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Reading Literature Makes Us Smarter and Nicer

By Annie Murphy Paul | June 03, 2013 | 8 Comments

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.

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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



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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.

(MORE: [Why Americans Need Spelling Bees and Vocabulary Tests](#))

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.

(PHOTOS: [Peter Hapak's Portraits of Authors](#))

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.

MORE: [Why E-Reading With Your Kid Can Impede Learning](#)

This article is from the [Brilliant Report](#), a weekly newsletter written by Murphy Paul

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Paul's latest book is *Origins: How the Nine Months Before Birth Shape the Rest of Our Lives*.