

INTRODUCING ‘WORTH READING’

Jason Smith on a New Column Coming to
AUJ

When C.S. Lewis was asked in 1944 to write the preface for a new edition of St. Athanasius' foundational 4th-century book *On the Incarnation*, Lewis felt it was important to begin by advocating for “reading old books,” a practice that had fallen out of vogue amidst the heyday of Modernism. The result was a critical essay on how to train your mind to avoid being swept up in the fervors and frenzies of the moment in which you happen to live, to recognize the common errors of your particular *zeitgeist*, and to avoid falling into the trap of what Lewis and Owen Barfield called “chronological snobbery,” which they defined as the unconscious assumption that modes of thought which have fallen out of fashion are necessarily inferior to the modes of thought which succeeded them. Lewis' essay is available in the collection *God in the Dock* as well as a recent re-issue of *On the Incarnation*.

Today, it becomes increasingly necessary to advocate for reading *books*, full stop. No need to belabor the point: there's already been plenty of hand wringing over drastic declines in reading since the 1950s as time spent watching TV shows has climbed.¹ (Undue attention has also been paid to the *very* modest amount that Millennials read more than older generations, thanks partly to ebooks and audio books).² Although more *words* are probably being read at any given moment now than at any previous point in history, most of the words that our eyes encounter are part of short-form pieces distributed digitally: emails, instant messages, blogs, texts, news articles, comics, think pieces, message boards, social media posts, memes, ads. Let's set aside the studies indicating that digital reading seems to take more effort both to understand and to remember than paper reading.³ That research may not hold up

¹ Christopher Ingraham, "Leisure reading in the U.S. is at an all-time low." *The Washington Post*, June 29, 2018, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/29/leisure-reading-in-the-u-s-is-at-an-all-time-low/>.

² Alison Flood, "Young read more books than older generation, research finds," *The Guardian*, September 12, 2014, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/12/young-read-more-books-than-older-generation-research>.

³ Ferris Jabr, "The Reading Brain in the Digital Age: The Science of Paper versus Screens," *Scientific American*, April 11, 2013, accessed

over time because of *neuroplasticity*, the term for how our brains rewire themselves to take better advantage of the tools we use regularly . . . which is cause for both amazement and concern. Too much time spent reading pithy content online may in fact be making it harder for us to read books.⁴

Which brings us to the central question: What is a book? Better yet, what is a *good* book? (Because for a book to be worth the time and attention it takes to read, it had better be good!)

When a book is “good,” what job is it doing that other kinds of writing, other ways of organizing and presenting words, cannot?

A good book is a long-form organization of ideas, research, and narrative that explores complexity, develops thorough arguments and expansive themes, and treats delicate or sensitive material in a nuanced and illuminating manner, when any of the above would be impossible in a shorter work.

February 21, 2021,
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/reading-paper-screens/>.

⁴ Michael S. Rosenwald, "Serious reading takes a hit from online scanning and skimming, researchers say," *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2014, accessed February 21, 2021,
https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/serious-reading-takes-a-hit-from-online-scanning-and-skimming-researchers-say/2014/04/06/088028d2-b5d2-11e3-b899-20667de76985_story.html.

To turn that around and look at it from another angle, a good book is book-length because it must be. It demands that the reader be mentally immersed in its pages over an extended period of time because doing justice to the raw material of its story or its argument requires immersion. A good book must engage the mind on a single subject and pull it upstream on a river of insight or experience over hours and days so that the living brain can reshape itself and become able to understand and appreciate the author's craft and message.

(By the way, a great book on appreciating craft and message is Lewis's *Experiment in Criticism*. Despite the academic-sounding title, it's an accessible read).

Short-form writing cannot do a good book's job. It's too ephemeral. We skim it, extract a few key phrases, perhaps copy the link to some friends, and move on.⁵ If we want to better understand the awesome complexities of our world, develop empathy for someone with a complicated life experience (and whose life experience isn't complicated?), or even gain insight into our own

⁵ Farhad Manjoo, "You Won't Finish This Article," *Slate*, June 6, 2013, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://slate.com/technology/2013/06/how-people-read-online-why-you-wont-finish-this-article.html>.

psyches, good books are a great option -- often, the only option.⁶ Relying on the ephemera of short-form content, even though it can be entertaining and informative, saps our mental and emotional ability to engage with a nuanced subject over a long time. Neil Postman warned -- with insight that has long seemed prophetic -- of the societal consequences of neglecting the discipline of long-form attentiveness in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Almost 40 years later, we find ourselves in dire need of men and women capable of parsing complexity, appreciating nuance, and engaging others with empathy.

OK; let's say we're convinced. But here's the real problem: where to start? Somewhere between 2 and 3 million new books are published every year, including reprints and new editions. Our time and attention are finite. Which books deserve it? What's worth reading?

We're all asking this question. One of the best ways to answer it is through crowdsourcing: using the recommendations of other like-spirited readers

⁶ Claudia Hammond, "Does reading fiction make us better people?" *BBC*, June 2, 2019, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190523-does-reading-fiction-make-us-better-people>.

with similar interests to narrow the list of potentials to a manageable size.

Therefore: this column. Our hope is to turn this space, issue by issue, into a proverbial threshing floor that separates the wheat from the chaff.

Going forward, we intend “Worth Reading” to become a regular fixture of *An Unexpected Journal*. It will feature book recommendations related to the theme of the issue in which each installment appears. Most of the titles featured won’t be “hot off the presses.” Some will be popular, bestselling titles. Others may be more obscure. We’ll recommend books for kids, books for adults, fiction and nonfiction, all genres considered. What these books will have in common is what makes them Worth Reading: each does a job that only a book could do, and does it well.

We hope you’ll look forward to this column in future issues, and we hope it will help guide you (and perhaps your friends and loved ones) to some really good books. But more than that, we hope you’ll participate! Take a look at the upcoming issues listed on our submissions page. Then, use the submissions form to recommend a book. Include the title, author, and a short writeup (aim for 500 words or fewer) explaining how your recommendation fits

the issue theme and why it fits this column's definition of a book Worth Reading.

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