

The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction (2011)

Alan Jacobs

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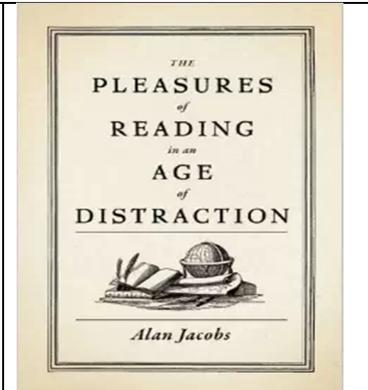
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The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction rails against the prescriptiveness of those who would dictate how and what we should read. By looking at all sides of the argument through 160 pages of anecdote and analysis and allowing us to make up our own minds, Jacobs avoids committing the same prescriptive offence. His aim throughout the book is to empower us to reclaim sovereignty over our reading choices and reconnect us with what he calls, “one of the great human delights” (p.10), a delight that has been lost to many who merely want to appear well read. His observations and suggestions stem from his own extensive reading and from his many years of teaching and interacting with both former and current students.

While Jacobs finds pleasure in occasionally recommending books to close friends and family members whose tastes and preferences he knows well, booklists which are handed out by so-called “experts” carry an aroma of obligation and virtue, reduce our sovereignty over and confidence in our reading choices and make us feel incapable of deciding for ourselves. He observed this about many of his former students, who were good readers but who felt unable to choose for themselves and often requested that he recommend titles. “Experts” such as Bloom, Adler, Van Doren, Fadiman, Dirda and others who prescribe reading lists have earned Jacobs’ harshest criticism. Such lists may result in a reader oscillating between experiencing shame (if caught reading something not on the list) and self-congratulations (if clever enough to read “proper” listed works). Harry Potter books were considered by the “Vigilant school” (p.17) to be inferior and their readers were classed as subliterate by Bloom. Perhaps adult Harry Potter readers who were observed hiding their copy between the covers of more ‘respectable’ books would have benefited from Jacobs’ advice to, “Read what gives you delight ... *without shame*” (emphasis added) (p.23). The belief that reading great books is good for us – even if we do not enjoy them – is akin to being told to eat our broccoli as it is full of vitamins, and formal education has a lot to answer for in this regard. We cannot always be ready for the demand that great works of literature make, so our delight and pleasure should be the standard which guides our reading choices because reading is a highly individual and personal experience.

Jacobs refers to our individual and personal preferences as Whim, a concept he got from Jarrell, and which he distinguishes from mere whim. This distinction is not readily clear at first, and requires a lot of rumination on our part. In small case lettering, whim is “thoughtless, directionless preference that almost invariably leads to boredom or frustration or both” (p.41), while Whim “can guide us because it is based in self-knowledge – it can become for us a gracious Swiss pedagogue of the mind” (p.41). The latter is a reference to the story of Edward Gibbon, the famous author, who gained little from his time at Oxford University as he was left to his own whims, but who flourished, after leaving Oxford, under the “unexpectedly tender and sensitive care” of a good Swiss Protestant (p.40). This care helped Gibbon to begin to “pursue the life of the mind in a serious way” because

he was given “guidance that *did not refute or replace his innate preferences but helped him to see where those preferences properly led*” (emphasis added) (p.40). According to Jacobs, Whim is “One, dominant, overarching, nearly definitive principle for reading” (p.15), one which can be greatly violated by reading lists which ignore each reader’s innate interests and preferences. Reading at Whim is reading a text for itself, not to gain information or to cross off a title on a list but to pursue this “life of the mind” (p.40). Knowledge about ourselves as readers enables us to search for a reading experience which we know we will enjoy, when we are ready for it, something Marilyn Reynolds (2004) also writes about. It emboldens us to abandon books we no longer wish to continue reading, which echoes Krashen’s description of free voluntary reading. However, it also allows us to rethink such abandonment and to entertain the possibility that an abandoned book “may give me pleasure *later*, if I allow it to do so” (p.42). We have a Whim to read something because we have formed an opinion beforehand but we often revise our judgements after reading part or all of a book.

