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THE ART OF READING (FOR NON-READERS)

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The Art of Reading (for non-readers) renuka murthi

Not to flex, but the highlight of my house is a quaint little library.

It's got a sunroof, some cozy furniture that's been soiled by suspicious stains, and most importantly, shelves upon shelves of books—from novels and short story collections to encyclopedias, memoirs, and condescending jokes of “self-help” books like *The Secret*, all the reading material I could ever ask for is always right at my fingertips. My parents routinely confiscated my DS and TV remotes throughout my childhood, so since reading was my only other choice of entertainment, you could say I learned to love books in a Stockholm syndrome-esque way. There was a simple pleasure in getting lost in a vivid imaginary world for hours on end, and an even simpler camaraderie in banding together with third-grade classmates to beg the teacher for five more minutes of silent reading time.

I remember the joy of wolfing down page after page of my favorite books so palpably. Yet for the past five years, I've found it increasingly difficult to read a *paragraph*, let alone an entire book or book series.

This isn't to say I blame myself. As a college student, I have to deal with a lot more responsibilities and stressors than I did as a twelve-year-old whose biggest struggle was figuring out how to get free clothes on Club Penguin (as a former non-member, I can affirm that the class struggle on that site was real). I also know that I'm not alone in feeling this way—most of my friends don't read very much either. It's gotten to the point where we've dubbed ourselves “non-readers.” Every time we scoff at the idea of reading a book from cover to cover or complain about assigned reading to lubricate our conversations, we cement ourselves into this identity a little more.

“I don't read” was my favorite catchphrase for a while, which, in retrospect, is a sad thing for someone who enjoys writing to say.

Part of the reason I stopped reading was that I came to see it as way more time consuming than it was worth.

The more I fell victim to “hustle culture” and conditioned myself to feel guilty about doing anything “unproductive,” the more unappealing it seemed to waste valuable time reading (interestingly, I never felt this guilt while watching TV or scrolling through social media). On the rare occasion that I *did* read a book pre-quarantine, it'd be nothing more than a means to an end, something “productive” or (pseudo)intellectual that I read to educate myself or benefit in some way. There was nothing wrong with this, of course, but after middle school, I'd completely forgotten the value of reading something for *enjoyment's sake*.

As soon as I moved back home after the pandemic began, I set out to resurrect this part of me that's basically been dead for years. I scoured my now cobweb-infested library for books that seemed good but not too daunting, sat down, and forced myself to read like the good old days. After reading a couple of books with no ulterior motive or end goal other than enjoyment in mind (I know you never asked, but they were *Ender's Game* and *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*—I highly recommend both), I've come to understand what exactly sets reading apart from other forms of escapism. After all, why read something when you could watch the movie adaptation and save time and effort?

Short answer: I see reading as a collaboration, a team effort between the author and the reader to bring new subjective interpretations and experiences of a story into existence.

Reading seems (and often is) so mentally taxing because it requires you to think and actively piece together information rather than simply consuming it.

Reading is a creative act, which is why I think of it as an art—as you read, you simultaneously direct and watch your own mental movie with the guidance of the author, who is functionally your screenwriter. There are so many blanks to fill in with every book, from what characters look and act like to the finer details of each scene that authors leave to our imagination, and each reader fills in these blanks with unique answers shaped by their personalities, experiences, and subconscious preferences. Written stories are only as good as the reader experiences they actualize—there’s literally an infinite number of ways to experience one story, which is *incredible* the more you think about it.

Skilled authors give us enough agency to be the architects of our own experiences of their books, enabling us to create and imagine in tandem with consuming, and there’s a beauty in crafting a subjective experience that is entirely individual and irreplicable without having to actually map out a story from scratch. And as much as I love visual media, playing the puppeteer and orchestrating the details of a zombie apocalypse or a hero’s quest offers more of this beauty than sitting down and watching someone else’s vision of it play out on a screen. I now realize that as a child, I loved reading because while reading, I was never really a detached omniscient observer of a story. I always actively participated in shaping it. This kind of autonomy is refreshing and empowering, especially when we might feel a lack of control over our real lives.

To all the “non-readers” out there,

I challenge you to read something—anything—that appeals to you. It doesn’t have to be an intellectual or “hard” read (I’ve never read *War and Peace* and I’m never going to). Reread Percy Jackson if you want, there’s absolutely no shame in it. Abandon any guilt you might feel about wasting time you know you would’ve wasted on TikTok anyway, and as you read, allow yourself to become completely immersed in the process and your subjective experience.

Reading truly is a journey—a journey we all managed to intuitively embark on as children, and a journey that is worth reteaching ourselves to engage in and *enjoy*.



Renuka Murthi

Renuka is a sophomore majoring in business. In her free time, she loves to read, write, and force others to watch terrible movies/trashy reality TV with her (the lower the IMDb rating, the better). Renuka joined MA:E because she wanted to meet more members of Michigan's APIDA community, take creative risks with her writing, and dabble in new art forms.

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