

READY SET *Read*



A GUIDE TO *Reading* BETTER

Introduction

Why do we read books is one of those vast questions that need no answer? As well ask, why ought we to be good? or, why do we believe in a God? The whole universe of wisdom answers. To attempt an answer in a single article would be like turning a spyglass for a moment toward the stars.

We take the great simple things for granted, like the air we breathe. In a country that holds popular education to be the foundation of all its liberties and fortunes, we do not find many people who need to be argued into the belief that the reading of books is good for us; even people who do not read much acknowledge vaguely that they ought to read more.

There are, to be sure, men of rough worldly wisdom, even endowed with spiritual insight, who distrust "book learning" and fall back on the obvious truth that experience of life is the great teacher. Such persons are in a measure justified in their conviction by the number of unwise human beings who have read much but to no purpose.

The book full blockhead, ignorantly read, With loads of learned lumber in his head is a living argument against mere reading?

But we can meet such argument by pointing out that the blockhead who cannot learn from books cannot learn much from life, either. That sometimes useful citizen whom it is fashionable to call a Philistine, and who calls himself a "practical man," often has under him a beginner fresh from the schools, who is glib and confident in repeating bookish theories, but is not yet skillful in applying them.

If the practical man is thoughtless, he sniffs at theory and points to his clumsy assistant as proof of the uselessness of what is to be got from books. If he is wise, the practical man realizes how much better off he would be, how much farther his hard work and experience might have carried him, if he had had the advantage of bookish training.

Moreover, the hard-headed skeptic, self-made and self-secure, who will not traffic with the literature that touches his life work, is seldom so confined to his own little shop that he will not, for recreation, take holiday tours into the literature of other men's lives and labors.

The man who does not like to read any books is, I am confident, seldom found, and at the risk of slandering a patriot, I will express the doubt whether he is a good citizen. Honest he may be, but certainly not wise. The human race for thousands of years has been writing its experiences, telling how it has met our everlasting problems, how it has struggled with darkness and rejoiced in light.

What fools we should be to try to live our lives without the guidance and inspiration of the generations that have gone before, without the joy, encouragement, and sympathy that the best imaginations of our generation are distilling into words. For literature is simply life selected and condensed into books. In a few hours we can follow all that is recorded of the life of Jesus—the best that He did in years of teaching and suffering all ours for a day of reading, and the more deeply ours for a lifetime of reading and meditation!

If the expression of life in words is strong and beautiful and true it outlives empires, like the oldest books of the Old Testament. If it is weak or trivial or untrue, it is forgotten like most of the “stories” in yesterday's newspaper, like most of the novels of last year. The expression of truth, the transmission of knowledge and emotions between man and man from generation to generation, these are the purposes of literature. Not to read books is like being shut up in a dungeon while life rushes by outside.

I happen to be writing in Christmas week, and I have read for the tenth time “A Christmas Carol,” by Dickens, that amazing allegory in which the hard, bitter facts of life are involved in a beautiful myth, that wizard's caldron in which humor bubbles and from which rise phantom figures of religion and poetry. Can anyone doubt that if this story were read by every man, woman, and child in the world, Christmas would be a happier time and the feelings of the race elevated and strengthened?

The story has power enough to defeat armies, to make revolutions in the faith of men, and turn the cold markets of the world into festival scenes of charity. If you know any mean person you may be sure that he has not read “A Christmas Carol,” or that he read it long ago and has forgotten it. I know there are persons who pretend that the sentimentality of Dickens destroys their interest in him.

I once took a course with an over-refined, imperfectly educated professor of literature, who advised me that in time I should outgrow my liking for Dickens. It was only his way of recommending to me a kind of fiction that I had not learned to like. In time I did learn