No one takes pleasure in all kinds of reading, “Our goal as adults is not to love all books alike” (p.135), and to think so is to lack self-knowledge. Pleasure in reading a book happens unmethodically and without planning through serendipity, a word Jacobs explains as accidental sagacity, different to fortuity or mere luck. The latter conjures up a sense of helplessness whereas the former can be cultivated and made to grow because we can decide to turn serendipitous events into learning experiences, which can teach us more than if we had simply found what we were looking for (p.143). Often, we do not know what we are looking for and serendipity and Whim (which are closely related) can help us find what will be good for us. Serendipity reenacts our first experiences with books whose contents came to us unsolicited and unanticipated “from the hand of someone who loved us” (p.145). Here he refers to the idea of being read to as synonymous with being loved (p.146), to the extent that many authors admit to having hidden their newfound ability to read when young for fear that their parents would stop reading to them.

Jacobs urges us to read at Whim with rapt attention in order to gain deep satisfaction (p.86). When we decide to read, we choose to pay a certain type of attention which creates “silence and receptiveness to a voice” (p.149). Not all books “want the same *kind* of attention, and good readers ... make the necessary adjustments” (p.98). Rapt attention is a lost-in-a-book quality, which must be cultivated because focusing attention on the written word does not come easily. To read attentively is to ruminate so that we recall what has passed through our minds and reflect further on it, in a kind of chewing of the “textual cud” (p.97). We temporarily suspend disbelief so that we experience whatever we read as if it were real. The text remains silent unless we throw ourselves into it as completely as children do, with all their senses. We must develop this ability “by force of will, sharpened by habit” (p.125) because habit lessens the effort needed to sustain it. It takes time to read and get a book; a book might appear to tell us to “wait, the answer to our questions is coming, if we are patient” (140) and attentive.

There are many distractions to the kind of reading that brings pleasure. Schools do not help to generate long-term attentiveness because reading textbooks requires discipline, not rapt attention (p.115) and teachers make reading appear to be more dutiful than pleasurable. Education has seldom taught “how to read lengthy and complicated texts with sustained, deep, *appreciative* attention” (p.109) so pleasure-filled reading can only happen during our leisure hours. Other distractions mentioned by Jacobs include noise, being overly concerned with the physiological processes of reading, such as movements of the eye or monitoring one’s reading speed, attempting to read a prescribed list of titles so as to merely *have read* them or to appear well read and the sheer number of books vying for our attention which may make us wonder how we will read them all, “So many

books, so little time” (p.70). Then, there are the endless streams of texts which appear on our screens, thanks to the prevalence of Wi-Fi, few of which promote long-term attentiveness.

However, Jacobs assures us that the noise and distraction of everyday life need not be a deterrent to our reading; we must simply build a “cone of silence” (p.117) around ourselves, a silence referred to by Francis Spufford’s mother as a reading silence. This is exemplified not just by patrons of a library but by children studying at the kitchen table, for example, or someone engrossed in a book in a noisy restaurant. Within this cone of silence Jacobs urges us to read at our own pace without worrying “what your rate of words per minute is” (p.69) but to read slowly enough to *enjoy* a book by ruminating over it. Solutions to the distraction of technology exist (for example, shut down the computer and lock the cellphone in the car), but the problem is *wanting* to change our habits. Jacobs, who readily admits to suffering from twitching thumb syndrome, suggests that we view technology as “part of the solution” (p.82). He believes that having a Kindle has helped restore his concentration and attention span for reading a book as it facilitates responsive note-writing and makes it harder to jump around in the text than in a regular codex. He even devotes a short section to Kindling and also mentions his blog about e-readers (p.81).

Overall, Jacobs presents a more optimistic view of reading than that of “many contemporary Jeremiahs” (p.5) by reassuring us that distractions to reading have existed since reading began, albeit in somewhat different forms, and that they can be overcome. His book is easy to read although at times it appears repetitive and contradictory but, then, reading itself is often contradictory and does not readily reveal its mysteries (p.33). It is replete with references, giving the reader a wealth of further texts to consult, although an index or table of contents would have helped. I observed a slight oversight in his citation of Saenger’s (1997) seminal work on silent reading. He mentions the role played by Irish monks in introducing spaces between words but omits the role of Arab scholars, which was summed up thus by Saenger, “the Latin West ... is indebted to the Arab world for the transmission of the text format” (p.124). Like many other Semitic languages, Arabic texts contained spaces between words because their alphabets contained no vowels at first, and when Arab scholars translated classic works of Aristotle and others, they used such spaces, from around the 10th century, which spread throughout Europe.

References

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