

The Need to Read

Notebook: Articles To Read

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The Need to Read

Reading books remains one of the best ways to engage with the world, become a better person and understand life's questions, big and small



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We all ask each other a lot of questions. But we should all ask one question a lot more often: "What are you reading?"

It's a simple question but a powerful one, and it can change lives.

Here's one example: I met, at a bookstore, a woman who told me that she had fallen sadly out of touch with her beloved grandson. She lived in Florida. He and his parents lived elsewhere. She would call him and ask him about school or about his day. He would respond in one-word answers: Fine. Nothing. Nope.

And then one day, she asked him what he was reading. He had just started "The Hunger Games," a series of dystopian young-adult novels by Suzanne Collins. The grandmother decided to read the first volume so that she could talk about it with her grandson the next time they chatted on the phone. She didn't know what to expect, but she found herself hooked from the first pages, in which Katniss Everdeen volunteers to take her younger sister's place in the annual battle-to-the-death among a select group of teens.

The book helped this grandmother cut through the superficialities of phone chat and engage her grandson on the most important questions that humans face about survival and destruction and loyalty and betrayal and good and evil, and about politics as well. Now her grandson couldn't wait to talk to her when she called—to tell her where he was, to find out where she was and to speculate about what would happen next.

Other than belonging to the same family, they had never had much in common. Now they did. The conduit was reading.

We need to read and to be readers now more than ever.

We overschedule our days and complain constantly about being too busy. We shop endlessly for stuff we don't need and then feel oppressed by the clutter that surrounds us. We rarely sleep well or enough. We compare our bodies to the artificial ones we see in magazines and our lives to the exaggerated ones we see on television. We watch cooking shows and then eat fast food. We worry ourselves sick and join gyms we don't visit. We keep up with hundreds of acquaintances but rarely see our best friends. We bombard ourselves with video clips and emails and instant messages. We even interrupt our interruptions.

And at the heart of it, for so many, is fear—fear that we are missing out on something. Wherever we are, someone somewhere is doing or seeing or eating or listening to something better.

I'm eager to escape from this way of living. And if enough of us escape, the world will be better for it.

Connectivity is one of the great blessings of the internet era, and it makes extraordinary things possible. But constant connectivity can be a curse, encouraging the lesser angels of our nature. None of the nine Muses of classical times bore the names Impatience or Distraction.

The City Lights bookstore in San Francisco. Photo: Getty Images/Lonely Planet Images

Books are uniquely suited to helping us change our relationship to the rhythms and habits of daily life in this world of endless connectivity. We can't interrupt books; we can only interrupt ourselves while reading them. They are the expression of an individual or a group of individuals, not of a hive mind or collective consciousness. They speak to us, thoughtfully, one at a time. They demand our attention. And they demand that we briefly put aside our own beliefs and prejudices and listen to someone else's. You can rant against a book, scribble in the margin or even chuck it out the window. Still, you won't change the words on the page.

The technology of a book is genius: The order of the words is fixed, whether on the page or on the screen, but the speed at which you read them is entirely up to you. Sure, this allows you to skip ahead and jump around. But it also allows you to slow down, savor and ponder.

At the trial in which he would be sentenced to death, Socrates (as quoted by Plato) said that the unexamined life isn't worth living. Reading is the best way I know to learn how to examine your life. By comparing what you've done to what others have done, and your thoughts and theories and feelings to those of others, you learn about yourself and the world around you. Perhaps that is why reading is one of the few things you do alone that can make you feel less alone. It is a solitary activity that connects you to others.

So I'm on a search—and have been, I now realize, all my life—to find books to help me make sense of the world, to help me become a better person, to help me get my head around the big questions that I have and answer some of the small ones while I'm at it.

I know I'm not alone in my hunger for books to help me find the right questions to ask, and find answers to the ones that I have. I am now in my mid-50s, a classic time for introspection. But any

age is a good age for examining your life. Readers from their teens to their 90s have shared with me their desire for a list of books to help guide them.

People have always received life-guiding wisdom from certain types of nonfiction, often from “self-help” books. But all sorts of books can carry this kind of wisdom; a random sentence in a thriller will give me unexpected insight. In fact, novels and works of narrative nonfiction can do something extraordinary that most self-help books can’t: They can increase our capacity for empathy by engaging our imagination as they introduce us to new perspectives.

I also believe that, to paraphrase the Roman lawyer Pliny the Younger, no book is so bad that you can’t find anything in it of interest. You can learn something from the very worst books—even if it is just how crass and base, or boring and petty, or cruel and intolerant the human race can be.

I’m not a particularly disciplined or systematic seeker. I don’t give a great deal of thought to the books I choose—I’ll read anything that catches my eye. Most of the time, when I choose what I’m going to read, it has absolutely nothing to do with improving myself. Especially when I’m at my happiest, I’m unlikely to search for a book to make me happier. But it’s often during these periods of non-seeking that I’ve stumbled across a book that has changed my life.

Sometimes these books have changed me in relatively trivial ways at first, but then in more significant ways later. When I was 5 years old, my parents read to me E.B. White’s 1945 classic, “Stuart Little,” the story of a remarkable mouse born to a human family. The immediate effect was to make me feel that the thing in life I most desperately wanted was a pet mouse. After much pleading, I was given a gerbil for my birthday. (It soon bit me, and I was so upset that I packed a suitcase and ran away from home; I made it 50 yards before I decided to turn back).

