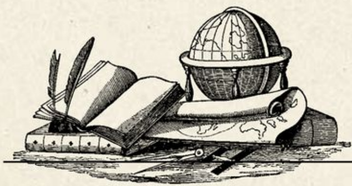
THE PLEASURES *of* READING *in an* AGE *of* DISTRACTION



Alan Jacobs

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Printed in the United States of America
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For my students, with whom I have read, and will read, so much

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Caveat lector Those who have always disliked reading, or who have been left indifferent by it, may find little of interest here. But those who have caught a glimpse of what reading can give—pleasure, wisdom, joy—even if that glimpse came long ago, are the audience for whom this book was written.

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Yes, we can! A while back my teenage son drifted into the room where I was reading, tilting his head to catch the title of the book in my hands. It was that venerable classic *How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler and Charles van Doren. "Oh man," he said, "I had to read that in school last year. Maybe I learned something about how to read a book, but after that I never *wanted* to read a book again."

In 1940 Mortimer Adler published the first edition of *How to Read a Book* and was, he later commented, surprised at its immediate and lasting popularity. Although Adler was unabashedly elitist in some respects—the belief that some books are Great Books and that those are the books most worth reading animated his whole life—*How to Read a Book* belongs to a fine tradition of American populism. The conviction underlying the whole enterprise was that you need not have an expensive university education in order to be a skillful reader of even the most challenging texts. Rather, you just need a bit of guidance—a single volume's worth of recommended strategies

and tactics—and you can take it from there, following your own path to erudition, making yourself worthy of the Great Tradition of which Adler himself was but a humble acolyte. Adler's guide was to reading what Charles Atlas's "Dynamic Tension" program was to bodybuilding: a common-sense, practical program for the average American with some do-it-yourself gumption. (There are passages of exhortation in *How to Read a Book* that sound quite a lot like Charles Atlas: "With nothing but the power of your own mind, you operate on the symbols before you in such a way that you gradually lift yourself from a state of understanding less to one of understanding more." This is the intellectual equivalent of Atlas's "dynamic tension" approach to bodybuilding, which rather than using weights "pits muscle against muscle.") And in an age when relatively few Americans attended college, and still fewer attended colleges with a liberal-arts emphasis, there was, it turned out, a great hunger for the kind of confident instruction Adler offered.

When, three decades later, Adler enlisted Charles Van Doren to help him revise his guide to reading, the American social fabric had altered considerably. Thanks in large part to the postwar GI Bill, which paid college tuition for returning soldiers, a much higher percentage of Americans were attending college. One might think that in such circumstances Adler's direction would be less valuable. But, he argued, universities focused so much on the dissemination of facts and so little on the pursuit of understanding that the reading abilities of the American public had not been much improved by the rise in college attendance. Moreover, something else had occurred since 1940: television. Americans were becoming ever more distracted and ever less instructed; reading was becoming an increasingly unfamiliar and indeed unnatural practice; and therefore his book remained as timely as it had ever been.

In this claim Adler was probably right. But what would he have said if in 1972 he had been granted a vision of the next thirty years of American history? Seeing the innumerably greater distractions available to us, he may well have given up the cause of reading as a lost one. After all, in 1972 few Americans had access to more than four television stations, and the only computers were elephantine hulks locked in the basements of universities and a few large corporations.

But despite the lamentations of many contemporary Jeremiahs, the cause of reading is not a lost one by any means. There are millions of devoted readers in America, as can be evidenced by the hundreds of enormous Borders and Barnes & Noble bookstores (despite the recent struggles of those chains), by the huge success of Amazon.com as a seller of books, by Oprah's Book Club, and by the most recent NEA survey of reading in America, which reveals a surprising uptick in the reading of literary fiction and other long-form works.*

