

International Conversation Cafe

Lifestyle Topic: Books

Choose the quotes and questions your group would like to discuss.

Never read a book through merely because you have begun it. ~John Witherspoon
(1723 - 1794)

Which book would you prefer not to read? Why?

Have you ever finished reading a book just because you had started it? Did you regret this decision?

Do you think Witherspoon gave good advice about books? Why?

Do you think you can judge a book before you've finished reading it?

What characteristics does a good book have?

Have you ever found yourself surprised by a book? How so?

Life-transforming ideas have always come to me through books.~Bell Hooks, O
Magazine, December 2003

What is your favorite book? Why?

Do you think all books have the power to provide life-transforming ideas? Can you give an example?

Do you have a book that inspires you? What is it called?

Would you consider a religious book inspirational? How so?

If you were to write a book, what would it be about?

What are some famous books in your home country?

The multitude of books is making us ignorant. ~Voltaire (1694 - 1778)

What do you think Voltaire meant when he said this?

Would you agree or disagree with this quotation? Why?

Do you consider books to be a necessary part of society? How so?

Do you think some books make us more ignorant than other books?

How do you choose the books that you do want to read?

What would you say contributes to the ignorance of our generation (for example, Voltaire thinks too many books made his generation ignorant)?

A Country Without Libraries Charles Simic

Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.
—Groucho Marx

Like many other Americans of my generation, I owe much of my knowledge to thousands of books I withdrew from public libraries over a lifetime. I remember the sense of awe I felt as a teenager when I realized I could roam among the shelves, take down any book I wanted, examine it at my leisure at one of the library tables, and if it struck my fancy, bring it home. Not just some thriller or serious novel, but also big art books and recordings of everything from jazz to operas and symphonies.

In Oak Park, Illinois, when I was in high school, I went to the library two or three times a week, though in my classes I was a middling student. Even in wintertime, I'd walk the dozen blocks to the library, often in rain or snow, carrying a load of books and records to return, trembling with excitement and anticipation at all the tantalizing books that awaited me there. The kindness of the librarians, who, of course, all knew me well, was also an inducement. They were happy to see me read so many books, though I'm sure they must have wondered in private about my vast and mystifying range of interests.

I still can't get over the generosity of the taxpayers of Oak Park. It's not that I started out life being interested in everything; it was spending time in my local, extraordinarily well-stocked public library that made me so.

This was just the start. Over the years I thoroughly explored many libraries, big and small, discovering numerous writers and individual books I never knew existed, a number of them completely unknown, forgotten, and still very much worth reading. No class I attended at the university could ever match that. Even libraries in overseas army bases and in small, impoverished factory towns in New England had their treasures, like long-out of print works of avant-garde literature and hard-boiled detective stories of near-genius.

Yes, reading books is a slow, time-consuming, and often tedious process. Books require patience, sustained attention to what is on the page, and frequent rest periods for reverie, so that the meaning of what we are reading settles in and makes its full impact.

How many book lovers among the young has the Internet produced? Far fewer, I suspect, than the millions libraries have turned out over the last hundred years. Their slow disappearance is a tragedy, not just for those impoverished towns and cities, but for everyone everywhere terrified at the thought of a country without libraries.

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