



Reading Literature Makes Us Smarter and Nicer

"Deep reading" is vigorous exercise from the brain and increases our real-life capacity for empathy

By [Annie Murphy Paul](#) June 03, 2013

Gregory Currie, a professor of philosophy at the University of Nottingham, recently argued in the [New York Times](#) that we ought not to claim that literature improves us as people, because there is no "compelling evidence that suggests that people are morally or socially better for reading Tolstoy" or other great books.

Actually, there is such evidence. Raymond Mar, a psychologist at York University in [Canada](#), and Keith Oatley, a professor emeritus of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto, reported in studies published in [2006](#) and [2009](#) that individuals who often read fiction appear to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and view the world from their perspective. This link persisted even after the researchers factored in the possibility that more empathetic individuals might choose to read more novels. A [2010 study](#) by Mar found a similar result in young children: the more stories they had read to them, the keener their "theory of mind," or mental model of other people's intentions.

"Deep reading" — as opposed to the often superficial reading we do on the Web — is an endangered practice, one we ought to take steps to preserve as we would a historic building or a significant work of art. Its disappearance would imperil the intellectual and emotional development of generations growing up online, as well as the perpetuation of a critical part of our culture: the novels, poems and other kinds of literature that can be appreciated only by readers whose brains, quite literally, have been trained to apprehend them.

Recent research in cognitive science, psychology and neuroscience has demonstrated that deep reading — slow, immersive, rich in sensory detail and emotional and moral complexity — is a distinctive experience, different in kind from the mere decoding of words. Although deep reading does not, strictly speaking, require a conventional book, the built-in limits of the printed page are uniquely conducive to the deep reading experience. A book's lack of hyperlinks, for example, frees the reader from making decisions — Should I click on this link or not? — allowing her to remain fully immersed in the narrative.

That immersion is supported by the way the brain handles language rich in detail, allusion and metaphor: by creating a mental representation that draws on the same brain regions that would be active if the scene were unfolding in real life. The emotional situations and moral dilemmas that are the stuff of literature are also vigorous exercise for the brain, propelling us inside the heads of fictional characters and even, studies suggest, increasing our real-life capacity for empathy.

None of this is likely to happen when we're scrolling through TMZ. Although we call the activity by the same name, the deep reading of books and the information-driven reading we do on the Web are very different, both in the experience they produce and in the capacities they develop. A growing body of evidence suggests that online reading may be less engaging and less satisfying, even for the "digital natives" for whom it is so familiar. Last month, for example, Britain's National Literacy Trust released the results of a study of 34,910 young people aged 8 to 16. Researchers reported that 39% of children and teens read daily using electronic devices, but only 28% read printed materials every day. Those who read only onscreen were three times less likely to say they enjoy reading very much and a third less likely to have a favorite book. The study also found that young people who read daily only onscreen were nearly two times less likely to be above-average readers than those who read daily in print or both in print and onscreen.

To understand why we should be concerned about how young people read, and not just whether they're reading at all, it helps to know something about the way the ability to read evolved. "Human beings were never born to read," notes Maryanne Wolf, director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University and author of *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*. Unlike the ability to understand and produce spoken language, which under normal circumstances will unfold according to a program dictated by our genes, the ability to read must be painstakingly acquired by each individual. The "reading circuits" we construct are recruited from structures in the brain that evolved for other purposes — and these circuits can be feeble or they can be robust, depending on how often and how vigorously we use them.

The deep reader, protected from distractions and attuned to the nuances of language, enters a state that psychologist Victor Nell, in a study of the psychology of pleasure reading, likens to a hypnotic trance. Nell found that when readers are enjoying the experience the most, the pace of their reading actually slows. The combination of fast, fluent decoding of words and slow, unhurried progress on the page gives deep readers time to enrich their reading with reflection, analysis, and their own

memories and opinions. It gives them time to establish an intimate relationship with the author, the two of them engaged in an extended and ardent conversation like people falling in love.