And consider this: in January 2008 Steve Jobs, the head of Apple Computer, was interviewed by reporters from the *New York Times*, and while Jobs was primarily interested in celebrating Apple's newest products, he was willing to announce his views on other matters as well. For instance, Amazon.com's then-new electronic reading device, the Kindle: "It doesn't matter how good or bad the product is, the fact is that people don't read anymore," he said. "Forty percent of the people in the U.S. read one book or less

*"*Reading on the Rise*, the National Endowment for the Arts' new report, documents a significant turning point in recent American cultural history. For the first time in over a quarter-century, our survey shows that literary reading has risen among adult Americans. After decades of declining trends, there has been a decisive and unambiguous increase among virtually every group measured in this comprehensive national survey" (http://www.nea.gov/research/ReadingonRise.pdf). The surveys on which the report was based were conducted in 2008.

last year. The whole conception is flawed at the top because people don't read anymore." Two years later he introduced Apple's new product, the iPad, and emphasized the gadget's ties to Apple's new online bookstore and its excellence as a medium for reading newspaper, magazines, and yes, even books. I don't think a highly exploitable clientele of readers spontaneously self-generated between 2008 and 2010.

I meet and talk to and hear from many readers: I regularly get emails and letters from readers of my previous books, and those readers seem to cover a remarkably broad spectrum of education and experience. Just in the past few weeks I have heard from three readers of my biography of C. S. Lewis: an email from a Canadian college student who had written a long post about it on her blog, a letter from a high school student in Florida who had typed and sent to me a one-page review of the book (she liked it overall, but found some passages confusing), and a long handwritten letter from an elderly woman in New York who half-a-century ago had corresponded with Lewis and wanted to give me an account of it. These are limited sorts of conversations, of course, but when I get to talk more fully with readers I discover that for all their enthusiasm they often lack confidence: they wonder whether they are reading well, with focus and attentiveness, with discretion and discernment.

This uncertainty spans the generations but comes in different flavors. I find myself particularly intrigued by younger people who have heard their cohort called "The Dumbest Generation," who are continually told that their addiction to multiple simultaneous stimuli renders them incapable of the seriously focused and single-minded attention that the reading of big thick books requires. Some of them are defiant in response to such charges, but most at least half-believe them. Told over and over again that they can't read, they begin to wonder why they should even try. It's not just teenagers and twenty-somethings who sound such a note; I have

heard talk like this from people up to forty and in a few cases older. Many of them say that they used to be able to read but since becoming habituated to online reading and the short bursts of attention it encourages—or demands—simply can't sit down with a book anymore. They fidget; they check their iPhones for email and Twitter updates. Thus Nicholas Carr:

> Over the past few years I've had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory. My mind isn't going—so far as I can tell—but it's changing. I'm not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I'm reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

And he concludes, mournfully, "I miss my old brain." (I'll have more to say about Carr's particular predicament later in this book.)

All of these people *can* read, of course. Those who never have done so can learn, and those who have lost the habit can reacquire it.* The plasticity of the brain is an amazing thing, but training it

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*It is noteworthy that, in spite of the worries I have mentioned, most people not only think well of the act of reading but, a team of sociologists from Northwestern University report, fully expect to be doing more of it in the future: "More than nine out of ten are convinced that reading is 'a good use of your time'. . . . And they think

requires effort and patience. I am aware that my "you can do it" rhetoric here echoes Adler and Charles Atlas, not to mention Barack Obama and Bob the Builder. But the American DIY tradition is by no means a contemptible one; it just needs, especially when applied to reading, a little updating. The Adler–Van Doren model, with its decision-tree model of engagement—"If book is of Type 1, apply reading technique C"—and its strongly legislative tone is not ideally suited to today's habits of mind.

Adler and Van Doren are strict taskmasters. A word that appears often in their account is "obligation," and its business end is generally pointed at the book's reader. Their book is a "practical" one, they remind us, intended to foster certain specific results, and "the reader of a practical book has a special obligation with respect to it." If "the reader of a practical book accepts the ends it proposes and agrees that the means recommended are appropriate and effective," then he or she is obliged to follow the book's instructions. It's hard not to have some anxiety about what Adler and Van Doren might do to us if we fail in that obligation.

