pupek can write! *Tomato Girl* is a beautiful novel related by an eleven-year old narrator, Ellie, whom I loved from the moment she admitted "I can't tell them about Mama's moods, or how she keeps Baby Tom in a jar." I was captivated by her story, and so curious to learn it that I had trouble setting the novel down.

Though young, Ellie is a perceptive narrator, and I enjoyed meeting the adults in the book through her eyes. I saw how and why she adored her father, though his actions were irresponsible, sometimes cruel, and sometimes criminal. Her mother suffers from madness, and as I watched her condition deteriorate through her daughter's eyes, I felt my concern intensify into something approaching terror. Ellie is a child forced to shoulder burdens that even an adult—and especially the adults in the story--have trouble carrying. I couldn't help but feel compassion for her. I wanted things to work out for her; I was completely sucked into her world.

The story is very dark at times, but the book remains hopeful, often because Ellie brings a light to the events through her unwavering love for her family and her childish innocence. The characters are complex, the setting well described, the voice one you will not likely forget. *Tomato Girl* is a wonderful debut novel by a writer who knows her craft. I'm already looking forward to Pupek's next book.

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### **Zinta says**

"I'm the girl they found standing on the table. The girl who traced the cracks in the wall with her mother's blood."

How we hope little Ellie will come through the dark places of her 11 years of life whole again, as whole as one might expect from the insanity she has survived. We want to believe. Throughout the entire novel, "Tomato Girl," author Jayne Pupek's first, we have been holding our breath with that hope. A former social worker, Pupek has, after all, described this little girl and the wrenching abuse surrounding her at every turn to such effect that we feel almost as if we share that life.

It is a deeply uncomfortable place to be. But Pupek has not meant us to be comfortable. Far from it. We have only that shred of hope that in the very first page, we are invited to read the notebook in which Ellie writes as a form of therapy. That means—Ellie has survived long enough to even get to therapy. Even as she sits in the cellar writing among the glass jars of pickled tomatoes, some of which begin quite eerily to look like the face

of a pickled fetus.

One of those pickled objects had been. Baby Tom, her stillborn brother, had been in one of those jars because his mother, Ellie's mother, couldn't bear to part with him. And if that was not unbearable enough, consider scenes of a mother gone mad with some inner torment, taunted by a husband who is not only sleeping with a teenage girl, not so very much older than Ellie, but has even brought that girl into their home. To live. With him. Moving out of his marital bed into the sewing room. One can feel the palpable madness swirling off the written page like an evil vapor. Oh, the torments we inflict one upon the other ...

Ellie observes all of this with the hopeful heart and naïve eyes of a young girl. Since the book is written in first-person narrative, we sense far more quickly than Ellie does exactly what it is that she is seeing. There's a *Lolita* thing going on here. A brewing pedophilia. A middle-aged man sinking into perversion and temptation, leaving despair and madness in his wake. Ellie can only wonder why Daddy talks so long at the hardware store, where he is a long-time clerk, with the "tomato girl," who brings her crops of reddened, plump fruit to sell. Ellie sees the way Daddy's eyes linger overlong. That he sometimes touches the girl. That the girl touches him, and then, Ellie glimpses a quick kiss, and she struggles to understand. Tess, the tomato girl, comes from an abusive home, too. Daddy later tries to explain away his growing obsession with the primping teen girl—a cute blonde with too much make-up and earrings that dangle to her bare shoulders, snapping gum and paging through women's magazines, oh so teen—by telling Ellie he is taking Tess in to save her from her abusive father. As if he were somehow saving one girl from an abusive father while inflicting it upon his own daughter. Oh, the power of rationalization ...

Tess has occasional epileptic seizures, and while she is so incapacitated, her father has indeed taken, shall we say, advantage. Pupek develops here with expertise the mind games men play when they want their piece of female flesh. Tess's father manages to tell himself he has the right, she's his girl. Ellie's father manages to paint himself a hero in his own eyes, bringing the teen into his own bed, under his own roof, insisting upon the compassion of his wife and young daughter. While his wife spirals into a demented and suicidal state—she can't be fooled—Ellie, like most any child, dotes on her father and works and works to please him, to remain in the circle of his wandering eye, daily forgiving him, even as her understanding grows. She needs to forgive him. For her own sanity. This is her Daddy. And he does, after all, keep telling her how he loves her. How he needs her to be good. To be kind to sweet Tess. And the boundaries continue to be pushed farther and farther.

As such scenarios must, they eventually end in a splash of unspeakable suffering and an explosion of violence. There is a murder, there is a suicide, there is more than one emotional breakdown, and there is, in the center of it all, little Ellie, trying desperately to hold an unraveling world together. No one survives intact. By conclusion, the reader is exhausted with emotion, sighing with relief at one's own saner world, but the realization remains: such things happen. Every day. In more and more homes, and perhaps even in the one next door. As our family protective services agencies are near bursting with cases of abuse, too many still going unreported, and domestic violence is on the increase, and values fall by the wayside in how we treat those in our primary relationships in pursuit of baser pleasures ... the story of Ellie and Tess, the tomato girl, may grow as common as tomatoes.

