

A Good Mystery: Why We Read

**“Tell me what you read and I'll tell you who you are' is true enough,
but I'd know you better if you told me what you reread.”**

Francois Muriac

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PERHAPS the most fantastical story of the year was not "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," but "The Uncommon Reader," a novella by Alan Bennett that imagines the queen of England suddenly becoming a voracious reader late in life.

At a time when books appear to be waging a Sisyphean battle against the forces of MySpace, YouTube and "American Idol," the notion that someone could move so quickly from literary indifference to devouring passion seems, sadly, far-fetched.

The problem was underscored last week when the National Endowment for the Arts delivered the sobering news that Americans - particularly teenagers and young adults - are reading less for fun. At the same time, reading scores among those who read less are declining, and employers are proclaiming workers deficient in basic reading comprehension skills.

So that's the bad news. But is all hope gone, or will people still be drawn to the literary landscape? And what is it, exactly, that turns someone into a book lover who keeps coming back for more?

There is no empirical answer. If there were, more books would sell as well as the "Harry Potter" series or "The Da Vinci Code." The gestation of a true, committed reader is in some ways a magical process, shaped in part by external forces but also by a spark within the imagination. Having parents who read a lot helps, but is no guarantee. Devoted teachers and librarians can also be influential. But despite the proliferation of book groups and literary blogs, reading is ultimately a private act. "Why people read what they read is a great unknown and personal thing," said Sara Nelson, editor in chief of the trade magazine Publishers Weekly.

In some cases, asking someone to explain why they read is to invite an elegant rationalization. Junot Díaz, the author of "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao," vividly recalls stumbling into a mobile library shortly after his family emigrated from the Dominican Republic to New Jersey when he was 6 years old. He checked out a Richard Scarry picture book, a collection of 19th-century American wilderness paintings and a bowdlerized version of Arthur Conan Doyle's "Sign of Four."

So what about those three titles turned him into someone who is crazy for books? "I could create a narrative explaining the creation myth of my reading frenzy," Mr. Díaz said. "But in some ways it's just provisional. I feel like it's a mystery what makes us vulnerable to certain practices and not to others."

Such caveats aside, there are some clues as to what might transform someone into an enduring reader.

"The Uncommon Reader" posits the theory that the right book at the right time can ignite a lifelong habit. (For the fictional queen, it's Nancy Mitford's "Pursuit of Love.") This is a romantic ideal that persists among many a bibliophile.

"It can be like a drug in a positive way," said Daniel Goldin, general manager of the Harry W. Schwartz Bookshops in Milwaukee. "If you get the book that makes the person fall in love with reading, they want another one."

Most often, that experience occurs in childhood. In "The Child That Books Built," Francis Spufford, a British journalist and critic, writes of how "the furze of black marks between 'The Hobbit' grew lucid, and released a dragon," turning him into "an addict."

But what makes that one book a trigger for continuous reading? For some, it's the discovery that a book's character is like you, or thinks and feels like you. In accepting the National Book Award for young people's literature for "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian" earlier this month, Sherman Alexie thanked Ezra Jack Keats, author of "The Snowy Day," a classic picture book. "It was the first time I looked at a book and saw a brown, black, beige character - a character who resembled me physically and resembled me spiritually, in all his gorgeous loneliness and splendid isolation," Mr. Alexie, a Spokane Indian who grew up on a reservation, told the audience.

In an interview, Mr. Alexie said "The Snowy Day" transformed him from someone who read regularly into a true bookhound. "I really think it's the age at which you find that book that you really identify with that determines the rest of your reading life," Mr. Alexie said. "The younger you are when you do that, the more likely you're going to be a serious reader. It really is about finding yourself in a book."

Of course that doesn't account for reading for information, enlightenment or practical advice. And for others, it's not so much identification as the embrace of the Other that draws them into reading. "It's that excitement of trying to discover that unknown world," said Azar Nafisi, the author of "Reading Lolita in Tehran," the best-selling memoir about a book group she led in Iran.

Sometimes the world of reading is opened up by a book that goes down easy. Mr. Bennett said he chose "The Pursuit of Love" for his fictional queen because it happened to be the first adult novel that he read for pleasure. He said that for him, as with the queen's character, the book was a stepping off point into more heavyweight literature. "There are all sorts of entrances that you can get into reading by reading what might at first seem trash," Mr. Bennett said.

And certain books that become phenomena - like those in the Harry Potter series or "The Da Vinci Code" or, to a slightly lesser extent most books recommended for Oprah Winfrey's book club - can, in tempting people to read in the first place, create habitual readers. Perhaps more often, however, those readers just wait for the next "hot" book.

Indeed, even after Ms. Winfrey recommends a title, sales of other books by the same author don't necessarily match those of the book that bears her imprimatur. "What I find with readers today is they don't go off on their own to another book," said Jonathan Galassi, publisher of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. "They wait for the next recommendation."

It may also be that for some, reading is a pursuit that, like ballet or baseball, simply requires practice. "I think for a lot of people, reading is just something you do," said Paula Brehm Heeger, president of the Young Adult Library Services Association. "And you eventually realize that you really like it."

Book sales in general are growing only slightly: According to the Book Industry Study Group, a publishing trade association, the number of books sold last year, 3.1 billion, was up just 0.5 percent from a year earlier.

The question of whether reading, or reading books in particular, is essential is complicated by the fact that part of what draws people to books can now be found elsewhere - and there is only so much time to consume it all.

Readers who want to know they are not alone are finding reflections of themselves in the confessional blogs sprouting across the Internet. And television shows like "The Sopranos" or "Lost" can satisfy the hunger for narrative and richly textured characters in a way that only books could in a previous age.

But books have outlived many death knells, and are likely to keep doing so. "I'm much more optimistic than I think most people are," Mr. Díaz said. Reading suffers, he said, because it has to compete unfairly with movies, television shows and electronic gadgets whose marketing budgets far outstrip those of publishers. "Books don't have billion-dollar publicity behind them," Mr. Díaz said. "Given the fact that books don't have that, they're not doing a bad job."