There's an odd passage in *How to Read a Book* when Adler and Van Doren are discussing the reading of "canonical" texts. By this, they mean not just religious texts, sacred books, but any books that

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they ought to be able to read more, for very few people find reading 'too hard to do'. . . . They expect to read more in the future. When asked, 'Do you think you'll find yourself reading more in the months and years ahead, reading less, or is the amount of reading you do probably going to stay the same,' 45% said more, 3% less, and 51% the same. . . . People particularly intend to read more materials that are educational or will improve their lives, such as nonfiction books, newspapers, and the Bible. A British survey finds that people actually believe they are reading more. 'Despite competition from new media, and increasing pressure on people's leisure time, relatively few people think they are reading books less now than five years ago. Most (80%) claim to be reading about the same or more.'"

carry absolute authority within a given community. In discussing this kind of reading Adler and Van Doren retrieve the notion of readerly obligation and give it some extra punch:

> The faithful reader of a canonical book is obliged to make sense out of it and to find it true in one or another sense of "true." If he cannot do this by himself, he is obliged to go to someone who can. This may be a priest or rabbi, or it may be his superior in the party hierarchy, or it may be his professor. In any case, he is obliged to accept the resolution of his problem that is offered him. He reads essentially without freedom; but in return for this he gains a kind of satisfaction that is possibly never obtained when reading other books.

When I read the first part of this passage, I discerned a certain skepticism toward the claims made for canonical texts; but that last sentence—"a kind of satisfaction that is possibly never obtained when reading other books"—sounds rather wistful to me, as though Adler and Van Doren wouldn't altogether mind exerting that kind of authority themselves. And that impression is strengthened by the passage I've already quoted in which they stress the obligations of readers to the very kind of book they have written.

I wouldn't be surprised if many readers of *How to Read a Book* actually like this tone: it is the strongly worded lecture that helps stiffen the backbone, strengthen the resolve. (George Orwell tells the story of a childhood schoolmate of his who did poorly on an examination and afterward wished, mournfully, that he had been caned before it so that he would have studied harder.) After all, among those who wish they were better readers, a good number do tend to think of reading as a means of self-improvement: it is thanks to them that *How to Read a Book* is still in print. One can certainly read in order to build up intellectual muscles, and I will

have a bit to say about that in the pages that follow. But I will have a lot more to say about other matters. Forget for a moment *how* books should be read: *Why* should they be read? The first reason—the first sequentially in the story that follows but also the first in order of importance—is that reading books can be intensely pleasurable. Reading is one of the great human delights. And the Charles Atlases of reading rarely remember this.

Mortimer Adler's coauthor, Charles Van Doren, may have realized that there was something unfortunately dutiful about *How to Read a Book*, because in 1985 he published *The Joy of Reading: A Passionate Guide to 189 of the World's Best Authors and Their Works*. Adler himself commended the book in a blurb, as did the legendary editor Clifton Fadiman: "Mr. Van Doren is that rarity, a truly well read man who reads not for professional purposes but for pleasure. His book spurs us on to explore more deeply and joyfully the infinitely varied terrain of good books." But for all the talk here of joy, passion, and pleasure, the spell of readerly responsibility is a difficult one to dismiss, as can be seen in Fadiman's own book, *The New Lifetime Reading Plan: The Classical Guide to World Literature*, the key word here being *Plan*.* Indeed, Van Doren's guide, however passionate it may be, sticks with the canonical authors almost as methodically as Fadiman's does, and concludes the book with, yes, a "Ten-Year Reading Plan," whose contents and sequence are "more than merely suggestive." Now, Van Doren may earn some populist *bona fides* by adding to his list, in a revised 2008 edition, J. K. Rowling and, of all people, Carl Hiaasen—but there's something odd about such writers ending up on a *list*, which is intrinsically directive, instructive, authoritative.