Pupek, also a published poet, has made a worthy contribution with her first novel. Not only as a literary accomplishment, but also a social one.

~Zinta Aistars for The Smoking Poet, Fall 2008

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## **Craig says**

Wow! This is some dark, dark stuff. When I first picked up the book, judging (of course) by the cover and the jacket blurb, I think I was expecting a light, semi-comedic, Joshlyn Jackson type, small rural town novel.

This. is. not. that. book.

Poor Ellie, is dealing with an unstable mother (trying to keep her out of an institution), manipulating, yet loving father (trying to keep him out of jail) who's diddling an abused teenager (with daddy issues), all the while trying to keep her home in order, not to mention all the normal ups and downs of pre-adolescence.

While at times, Ellie loses some of her rationality and reason, (let's face it, who wouldn't), we never stop being on her side.

Pupek has a strong sense, though, of small-town justice and insularity(?)--the desire of those who live in small towns to deal with problems in their own time and means. This is done without much judgement.

Very interesting book, Ms. Pupek. It kept me up to the wee hours of the morning last night.

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## **Shelby \*trains flying monkeys\* says**

I really cared about Ellie (the child in this book) She had so much to deal with and she still was a good kid. She handled mental illness, her dad cheating in the same house as her mom and death of a beloved pet with grace. Good southern book.

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## **GUD Magazine says**

Tomato Girl is a fairly standard coming-of-age story, occasionally daring in some aspects, but, on the whole, rather mediocre. It covers territory that many such stories do -- parental sex and infidelity, insanity, viewpoint-character bad behavior -- but delves into them more deeply and disturbingly than a lot of adult novels about preteen girls would dare or care to, usually without losing its sense of realism.

But it's that 'usually' that makes all the difference; Tomato Girl is a thoroughly almost-good novel. On so many levels, it reaches for and almost achieves something special, but falls just short. The experience of reading this author's first published novel was, in fact, rather like watching someone play a sport they're just good enough at to have gotten onto the team; you can see so many ways they could fail, but they succeed just often enough that you still get the feeling of having your hopes dashed when they flub it. And unfortunately, being able to see the author's process so easily kept me from really getting absorbed in what might otherwise have been quite a captivating novel.

The novel begins with a prologue from the point of view of the narrator, Ellie, as an adult, then jumps in near the end of the main story arc for the first chapter, then begins at the beginning in the second chapter. I assume this time-layering and difficult, stuttery distance is supposed to give us a feeling of what it must be like to be an early-middle-aged woman trying to face the events of a traumatic childhood, but it is not skillfully enough done, and merely serves to make the book difficult to get into. Likewise, I can see why the

author chose to tell the reader nearly everything that's going to happen in the story in that first chapter (Ellie's father will fall in love with a teenage tomato-grower, get sick of dealing with Ellie's crazy mother, run away with the tomato girl under unpleasant circumstances, and leave Ellie to deal with the increasingly out-of-control mother (who keeps a baby in a jar) on her own, with emotional support only from an elderly psychic with the wrong color skin) -- it gives us a sense of the narrator and her direct matter-of-factness, and a proper feeling of impending doom -- and, done right, I could see it working very well. But in this case, it merely serves to rob the book of suspense and make any foreshadowing that happens later seem irrelevant. All in all, there are just too many amateurish mistakes for the author to get away with the out-of-the-ordinary structural and dramatic choices that ought to have made this novel special and memorable.

However, there are enough good things about it to make it worth reading if you're into emotional twistiness. The narrative is reasonably evocative, if a bit repetitive, the setting is thorough, and the characters have some depth and grab. Tess, the tomato girl, is interestingly portrayed and recognizable -- even if you don't really want to recognize her -- and the narrator's unusually-but-humanly flawed parents and friend(s) make a good supporting cast. (In fact, I found Ellie to be the weakest character, though I assume she is meant to be the strongest.) Those supporting characters, along with some memorable, emotionally-charged images, are the novel's strongest points.

[Reviewed for GUD Magazine by Julia Bernd.]

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### **Alice Osborn says**

Jayne Pupek's "Tomato Girl" was a book I couldn't put down. Well-paced, funny, and authentic with vulnerable and memorable characters, Pupek throws the proverbial rocks at her protagonist, 11-year-old Ellie Sanders throughout the book -- Ellie's troubles never seem to relent, except when she lets them go at the end. Beginning in a circular fashion with her mentally ill mother("a lily caught in a hurricane was how Daddy described Mama. If we calmed the winds around her, she would be fine") having a breakdown at the outdoor food market in town, Ellie recounts the events that led to her father leaving the family with "The Tomato Girl" a 17-year-old, fragile epileptic incest survivor. Then Pupek rushes furiously to the end where Ellie is taken into foster care and is told to let go of her troubles by Clara, a clairvoyant who saves Ellie's spiritual soul.

