

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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**I have spent the larger part of my life reading books, writing them, publishing them, and trying to persuade others, especially children, that the reading habit is far more important than brushing one's teeth, and ten thousand times more enjoyable. —Clifton Fadiman**



**Clifton Fadiman**  
(May 15, 1902 – June 20, 1999)

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## THE JOY OF READING \*

by Clifton Fadiman

One hundred—even fifty—years ago an article headed *The Joy of Reading* would have carried no note of urgency. It would have been non-argumentative, simply because no argument would have seemed necessary. Our grandparents and great-grandparents—if they were readers at all—took for granted the notion that regular reading, whether serious or trivial, carried with it a solid and important pleasure. One scholar-critic of a bygone generation, Logan Pearsall Smith, went so far as to declare roundly, “People say that life is the thing, but I prefer reading.” Who today could summon up the fervor which, over a half-century ago, impelled Christopher Morley, man-of-letters, to write: “When you sell a man a book you don’t sell him just twelve ounces of paper and ink and glue—you sell him a whole new life”?

In 1941, just about the time Western Civilization started its descent toward our present Techno barbarism, there appeared an anthology called *Reading I’ve Liked*, edited by me. In the Preface I recalled an anecdote originally told by Dr. Sandor Ferenczi, the psychoanalyst, about a Hungarian aristocrat who, while devouring a quick lunch between trains, was recognized by a boorish acquaintance.

“My dear Count! How are you?”

“Umph.”

“And how is the Countess?”

“Dead.”

“How shocking! It must be terrible for your daughter.”

“She’s dead.”

“But your son—”

“Dead! Everybody’s dead when I’m eating!”

The kind of human being the Hungarian represented is dead too, or dying.

That is why today the title of this article needs defense. One must actually make a *case* for reading, as though it were on trial. Sometimes I think it has to be defended just as breathing has to be defended. The powerful people who run our production-consumption world have combined with us, the powerless ones with our many devices that make possible so much meaningless movement. Together we have elected pollution rather than fresh air, which is to say, death rather than life. Real breathing, inhaling something better than lethal filth, has to be fought for by a few old fogies.

Similarly, real reading has to be fought for, against the pollution of the airwaves, against the mental sludge produced, at their worst, by the “media”. Does this statement seem excessive? I wonder. It was expressed more calmly by the novelist Evelyn Waugh. In his autobiography he remarks about his father: “He genuinely liked books—quite a rare taste today.”

I admit that in this case I speak as a prejudiced witness. Like most of us, I have wasted a fair portion of my life, much of it involved in getting and spending. That life is nearing its end. Now, looking back, I am certain of only two activities as not having been wasteful, that is, which have not been concerned with magnifying the glory of the God in Whom we trust—the GNP. The first is loving—whether women, family, friends, children, ideas, or the handful of human beings of the past and present whose recorded lives can lift the heart.

And the second is reading. Of these two activities I am certain. Of all the others I am doubtful.

I have been an habitual reader for over 65 years and a professional one for more than half a century. Reading has made me feel richer, more serene, less the prisoner of the transient, perhaps (though here I am less sure) even a little wiser. I don’t mean to be pompous. Much of my reading has been quite non-purposive. I still smile when I think of the student at Cambridge University who, asked by her tutor whether she had enjoyed a certain book, replied, “I don’t read to enjoy. I read to evaluate.” Whenever I can, I read to enjoy, though my trade compels me all too frequently to evaluate.

For example, during the last year the doctors have advised me to take more bed rest than I normally prefer. I've managed to make a go of it by reading scores of paperback detective stories. Pure diversion was what I was after, and got. But the diversion had to be top-level: not Mickey Spillane but Ngaio Marsh. Whatever one reads—a suspense novel by Helen MacInnis or a dialogue by Plato—let it be the best of its kind. That is the only way to avoid the let-down feeling that comes of reading trash. There is a distinction between serious books and merely diverting ones. But the real distinction lies deeper: it lies between good books and poor ones, no matter what the level of content.

It does not matter what kind of books one prefers. Dr. Johnson liked best “the biographical part of literature”. You may like novels, or (a rare taste these days) poetry, or history, or philosophy. It is not “balance” that counts, or the reading of what is fashionable, or of what is time-tested. What counts is the discovery and enjoyment of what truly engages your mind, liberates it, enhances it—or merely entertains it. But the mind must somehow be involved. Some kind of dialogue must go on between you and the author. No dialogue is created between the viewer and the standard TV show. The show is not the product of a mind, but of a gang of mechanics who restrict themselves to satisfying your expectations and who at all costs avoid anything that might promote mental stimulation. The usual purpose of TV is to anesthetize the mind so as to prepare it for the proper reception of television's reason for being: the commercial. Good books, on the other hand, have nothing to sell but themselves. They make possible a pure rather than a polluted relationship between originator and recipient.

In libraries you occasionally come across a typed notice:

Books are quiet. They do not dissolve into wavy lines or snowstorm effects. They do not pause to deliver commercials. They are three-dimensional, having length, breadth, and depth. They are convenient to handle and completely portable.

Add: there is real life in them.

When I think of what the lifetime habit of reading can do for us, I often reflect on the contrast between two Americans, Eisenhower and Truman. Both were men of high ability, both were generally admired by their countrymen. Eisenhower, according to credible report, confined his non-official reading to westerns. That was as far as his mental curiosity led him.