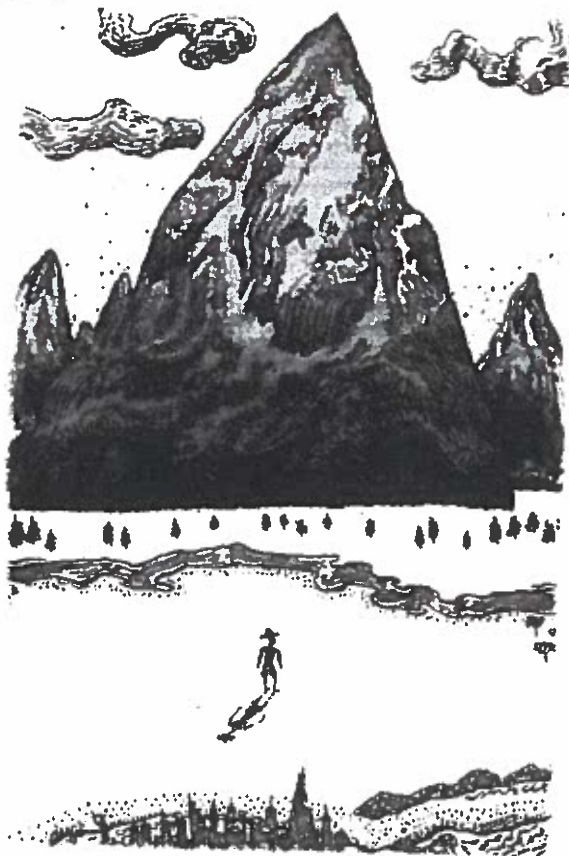
This is not reading as many young people are coming to know it. Their reading is pragmatic and instrumental: the difference between what literary critic Frank Kermode calls “carnal reading” and “spiritual reading.” If we allow our offspring to believe carnal reading is all there is — if we don’t open the door to spiritual reading, through an early insistence on discipline and practice — we will have cheated them of an enjoyable, even ecstatic experience they would not otherwise encounter. And we will have deprived them of an elevating and enlightening experience that will enlarge them as people. Observing young people’s attachment to digital devices, some progressive educators and permissive parents talk about needing to “meet kids where they are,” molding instruction around their onscreen habits. This is mistaken. We need, rather, to show them someplace they’ve never been, a place only deep reading can take them.

OUR LITTLE SECRET

An Easterner will never admit to his true feelings about the West. It's too embarrassing

THERE'S SOMETHING we Easterners don't talk about much among ourselves, much less with anyone living west of, say, Denver. The secret is that once we head West and see some chunk of it for ourselves, we're never quite the same. The scale and power of the place is more than we're wired for. We're (I almost hate to say this) awestruck. We're not going to tell you that, of course. We're proud of where we come from. And we don't want to have a whose-is-bigger? contest with you guys.

Even if we wanted to talk about it, however, it's not the easiest thing to pin down. Scale is the obvious thing. But it's not the whole story. Sure, pretty much every feature of the western landscape—mountains and canyons, deserts and plains, sun and stars, even the critters and the weather—is bigger and more dramatic. But it's not just mathematically bigger, the way a 12-inch sub is twice as big as a 6-inch one. It's orders-of-magnitude bigger, the way a train is bigger than a roller skate.



Here's an example. Years before I started hunting, during a lay-over in Tucson, I saw a guy with a set of antlers about 5 feet long, with tines like the short swords used by ancient Roman infantry. I actually thought the antlers were fake. Either that or artifacts from an archaeological dig. I couldn't accept that some North American animal toted anything like that on its head. A gate agent set me straight. They were elk antlers, he said. And a pain in the butt to ship because they punctured other passengers' luggage.

Here's another. Back when I was 21, Charlie Castaldi and I backpacked into the Bighorns with 60-pound packs, fly rods, and enough freeze-dried food for a month. We came out 10 pounds lighter, and feeling like gods. One evening, as we lay exhausted inside our tiny orange tent, we listened to a thunderstorm rage thousands of feet below us. It was unearthly. Charlie—worried that the storm might rise and, drawn to aluminum tent poles, fricassee us inside the tent—wanted to relocate. I was tired beyond fear.

Later, getting up to pee, I walked out into the silence under a sky filled with more stars than I'd seen before or since: stars so sharp they looked like pinpricks in some black membrane with a different sun blazing away on the other side. I remember being surprised, because I took that sky to mean that God himself wasn't above showing off every now and then.

Friends who've been West will sometimes forewarn you that things are different out there, that a ridge or lake that looks 5 miles off is really 20. You may think you're prepared. You aren't. You're prepared the same way that a boy reading about love thinks he has a handle on it. Then his heart gets pierced. The world itself changes. The best preparation is to go knowing that you can't prepare.