Now, when I reflect on “Stuart Little,” I realize this extraordinary tale taught me some powerful lessons. One of them is this: Stuart’s human family doesn’t care a whit that he is a mouse. It’s a tale of radical acceptance—you can be whatever or whoever you are born to be and not risk losing your family. Every child is in some ways different from her or his parents—even if not so different as Stuart is from his.

While my parents gave me some of my earliest favorites, teachers guided me to many of the books that would shape my life.

In middle school, we read Julius Caesar’s “The Gallic War.” This was the start of my learning a great truth: History is long, and I was short. Caesar accomplished more than I ever could and had written about it in timeless works that would be read as long as people read. There was no chance I would possibly leave a mark on the globe that measured up to Caesar’s. Not a bad lesson in humility for a seventh-grader.

In high school, I read “The Odyssey.” It taught me a lesson very different to the one my teachers might have expected, yet one that was in a way a corollary to the lesson I’d learned from Caesar: that you should never be ashamed of being mediocre.

Of course, “The Odyssey” is one of the greatest works of all time. But in telling the story of a very flawed hero, it opens up a different lens on greatness. Even Odysseus himself would have had to admit that he didn’t do a terrific job getting home. Others managed to come right home after the war chronicled in “The Iliad.” It took Odysseus a decade. But he does eventually make it. Coming home was essential, and what’s important is that he managed to do it. Odysseus was superlative at many things, but getting home wasn’t one of them. He was mediocre at that.

The beauty of accepting or even embracing mediocrity is that it helps you appreciate excellence. College introduced me to some of the most astonishing books I've ever read, as it should. The experience of reading and studying and revisiting a contemporary masterpiece like Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon" reminds me how thrilling true greatness is, whether in literature or other aspects of life. At the heart of this novel is the migration of a character named Milkman Dead from north to south, the opposite of the 20th century's "Great Migration" of African-Americans from the rural south to the cities of the north and west. I will never forget the images of flight that are present throughout—flight as escape from peril and as a symbol of freedom; flight by foot and through the air. I envy anyone who has yet to read "Song of Solomon."

Entering the workforce brought me to a different kind of book. A wise mentor gave me Anne Morrow Lindbergh's "Gift From the Sea." This is a book about priorities. Unlike recent books that focus on decluttering your home, Lindbergh, who had a busy life as an adventurer, pilot, best-selling author and wife of the famous aviator, shows you how to declutter your brain and your life. "The world today does not understand, in either man or woman, the need to be alone," she wrote in 1955.

After decades of work, I've come to believe that the ability to figure out who has your back and who is plotting against you is an essential skill. Thrillers and works of suspense give us the tools we need to try to figure out whom we can trust. A recent novel, "The Girl on the Train" by Paula Hawkins, is particularly valuable. It features a possibly unreliable narrator who isn't always sure she knows whether she is telling the truth. Sometimes the person I shouldn't be trusting is myself.

Books have also helped me through the worst times in my life, and no book more so than Charles Dickens's "David Copperfield." My need to figure out a way to cope with my sadness after finishing this novel was a trial run, of sorts, for dealing with the deaths of friends. When, as a young teen, I turned the last page, I found myself sobbing because I thought that was the end of my relationship with David Copperfield, and with Steerforth, and with Little Emily, and with Dora. But I was wrong; it was just the beginning. I think of them all the time, and I talk to them, too—just as I talk to friends who have died and think about them.

Recently, I read a book that is helping me be a better friend: Hanya Yanagihara's devastating novel "A Little Life." The story follows the intertwined lives of four men from right after college until middle age. Along the way, we learn about their childhoods and discover that one of them has been the victim of horrific abuse. I don't think I've ever read a novel that had so much to say about friendship, or about the ways we can and can't help one another, or about the importance of staying present in our friends' lives no matter what.

I also turn to books to help remind me of things I know but constantly forget. "Wonder" by R.J. Palacio is a novel about a boy with a facial deformity who is going to school for the first time. It has a powerful message delivered by the school's principal. He exhorts his students to "choose kindness." Quoting J.M. Barrie, he tells them, "Shall we make a new rule of life...always to try to be a little kinder than is necessary?" An excellent maxim for fifth-graders—and the rest of us.

And then there is "Reading Lolita in Tehran," by Azar Nafisi. It is the story of a study group for women that the author led in Tehran in 1995, and it reinforced for me and for so many the power of books and literature. Ms. Nafisi writes, "In all great works of fiction, regardless of the grim reality they present, there is an affirmation of life against the transience of that life, an essential defiance. This affirmation lies in the way the author takes control of reality by retelling it in his own way, thus creating a new world. Every great work of art, I would declare pompously, is a celebration, an act of insubordination against the betrayals, horrors and infidelities of life."

Rereading this book and others, I'm reminded that reading isn't just a respite from the relentlessness of technology. It isn't just how I reset and recharge. It isn't just how I escape. It's how I engage. And reading should spur further engagement.

Books remain one of the strongest bulwarks we have against tyranny—but only as long as people are free to read all different kinds of books, and only as long as they actually do so. The right to read whatever you want whenever you want is one of the fundamental rights that helps preserve all the other rights. It's a right we need to guard with unwavering diligence. But it's also a right we can guard with pleasure. Reading isn't just a strike against narrowness, mind control and domination: It's one of the world's great joys.

Excerpted from 'Eooks for Living,' which will be published by Knopf next month. Mr. Schwaibe is also the author of "The End of Your Lite Eook Club."