
Chapter 18

Richness From Reading

I cannot live without books.

— Thomas Jefferson

I grew up in a family of readers. My mother could easily (and often did) read a book a day. My father was a Shakespearean scholar who taught speed-reading on the side. If you walked through our house on any day at any time, you'd find several people reading. Reading, we all believed, was an essential part of a rich and productive life.

I believe that still. And I will tell you why.

How Reading Can Make You Smarter

Reading makes you smarter. In fact, it makes you smarter in almost every way you can be smart.

Studies show that people who read on a regular basis have higher raw intelligence, better analytical skills, stronger perceptive powers, and perform better when it comes to intellectual challenges.

If that were not enough, reading also improves *emotional* intelligence. In one study, participants read excerpts from literary fiction, popular fiction, or nonfiction. A control group read nothing at all. They were then given tests that measured their “social perception”—i.e., their ability to intuit things about people based on visual and verbal clues. Those who read literary fiction scored highest. Those who read nonfiction scored second-highest. Those who read popular fiction scored third-highest. And those who didn't read came in last. Two studies conducted by York University psychologist Raymond Mar, targeting both adults and children, came to the same conclusion.

Reading also improves memory. More than a dozen studies have demonstrated that regular readers are better at recalling all sorts of details—not just in the material they read but in every area of their lives.

And it improves analytical thinking—the ability to spot patterns in complex problems and conceive solutions.

It doesn't surprise me that reading makes you smarter. What surprises me is that some people think reading is an anachronistic skill. "I watch lots of biographies on the History Channel," one friend tells me. "I don't need to read books."

I'll grant my friend that there are plenty of good programs on TV these days. And there is no faster way to do quick research than by using Google. But watching TV or Googling does not activate the brain as fully and effectively as reading does.

How Reading Can Make You Healthier

Anything that makes you smarter is—as far as I'm concerned—something that any person interested in a rich and rewarding life should want to do. But reading offers health benefits too.

For one thing, reading is a very effective way to overcome stress. In a British study, participants engaged in an anxiety-provoking activity and then either read for a few minutes, listened to music, or played video games. The stress levels of those who read dropped 67 percent—more than any of the other groups. And, in fact, research conducted at the University of Sussex showed that reading is better at reducing stress than listening to music, enjoying a cup of tea or coffee, and even taking a walk.

A second health benefit you'll get from regular reading is a youthful brain. A study of 294 participants published in the journal *Neurology* found that those who engaged in mentally stimulating activities (such as reading) experienced slower memory decline. And according to research published in the journal *Proceedings of*

the National Academy of Sciences, readers are less likely to have Alzheimer's disease.

"The brain is an organ just like every other organ in the body. It ages in regard to how it is used," lead author Dr. Robert P. Friedland told *USA Today*. "Just as physical activity strengthens the heart, muscles, and bones, intellectual activity strengthens the brain against disease."

Another study, reported in *Prevention* magazine, found that readers have a 32 percent slower rate of cognitive decline later in life.

"Brainy pursuits make the brain more efficient by changing its structure to continue functioning properly in spite of age-related neuropathologies," Robert S. Wilson, Ph.D., professor of neuropsychology at Rush University Medical Center, told the magazine.

How Reading Can Make You Kinder

Smarter and healthier—surely those are sufficient reasons to become an avid reader. But in doing my research for this book, I discovered yet another benefit. According to several studies, reading can actually make you kinder.

Researchers in the Netherlands, for example, found that people who were "emotionally transported" by a work of fiction experienced a boost in empathy.

Another study by the National Endowment for the Arts found that people who regularly read are much more likely to be engaged civically and culturally.

And yet another study, published in *Creativity Research Journal*, showed that people who have just read a short story have less need for "cognitive closure" than people who've just read a nonfiction essay. One hundred University of Toronto students read either one of eight short stories or one of eight essays. Then

each student completed a survey measuring their emotional need for certainty and stability. Those who had read a short story had significantly lower scores than those who had read an essay. They expressed greater comfort with uncertainty and chaos—an attitude that allows for higher-level thinking and greater creativity.

Making “Rich” Choices

Some novels—think Danielle Steele or John Grisham—are easy to read and loads of fun (if you like that sort of thing), but provide no lasting pleasures. You read them quickly, caught up in the plot or amused by certain well-drawn characters. But then you put the books down and forget about them. You’ve invested time into them and you’ve gotten a return on your investment, but the return was very modest.

Compare that experience to reading *Sophie’s Choice* or *Lolita*, books that are more “difficult.” Such books challenge you on every level. The authors’ writing styles are more sophisticated. Their plots are less conventional. Their characters are multifaceted, like people tend to be in real life. And there are ideas presented throughout the story—ideas that often test your convictions and notions and beliefs.

You will get some of the benefits of reading—especially stress reduction—no matter what kind of books you read. But if you want a life that is richer in terms of your emotional and intellectual experience, you have to be selective in your choices. As with music and art, that means choosing books that have complexity, subtlety, and emotional power.

I don’t have the space or time to recommend great books for every aspect of a rich life, so I will limit my suggestions to five categories: modern fiction, classical fiction, short stories, nonfiction, and poetry.

My recommendations are in no way meant to be definitive. As award-winning author Lloyd Alexander said, “We don’t need to

have just one favorite. We keep adding favorites. Our favorite book is always the book that speaks most directly to us at a particular stage in our lives. And our lives change. We have other favorites that give us what we most need at that particular time. But we never lose the old favorites. They're always with us. We just sort of accumulate them."

My 10 Favorite Modern Novels

1. *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov
2. *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway
3. *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy
4. *True Grit* by Charles Portis
5. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey
6. *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac
7. *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron
8. *Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs
9. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee
10. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

My 10 Favorite Classics

1. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain
2. *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen
3. *A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens
4. *The Tin Drum* by Günter Grass
5. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë
6. *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville
7. *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley

8. *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis
9. *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison
10. *Native Son* by Richard Wright

My 10 Favorite Short Story Collections

1. *Dubliners* by James Joyce
2. *A Good Scent From a Strange Mountain* by Robert Olen Butler
3. *Nothing Gold Can Stay* by Ron Rash
4. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* by Raymond Carver
5. *The Complete Short Stories of O. Henry*
6. *Men Without Women* by Ernest Hemingway
7. *The Complete Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*
8. *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* by Raymond Carver
9. *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* by Julian Barnes
10. *Pastoralia* by George Saunders

My 10 Favorite Nonfiction Books

1. *Ten Philosophical Mistakes* by Mortimer J. Adler
2. *Economics in One Lesson* by Henry Hazlitt
3. *The Elements of Style* by Strunk & White
4. *The Painted Word* by Tom Wolfe
5. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig
6. *Out of Africa* by Isak Dinesen
7. *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway

8. *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*
9. *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote
10. *The American Language* by H.L. Mencken

My 10 Favorite Poetry Books

1. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*
2. *Selected Poems: Edna St. Vincent Millay*
3. *The Waste Land and Other Poems* by T.S. Eliot
4. *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg
5. *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*
6. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*
7. *Selected Poems by W. H. Auden*
8. *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*
9. *Love Is a Dog From Hell* by Charles Bukowski
10. *The Collected Works of Robert Penn Warren*

No matter how busy you may think you are, you must find time for reading, or surrender yourself to self-chosen ignorance.

— Confucius