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* Fadiman published the first version of this book, called *Clifton Fadiman's Lifetime Reading Plan*, in 1960.

This self-help, self-improvement model of reading seems deeply embedded in American cultural life: even Michael Dirda, a wonderfully sensitive and humane reader-critic, in his *Book by Book*, can't resist offering a master list of sixteen works and asserting that if you just read these particular texts with care, "nearly all of world literature will be an open book to you." Really? "Nearly all of world literature," and I just have to read these sixteen? Cause yields effect so automatically?

(It's the kind of thing Americans love to believe, and have for a long time: in 1835 the Christian evangelist Charles Finney, later the first president of Oberlin College, affirmed that "the connection between the right use of means for a [religious] revival and a revival is as philosophically [i.e., scientifically] sure as between the right use of means to raise grain and a crop of wheat. I believe, in fact, it is more certain, and there are fewer instances of failure." Growing wheat, converting people to Christianity, opening the whole world of literature to people—it's all just a matter of appropriate instrumentation, of applying the proper technique, of carefully following the instructions.)

It would be easy enough to dismiss Adler and Van Doren and Fadiman et al. for pedantry, but as I have already indicated the American reading public, or a significant chunk of it anyway, can't take its readerly pleasure straight but has to cut it with a sizable splash of duty. Books that aren't certifiably good for you are, in this way of thinking, to be suspected—and to read for "entertainment," or the sheer pleasure of the thing, verges on the morally unjustifiable. Thomas C. Foster's *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* and *How to Read Novels Like a Professor* tap into many of the same anxieties: they suggest that reading is best done by highly trained, professionally accredited experts; the implicit promise is that such expertise is at least partially transferable to the ordinary reader.

As a professor of literature, I must say that when I first saw Foster's books I thought, "Read like a professor? Good Lord, anything but that!" (Although, of course, Foster's imagined professor is an ideal one.) I sympathize with the view of academic reading that the novelist Zadie Smith articulated in an interview a few years ago:

> My main feeling is that my time as a student, especially my last year, was genuinely the happiest period of my life. But—BIG BUT—there were many things about academic life that I found unbearably oppressive and absurd. There's so much of one's real lived experiences that you have to leave at the gates. There's something about English departments in particular—a kind of desperate need to be serious, to be professional, to police this very ambiguous and necessarily amorphous act, reading—that I find hard to deal with. . . . I always feel a disappointment coming out of English departments, as if all these brilliant people are gathered and poised to study something and all they have to study is . . . *these things? Novels? But they're so . . . smooshy*. . . . It depresses me, how embarrassed some people seem to be about novels, how much they want them to be something else.

But however attractive this promise of expertise—or the similarly directive step-by-step approach of Adler and Van Doren, or the eat-your-vegetables lists of approved authoritative texts provided by Fadiman—can be for some, for others it only makes reading feel like drudgery. My son is one such person: it was the aroma of Responsibility, Obligation, and Virtue emanating from *How to Read a Book* that sent him fleeing. And there are many people like my son among the ranks of diffident readers, embarrassed non-readers, and guilt-stricken ex-readers—especially among natives or long habitués of the digital world. So I want to offer a very different model of what reading can be all about.

Whim Several times a year I get requests from people—usually students, but also friends and acquaintances, and even total strangers who have managed to find my email address—who want reading lists. "Dear Professor Jacobs, could you please give me your recommendations for what I should read this summer?" Or, "Dear Professor, in your opinion what are the ten most important books that every educated person should read?" I dislike that second question for reasons that are probably already clear, but the first I can't bring myself to dislike at all, since it's really a compliment in the form of a question.

Nonetheless, I never comply with these requests.