The heart of the book takes place during Holy Week. Ellie's pregnant mother, Julia, falls down the cellar steps trying to retrieve an onion (Ellie believes this is her fault because she wanted to rush to her dad's store and pick out a new Easter chick instead of getting her mother that onion). Rupert Sanders manages the general store in town and has gotten close to Tess, the tomato girl, who sells him her produce. After Julia falls, Rupert has Tess come home with him (to help out his wife), which leads to tragedy for everyone involved. Ellie is now caught in the hurricane of her father's creation, as she struggles to help her mother, compete for her father's love with Tess, and witness her mother attack Tess and her father, both verbally and physically. She manages to hold on because of her two constants: Jellybean her baby chick and Mary Roberts, her know-it-all best friend, but these two don't remain by her side as the narrative unfolds.

I loved how Pupek named all of her chapters: "Market Day," "Bad Letters," "Spoon," "The Gun," which allowed some clever foreshadowing. Pupek is also a poet and her taut verbal skills shine throughout the novel, especially when she uses analogies ("She (Julia) buys cabbages as twisted as a man's fist. Red radishes the size of a doll's heart.") without ever going overboard. Her images are grounded in the real world so I always could picture myself in the scene with smells, tastes and texture.

"Tomato Girl" is sad, yet hopeful and is the book that should have been "The Secret Life of Bees". It's one of the best books I've read all year and I'm rooting for it to be a big hit. I'm writing a much longer review on "Tomato Girl" for The Pedestal Magazine's August issue, please stay tuned.

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### **Diane says**

I have been avoiding writing a review about the book Tomato Girl, by Jayne Pupek, because that would mean it was time for me to move on to something else. I did not want to move on. I love loved loved this book! I read it once (in one day), but then the following day I went back and placed sticky notes on at least 10 pages, so that I could reread some of the haunting passages again, and keep them for the future.

Tomato Girl is about Ellie Sanders, an 11-year old girl growing up in a dysfunctional family. It is not an easy read, but I found myself anxiously waiting to turn each page. It is a heartbreak account of mental illness and how it can tear apart a family. The prologue is only one page, and yet it made my jaw drop open.

FROM THE PROLOGUE.....Jars line my cellar shelves. Some are filled with fists of yellow-veined tomatoes. Others hold small onions and chopped leeks, white pearl onions floating in an opaque sea. Sometimes the light falls on a jar of boiled quail or the slick dark meat of a rabbit. There are unexpected moments when I see the slit of an infant's mouth, or the curl of a tiny fist behind the glass, and I run up the steps, back into the open light of sky.....I need to tell what I remember, I need to tell the story of a girl whose world unraveled like a torn scarf.....

What I loved best about this book (well there are so many things to love), but especially that the story is told through 11-year old Ellie's eyes, and how she views the world she lives in. There are loads of clues the reader will pick up on, but naive Ellie does not (at least not initially). Ellie is so genuine; you just want to sweep her away .....off to a normal childhood as she is faced with far too many difficult adult issues. The novel takes place in 1969 in a fictional town in Virginia, so there is a whole racial element to the story as well.

I thought it was brilliant how the heart of the story takes place during Easter week. There is a part when Ellie thinks about her "God Promises"....so touching. There are so many beautiful passages and analogies in this book. I do not want to quote any more as I don't want to spoil it for others.

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I have read over 100 books in 2008 and this is my favorite so far. It is an amazing debut novel. I look forward to more books by this talented author. PLEASE read this book; it is one book that will resonate long after the final page has been turned.

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### **Staci says**

just picked this up from my local library, really looking forward to this read!

O.K. I sat outside all afternoon and read this book. I couldn't stop!! But Jayne, I'm mad!! Oh, how could you make Ellie's world so horrible!!? There are so few good people in Ellie's life. You made me totally hate Rupert! I wanted to knock his lights out....and Tess...omg...I don't want to go there. No wonder Ellie's mom

was CRAZY!! I heard Ellie in my head, her voice comes out strong and clear. You can't help but love this little kid. Great book Jayne!! Bravo!

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### **Lisa Vegan says**

This is a wonderful novel. It's reminiscent of other Southern coming of age novels such as *Bastard Out of Carolina*, but it's definitely original. The writing was excellent and there are many beautifully written passages, and the tale is so vivid that as I read I was easily wrapped up in Ellie's life.

This is in the end a hopeful story, but it's a very emotionally wrenching book to read. Abandonment is a central theme. Even though the protagonist is eleven, this book is very dark and I would never recommend this book to anyone under the age of twelve, and many readers might argue that this book is for adults and possibly older young adults only.

To me, Ellie sometimes seemed too mature/worldly and sometimes too immature/naïve for an eleven year old, but given her brutal life situation, having those contrasting aspects to her character makes perfect sense.

The story details show psychological astuteness, and they confirmed my belief that most children (and adults) can get through the most unbelievably horrifying circumstances if adequate support is available. The story is told first person by eleven year old Ellie, and she is terrific and worth rooting for. Most of the characters are tremendously interesting, whether they are sympathetic characters or those depicted as less likeable.

On a side note: I got an upside down library copy of this book, something I'd never seen before. In order to read it I had to look at the back cover upside down and start from there. I guess the cover was upside down during the book assembly process. I never got used to it and always opened the book to upside down text first. But I'm easily entertained and enjoyed the anomaly.

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