This quasi-illiteracy was reflected in his inability to use the spoken language with any clarity or force and an equal inability to use the written language with any vividness or originality. Truman, on the contrary, as we now know from Merle Miller's remarkable record of his talk, was a lifelong reader, largely in the vast field of history. That reading is reflected in his idiosyncratic and very effective use of the language. Whether one agrees with him or not, one feels the impress of a constantly reacting, fresh mind—just as, for all his admirable qualities, one is hard put to it to distinguish in Eisenhower's statements, interviews, and speeches any-thing but a sincere, earnest parroting of platitudes. Historians are now beginning to rank Truman among our great presidents, and Eisenhower among our mediocre ones. The reasons for this, ranking are various and complex. But among them I should list the simple fact that Truman, by reading, continued to educate himself throughout his lifetime, while Eisenhower remained happy with his westerns. I do not want to belabor the point, but it is worth recalling that our greatest presidents—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln—were highly literate men, whereas our worst president, Harding, had a cultural background appropriate for a failed dog-catcher.

I have spent the larger part of my life reading books, writing them, publishing them, and trying to persuade others, especially children, that the reading habit is far more important than brushing one's teeth, and ten thousand times more enjoyable. When I ponder these arguments I am forced to admit that I cannot guarantee their applicability to everyone. But as they have worked for me, who am no more than a moderately intelligent American, not remarkably different from my neighbor, I stubbornly persist in believing that they will work for tens of millions of others,

What, then, has reading done for me? What special joys and delights has it brought me that otherwise I might have missed? What are the arguments for reading?

Let me list a few.

The least impressive argument is a practical one. Generally speaking (there are many exceptions—I suppose most literature is Greek to Onassis) the reading habit has a certain success value. Some years ago an analysis was made of the childhoods of 413 famous men and women of the twentieth century. The survey revealed that only 2 of the 413 had come from homes that did not provide a background of books and learning. (They were Al Smith and Nikita Khrushchev.) To drop to a much lower level, I can report that I have managed to provide for myself and my family largely through the language skills developed in me by assiduous reading. Without books I would be on relief today, and you, the reader, would be supporting me.

Second: a good book (and that goes for the thirty volumes of your *Britannica*) exercises the mind as physical exertion exercises the muscles. If my mind is still moderately alert, reasonably receptive to new ideas and impressions, it is because the habit of reading has forced it to be so. That is why I counsel young people, and especially children, to seek out books that are a bit beyond their capacities. When young (and when old), try for at least a good part of the time to read *above* yourself. Marrying upward doesn't always work out (though it has with me), but reading upward does. There is nothing wrong with reading books you only partly understand. To confine yourself to the newspaper and the popular magazine is like trying to improve your high-jumping without ever raising the bar.

Third: I have found good books—and especially good novels, biographies, histories, and poetry—a shortcut to experience. Biological law has given me a limited life-span. I can crowd into it only so much direct, first-hand acquaintance with living. Most of us end up with one wife or husband, one set of children, one career, one set of friends, one set of ideas. If that's all we want, we needn't read. If it's not all we want, we'll find that good books cut across lots. Particularly for the young, they provide useful and enjoyable vicarious experience. They supply models of behavior—and misbehavior too, which is just as interesting. They provide, in economy-size packages, insights into human conduct and motivation, as well as ideas, speculations, theories, dreams—most of which we simply don't have the time or opportunity to encounter through first-

hand living. Not only do they help us grow: They help us grow *quickly*. In a society like ours, committed (at least up to yesterday) to literacy, the non-reader may be smart, shrewd, successful, even happy in a limited way. But he will remain partially a child.

The fourth argument is akin to the third. Good books are one key to the creation of a liberated mind. My mind is still struggling to free itself from the shackles of my basic nature, which is that of an animal. It will die still, I hope, struggling. But whatever limited emancipation it has achieved it owes in large part to reading.

That emancipation comes about in a number of ways. For one thing, books deliver us from the curse of the contemporary, the thralldom of the current. That is true, paradoxically, even of the book that deals with our own time, for a *good* book of that sort is also bound to deal with issues and emotions that have a long history. Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* is as much about history, politics, and leaders in general as it is about the history, politics, and leaders of our own time.

**The liberating power of reading springs also from the fact that good books, and especially great ones, enable us to meet those human beings who have supplied the ideas and constellations of emotion on which our civilization rests—and without which it will collapse or change into something posterity will not admire.**

Books are, above all, a pathway—only one, but an important one—to self-knowledge. Without self-knowledge we remain forever the slaves of habit, routine, and the pressures of our environment. This self-knowledge comes about through a seemingly contradictory process, through the *modification* of the ego. The world of books is the world of not-ourselves. It is what others know, feel, record, imagine. The more we read, the more clearly we can determine our own tiny position in time, in place, in the whole evolutionary procession from the amoeba to (let us say) Richard Nixon. Deprived of the power to make this imaginative leap, we remain imprisoned within the walls of the self. From such captivity little self-knowledge can come.

Another of the joys of reading is particularly connected with fiction and drama. The very word “novel” comes from the Italian *novella*, which itself comes from the Latin *novellus*,

having the meaning of “new”. Though the novel means many things to us, there remains hidden within it the magic idea of newness, fresh creation, the sudden construction (literally before our eyes, on the printed page) of hitherto unsuspected life, life akin to our own, yet different, an addition, an increment to our treasury of friends and acquaintances,

Have I forgotten anything?

Oh yes—reading can also be fun.



\* From *KNOW* the Britannica Magazine, Volume 1 Number 2 (1974)

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## DISCUSSION FORUM

**Reading makes a full man, meditation a profound man, discourse a clear man.** —Benjamin Franklin

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Dear Max,

I would like to thank Mr. O'Neill for taking the time to engage in a thoughtful and spirited discussion. He has raised a number of interesting points and I appreciate the opportunity to hear and understand his perspective on this important set of issues.

I would also like to say thank you to you Max, both for making the Discussion Forum available and for the consistently outstanding work performed by you and your staff at The Center for the Study of the Great Ideas.

Jim Reardon

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Frances Haroldson - Queensland, Australia**

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