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Reading: Feeding the Mind and Soul

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Reading Time: 4 minutes



Imagine a room full of fresh-faced humanities graduate students tasked with answering this timeless question: “Why read literature?” These eager youths race to the white board, markers in hand, scribbling their answers before a timer beeps the exercise complete. *You Are What You Read* (<https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691206783/you-are-what-you-read>), by Robert DiYanni, is like the product of that exercise, replete with trite refrains about the value of literature to individual and societal well-being:

- “Reading well awakens and broadens the mind. It provides a vast realm of inner experience that extends far beyond everyday life.”
- “[L]earning to read confidently and skillfully enhances our lives and helps us to enjoy life more completely.”
- “Developing an auditory imagination increases our ability to hear the rhythms of good writing and to feel its pulse, thereby adding to our reading pleasure.”
- “Coming at texts from different questioning directions allows for a wider range of interpretive possibilities than does insisting upon a text’s meaning before we have a chance to hear what it says, notice what it does, see what it shows, and consider what it suggests.”
- “Our primary reasons for reading are to acquire knowledge, deepen understanding, experience pleasure, and even, as we attain these ambitious goals, attain wisdom we might live by.”
- “We read [...] not only to comprehend, but also to connect texts with our lives and to incorporate them into ourselves. We read to make texts intelligible, to make meaning for our lives. If to some extent we are what we eat, we are very much also what we read.”

I could go on, but you get the point. These observations seem true, but simply stating or enumerating them is not as powerful as *feeling, experiencing, or engaging* the primary texts—the works of literature—that substantiate the observations. To his credit, DiYanni fills out commonplace veracities with corroborating anecdotes, background, and situations, making the book more than merely a hackneyed list about the significance and utility of reading.

But what kind of book *is* it? A textbook? A primer? A handbook? A supplement? A tool?

A little of each. It’s a self-help manual (of sorts) with a pragmatic purpose: to encourage people to study good, challenging texts while improving their reading plans and skills. It recalls Harold Bloom’s *How to Read and Why* (<https://www.amazon.com/How-Read-Why->

[Harold-Bloom/dp/0684859076](#)), which, given its tone and content, might have been titled *What I've Read and Why Those Texts Matter to Me and Should to You Too*.

DiYanni's subtitle says it all: "A Practical Guide to Reading Well." He doesn't intend these chapters to substitute for great literature itself. DiYanni means, rather, to steer readers in constructive directions.

He does so in three sections (Approaches, Applications, and Uses) that he bookends with a preface and a coda featuring a nine-part credo: "Read actively. Read deliberately. Read predictively. Read retrospectively. Read interpretively. Read evaluatively. Read purposefully. Read habitually. Read pleurably."

The first section argues that we read chiefly for enjoyment and only secondarily for interpretation. The audience doesn't seem to be scholars, who, after all, *enjoy* interpretation. Ironically, DiYanni *interprets* despite and while cautioning against interpretation. He examines excerpts from numerous texts to discern how syntax, sound, and structure generate sensory responses. His interpreting, moreover, doesn't seem to have diminished his palpable appreciation for literature, notwithstanding his suggestion that interpretation can impede literary appreciation.

DiYanni then takes a philosophical turn. He asks, "Is there a truth about the text?" Conceding that the "quest for the truth of the text" is "no simple matter," he submits that textual truth "is always the author's truth as determined by readers, a truth-seeking negotiation that never ends." The truth of the text, then, according to DiYanni, is independent of the reader's faculties; it is an interaction or participation between separate minds connected by written language.

The reading process, he continues, entails three stages: experience, interpretation, and evaluation. The first is our sensory response to the text, the second an attempt to grasp the interplay between text and sensation, and the third an extrapolation or theorizing about the cultural, social, political, or philosophical implications of the text. The flow is from affective to cognitive, feeling to thinking.

Nothing new or profound here. What about the second section? It's an elementary introduction to two genres – nonfiction (essays in particular) and fiction – that will assist, principally, teachers describing to young students such basics as voice, tone, plot, point of view, style, structure, mood, setting, theme, and so forth. If you aren't such a teacher, don't spend time on this section.

The third and final section addresses the “dialectics” or “paradoxes” of reading. DiYanni maintains that thought and feeling are inextricably tied and mutually reinforcing. He says that reading is simultaneously active and passive: one does it while the text does something back. DiYanni's imperative is not to overthink the process of reading; just let the process happen to you while you enter a narrative and find yourself pulled along by forces not entirely yours to control. Reading occurs in isolation, but necessarily involves the joining of multiple minds: that of the reader and the author or authors. I'm not sure these aspects of reading are “dialectical” or “paradoxical,” but I get DiYanni's perspective.

I used to admonish undergraduates not to take their literacy for granted. To illustrate why, I'd cite a common element of slave narratives, the anecdote about learning how to read. These stories not only reveal how precious literacy was to the author, an escaped or freed slave, but also clarified to nineteenth-century audiences how a former slave, forbidden by law from reading and writing, could have authored the text without the aid of an amanuensis (a literary assistant).

Take Frederick Douglass's reports of his boyhood learning. He depicts his master's wife teaching him before the institution of slavery corrupted her against such instruction, and he mentions, among other things, how he would trick white boys into spelling competitions.

Which is more powerful: DiYanni's matter-of-fact claim that reading “helps us live our lives” or Douglass's riveting account of his tenacious self-education against all odds? The latter, of course. Hence DiYanni's trouble: Why read his lengthy case for reading enduring texts when you could just read the enduring texts? DiYanni himself might say that you can't.

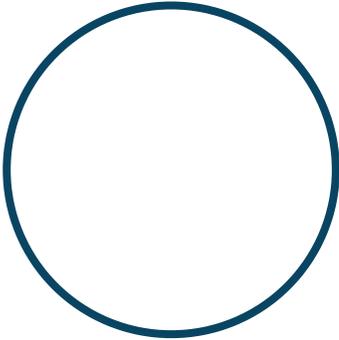
And he'd be right. If forced to choose between works of great literature and *You Are What You Read*, you'll make the right decision.

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