There are a few reasons why, and both of them are related to my views about the value and pleasure of reading. First, if people just want a list of the Greatest Hits of Western Literature (the *Iliad*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Hamlet*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Brothers Karamazov*), they can get that anywhere. Indeed, they probably already know what items go on that list. So presumably they want something else, though it's not always clear to me, and perhaps not to them, precisely what. My sense is that they want either books that have been particularly important to *me*—that's where the compliment comes in—or else the kind of book that gets written up in magazines as a "forgotten masterpiece." But there are many, many books that would fit into that latter category; and there is little reason to think that a book will be especially interesting or helpful to someone else just because *I* like it. Another person may not have my inclinations, interests, or personal needs.

Now, if people came to me and said, "Here's a list of ten of my favorite books—can you think of some others I'm likely to enjoy?" I would be more likely—and better prepared—to answer. But that rarely happens, which is unfortunate: as much as I dislike the general, abstract, decontextualized lists that people tend to ask for, I love making recommendations to people I know and

whose interests and tastes are familiar to me. Not long ago, as I was romping through Neal Stephenson's vast science-fiction opus *Anathem*, I kept thinking of a friend whose major passions are woven into that book. So as soon as I finished the story I ran right out to my local Borders, bought a second copy, and delivered it to his door with an exhortation to read it as soon as was humanly possible. I wasn't sure, of course, whether my friend would in the end like the book, but I knew he would be fascinated by much that happens in it, and, above all, I knew that we would have some enjoyable conversations about Stephenson's story. Thus Rudyard Kipling: "One can't prescribe books, even the best books, to people unless one knows a good deal about each individual person. If a man is keen on reading, I think he ought to open his mind to some older man who knows him and his life, and to take his advice in the matter, and above all, to discuss with him the first books that interest him."

In such a context of friendship and mutual interest, the making of recommendations is a pleasure. Outside of that, it quickly becomes an onerous (and perhaps pointless) duty, and I don't like mixing reading with onerous duties. Moreover, in many cases these requests have little to do with actually reading anything, but rather with *having read*—with the desire to say, "Yes, now I can check that one off." In his marvelous memoir *Hunger of Memory*, Richard Rodriguez describes how he once experienced this curious compulsion: "In the fourth grade," he writes, "I embarked on a grandiose reading program." He asked his teachers for lists of "important books," which he then began dutifully to read, without having any sense of what made the books worthwhile.

> I decided to record in a notebook the themes of the books that I read. After reading *Robinson Crusoe*, I wrote that its theme was "the value of learning to live by oneself." When I completed *Wuthering Heights*, I noted the danger of "letting emotions get out of control."

> Reading these brief moralistic appraisals usually left me disheartened. I couldn't believe that they were really the source of reading's value. But for many more years, they constituted the only means I had of describing to myself the educational value of books.

It is true, of course, that adult readers are unlikely to be quite as naïve as the young Rodriguez was: the people who ask me for reading recommendations aren't likely to write the themes of books in a notebook or on three-by-five cards. But the difference is not as great as one might suppose; the sense of obligation is much the same. Rodriguez's experience of reading, say, Plato's *Republic* might not be altogether alien to that of many of his elders: "I needed to keep looking at the book jacket comments to remind myself what the text was about. Nevertheless, . . . I looked at every word of the text. And by the time I reached the last word, I convinced myself that I had read *The Republic*. In a ceremony of great pride, I solemnly crossed Plato off my list."

So one reason I usually decline to give reading recommendations is that I don't want to encourage such habits of mind. But there's a positive counterpart to this negative reason: my commitment to one dominant, overarching, nearly definitive principle for reading: *Read at Whim*. I learned this principle from the essayist and poet Randall Jarrell, who once met a scholar, a learned man and a critic, who commented that he read Rudyard Kipling's novel *Kim* every year. Jarrell's response:

> The critic said that once a year he read *Kim*; and he read *Kim*, it was plain, at whim: not to teach, not to criticize, just for love—he read it, as Kipling wrote it, just because he liked to, wanted to, couldn't help himself. To him it wasn't a means to a lecture or article, it was an end; he read it not for anything he could get out of it, but for itself. And isn't this what the work of art demands of us? The work

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