

THIS LATE IN HISTORY

WHAT SHALL WE CHOOSE TO READ?

Jeannie Marshall

WE SEE THEM ALL THE TIME: serene-looking people, enjoying an hour or two with a book over a cappuccino. In cafes all over North America at the moment, they are reading Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Dennis Bock's *The Ash Garden*, or whatever else is the latest in big literary fiction, biography, or history. They might also be reading a magazine, *The New Yorker* maybe or the *Times Literary Supplement*.

But if you look closely at the publication in their hands, it's likely five or six weeks old. And if you could look inside their handbags and backpacks, you would probably find one or two partly read books. The calm such readers project, with their near motionlessness, their slow page-turning, is an illusion. Although they might be enjoying and be completely focused on whatever it is they are reading at the moment, just below the surface these readers are anxious.

Recently, Joseph Epstein wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement*, "As Prufrock measured out his life in coffee spoons, so I measure mine, by how many issue of the *TLS* I am behind at the moment."

"There's just not enough time to read," says Sherrill Cheda, a retired arts administrator. "My regret is that life isn't long enough to read more. My biggest fear is that I might go blind and not be able to read." Cheda is not expressing an unusual concern; it's a common feeling among people who love reading.

Most adult readers were drawn to it as children. At some point, the child discovers that reading is a pleasure and not a chore, and if the habit sticks, the child grows up to be a person who uses reading as one of their primary methods for learning about the world. This is the hope of all those parents urging *Harry Potter* books on their children right now.

But at some point along the path to discovery, the reader confronts his or her reading mortality. There's only so much time. And there are so many great books. And every year more books are published, some of which will be great. Reluctantly, the reader begins to acknowledge the appalling necessity of choosing to read certain good things and not other good things.

In his 1994 book *The Western Canon*, literary critic Harold Bloom

leaned right on to the literary panic button. “What shall the individual who still desires to read attempt to read, this late in history? The Biblical threescore years and 10 no longer suffice to read more than a selection of the great writers in what can be called the Western tradition, let alone in all the world’s traditions. Who reads must choose, since there is literally not enough time to read everything, even if one does nothing but read.”

This is where our anxiety begins. Once a reader acknowledges the limits, there is enormous pressure to make the best reading choices. Most readers end up with stacks of unread or partly unread books, more magazines than could be read in a decade’s worth of Christmas holidays and a nagging sense of guilt that whatever it is they are reading, they should probably be reading something else.

“I regret that I have not found the time to read Ian Kershaw’s two-volume biography of Hitler. It’s sitting in my study. And now we have Roy Jenkin’s new biography of Churchill,” says Jonathan Yardley, the chief book critic for *The Washington Post*. There is a real sadness in his voice as he acknowledges this terrible truth.

“That’s the way in which I feel reader’s guilt. It’s more likely to be about books that would add things to my life and would be really interesting to read but because I’m so caught up in my reading for my reviews and the periodicals I read for my column I might not ever read them.”

Yardley is being only partly honest with himself—he did buy the Kershaw books, after all, so he must hold out hope that he will get to them. And that is what keeps readers going, this crazy delusion that someday there will be time.

Eleanor Wachtel, the host of CBC Radio’s *Writers and Company* and *The Arts Today*, says she is either reading all the time or feeling anxious about not reading all the time. But she refuses to accept her limitations.

“I know people can calculate the number of books they can read in a year and the number of years they are likely to have left to read them and they come up with a sum that is much too small,” says Wachtel.

“So on some level I think I’m unrealistic because I don’t give up hope that I will read the things I want to read. Right this minute I want to read

Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. I'm going to read it soon and I might even end up interviewing him. It's been sitting there since I got it a month ago and I'm really looking forward to it," she says with determination.

This is not just the affliction of book critics. Anyone who loves to read gets it eventually. Brenda Ferguson has had a varied career working in medical research institutes and the film business, among other things, but the one constant in her life has been her voracious curiosity and her pursuit of knowledge through books.

"I feel anxious, I feel anxious," she says when asked about the big bag of books and papers she carries with her. "I think the reason for the anxiety has changed, though. When I was younger, I read looking for some kind of central truth, some sort of wisdom. If I just read the right stuff, I thought, I would be able to figure everything out. Now I read because I need information. I use the information as tools to write a paper, to contribute to a conversation and just to broaden my knowledge base."

Recently Ferguson decided to pursue a graduate degree in history as a way of structuring her reading. "If I'm going to delve into a particular topic, I want the full spectrum. I want to know what the polemics might be or what interesting little duel might be going on among various thinkers. I'm interested in the history of ideas but also thought—there's a distinction. Just knowing something in isolation isn't enough any more: I want to know where it came from."

There are times when Ferguson feels overwhelmed because her pursuit of knowledge keeps opening up new areas of ignorance. And so at those times she reaches into her bag of books and papers and pulls out a selection of poems by Rilke to console herself with one that begins: "Don't trust too much in books: they only share/what has been and will be."

Robert Fulford, cultural commentator for the *National Post* and committed reader, turns to Northrop Frye for comfort. "He was the best scholar of his kind in Canada, and when I read his diaries it's clear that he was having trouble keeping up," says Fulford.

His own advice to people who feel overwhelmed by reading is to try to read for two or three hours every day. And then he laughs. "I have never been able to work out a way to do that," he says. "I do read a lot

and I might read for three or four hours one day and might not be able to read at all the next.”

His reading list is typical of most people who suffer from reading anxiety. He subscribes to four daily newspapers and the weekly *Times Literary Supplement* and *The New Yorker*. Then he buys a slew of monthly magazines at the newsstand and keeps a constant stream of books coming into his house. At the moment, he is reading four books at once.

Wachtel believes reading more than one thing at a time is a key source of anxiety. She is now reading Audrey Thomas’s latest book for work and Jan Morris’s *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* for fun and because she was in Trieste this year. “I think reading more than one book at a time just exacerbates the anxiety.”

The surprising thing about those afflicted with reading anxiety is that they also tend to go out and socialize. They do not fit the stereotype of the reclusive bookworm. These readers said they would never dream of cancelling a social engagement in order to read. “You have to have social events so you can go out and talk about books,” says Fulford.

In spite of the stress that reading causes, it is a pleasant sort of stress. Even those who work as readers love it, though it does change the way they approach reading.

“This job would have lost its appeal and I would have lost my zest for it many years ago if I didn’t choose the books with at least the hope that I would find something pleasurable and enriching in them,” says Yardley. “My choices are made with the hope that my life will be more interesting because of it.”

And when he is finished, he publishes his two reviews in *The Washington Post* each week, plus his column based on his periodical reading. Hundreds of thousands of people turn to Yardley’s reviews to see what he has to say, and many of them will finish reading him with a vaguely pleasurable sense of unease as they make a note to read the book he has mentioned that day.

Jeannie Marshall is a staff writer for the National Post. This article is reproduced with the kind permission of herself and the National Post (©2001).

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