Returning home, some of us unconsciously wipe our memories clean, the better to enjoy what we have. I once got to shoot a Purdey shotgun, a firearm so precise, light, and responsive that I immediately tamped the memory of it down so I wouldn't hate my old gun. Maybe this is why, despite many visits, the West still does its shock-and-awe number on me. Recently, I went for a week of trout fishing high in the Wind River Range of Wyoming. From Lander, we drove up into the mountains until we ran out of road, then we rode horses for five more hours. In places, the trails were so steep and rocky that I occasionally shut my eyes, wrapped both hands in the horse's mane, and recited the Lord's Prayer. Except it had been a while and the catechism that came to mind, drilled into the heads of millions of TV-watching baby boomers decades ago, was this: "Crest has been shown to be an effective decay-preventive dentifrice that can be of significant value when used in a conscientiously applied program of oral hygiene and regular professional care."

I guess the Lord forgave me, because when the trail leveled out and I opened my eyes, I was looking up at a snowcapped mountain, beneath which lay a big bowl of a lake, house-size boulders scattered along the shore like breadcrumbs that had fallen from some table. The outflow slipped over a wide rock ledge and plunged into a series of amber-colored pools, each troutier looking than the next. It was ridiculously gorgeous geography, so scenic that for an instant I feared it might be fake, some outdoors catalog picture come to life. But it wasn't. It was just Wyoming.

Vol. 112, No. 7, FIELD & STREAM (ISSN 0715-9599, USPS 570-650) is published monthly except for a combined December-January issue, by Bonnier Corp., 2 Park Ave., New York, NY 10016, © 2012 by Bonnier Corp. All rights reserved. Reprinting in whole or part is forbidden except by permission of Bonnier Corp. FIELD & STREAM and Trout and Canada goose emblems are registered trademarks of Bonnier Corp. MAILING LIST We make a portion of our mailing list available to reputable firms. If you would prefer that we not include your name, please write us at the Palm Coast, FL, address below. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to FIELD & STREAM, P.O. Box 480235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. SUBSCRIPTION RATES \$19.97 for one year; please add \$8 per year for Canadian addresses and \$16 per year for all other international addresses. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40612608. Canada Post Return Pitney Bowes, PO Box 25542, London, ON M6C 6B2 Canada. Printed in the USA.

Text Rendering

central word phrase - claim point - rephrase

TDP

1st - why the text says

2nd - How is it structured for meaning?

3rd - evaluate quality + value + connect to other texts

Noticing Three Levels of Reading

WHAT **Level 1**

Key Ideas and Details

What's the conversation/topic?
the perspectives?

HOW **Level 2**

Craft and Structure

WHY/
TAKE-AWAYS **Level 3**

Integration of Knowledge & Ideas

Constructed response information:

1. A middle school student sample
2. A rubric elaborated from the essentials: accuracy, sufficiency and relevance.

4

The author learned the great life lesson of fending for yourself. First, because of the dad leaving he had to learn how to deal with hunger because the dad brought home the food. Next he had to learn how to fend for himself. The mother got a job, so he and his little brother were home alone. While his mother was at work he had to fend for himself, dress himself, prepare his own food and take care of his brother. These are big responsibilities which makes it part of the life lesson. Last but not least he had to fend for himself while going to the store. The boys kept on stealing his money and beating him up. The mother made him face his fears, and wouldn't let him come back until he did so. Therefore the life lesson of this story is fending for yourself.

Narrative:

1. What is the plot?
2. What is the theme?
3. What are the story elements?

Expository

4. What is the main idea and the supporting details?
5. What is the structure of the text to convey the ideas?
6. What are the larger issues?

Functional

7. What are the relevant steps, facts, etc.?
8. How do you apply these facts?

Rubric

Score	Description
4	The student completes all of the tasks listed with exceptional accuracy, clarity and control: re-states the prompt, answers the question using relevant support from the text, demonstrates the skill being assessed, fills up the given space, and demonstrates higher level thinking while answering the question
3	The student completes all of the tasks listed: re-states the prompt, answers the question using relevant and accurate support from the text, demonstrates the skill being assessed, fills up the given space, and demonstrates thinking while answering the question.
2	The student completes some of the following tasks: re-states the prompt, answers the question with support from the text, demonstrates the skill being assessed, fills up the given space, and demonstrates thinking.
1	The student fails to complete the following tasks: re-state the prompt, answer the question with support from the text, demonstrates the skill being assessed, fills up the given space, or demonstrates thinking.



WY Department of Education "Teacher to Teacher Initiative" Reading Success

Argument

9. What's the claim
10. Evidence
11. Reasoning - the rules + values applied to the evidence to express the claim