

# The Art of Book Reading

Written by Mrs. A. Caumont

“Studies serve for delight, for ornament and for ability.”— Bacon

We are told in “Percy’s Anecdotes” of a pretty American girl who declared, when questioned by the Duke of Kent, that her whole stock of literature consisted in two books, “the Bible and ‘Peter Pindar,’ sir.” This naive young person could at least give a concise account of her readings. At this present moment we know of more than one young Englishwoman who, if asked a similar question, would reply, “Oh, all Mudie’s Library!”

For now we live in an age of wholesale publishing, and wholesale reading; the number of books increases; new and cheap editions multiply, and are devoured by the public with a haste and despatch not always complimentary to the authors. Some of the choicest bits of modern fiction are perused in this fashion merely as a stop-gap against *ennui* in the corner of the railway carriage, in the tramcar, on board the steamer, in the dressmaker’s, or the dentist’s waiting-room. The Englishwoman’s novel too often ranks similar to the English child’s piece of barley-sugar, it is no regular nourishment for the mind, but it helps to wile away the time. Stuffing one’s self with sweetmeats at odd times, however, and gorging one’s mind with light literature are indulgences equally injurious to the physical and mental digestion; and are both bad habits to be discountenanced in time.

In this happy age of free libraries access to reading-stuff of every description is within the reach of all; the real difficulty remains only in the selection. For the young especially, whose notions of right and wrong have still to be formed, whose ideas of taste and refinement have yet to be cultivated, the choosing of suitable books is of vital importance; a matter which devolves great responsibilities, not only upon the parents, but upon the bookseller and the librarian. For the latter knows what books are in his store, and he is not an upright man who will wittingly allow a bad publication to be handed to a young girl or boy on his premises. So much material is perused now by even the very little folk; there is so much borrowing and lending of books among playmates, so many prettily-bound volumes arrive at all times of the year from kind-hearted uncles and aunties, and guests and god-parents, that it is no easy task to control the standard of fiction — like the Lord Chamberlain — even in the nursery!

And yet a careful mother ought to be as anxious about the nutriment of her child’s mind as she is concerning the food he eats, and the clothes he has to wear. For instance, she will not surely be satisfied to have her little one terrified with tales of ghosts and skeletons, and robbers under the bed; nor will she like to have his tender heart hardened by the minutest details of deeds of daring done by cut-throats and highwaymen! A good and wise mother will all along study her child’s nervous temperament, as well as his intellectual capacity, and make sure that the young mind be supplied only with such nourishment as it can properly and easily assimilate. Even when her boy and girl are entering their teens, it will be no matter of indifference to her whether they pore over stories

applicable to their age, or strain the eyes of their understanding with works of fiction specially prepared for the mature taste and ripe judgment of middle-aged men and women.

When a father proudly boasts that his little son aged eight has read “the Waverley Novels from one end to the other,” our hopes for that *Wunderkind* ought to be –first, that his eyesight may not have suffered, and secondly, that he may, some ten years hence, have the exquisite enjoyment of reading his Scott over again with all the keen relish, and all that romantic fervor which good Sir Walter had a right to expect in his readers.

Most healthily-minded children take greatest delight in descriptions of children of their own age. Their imagination creates a bond of sympathy between the fictitious hero and heroine and their own selves. The child in the book is their companion, their guide, their model for the time being –and for a long time after, if the work is anything like a masterpiece.

Here, then is a grand opportunity for the author to wield his influence for the good and noble and an occasion for the parent to discriminate carefully whether the choice of his child’s book has been a happy one or not.

Although, as we have just hinted, this fanciful parity of age forms a bond between most children and their fiction-heroes, it remains an unfortunate fact that there exists a class of precocious little prigs, who affect adult literary tastes, like the quaint young customer a friend described to me not long ago.

The latter was transacting some business in a wholesale second-hand bookshop shortly before closing-hour on a wet winter’s evening, when in trotted a wizen-faced, old-fashioned-looking little boy, accompanied by his nurse, a respectable elderly woman, who held his hand. Tearing himself loose from his attendant, the little creature in knickerbockers and long stockings and turned-down collars advanced his peering eyes up to a level with the counter, and in a distinct treble demanded “the whole of Shakespeare, Delius’s edition.” “Who is it for, my little man?” inquired the bookseller. “For myself,” piped out the childish voice, “but I must have the whole, and the best edition with notes.” Observing the astonishment of all present, the old nurse came forward with a slight curtsy, and explained that she had come to see that “Master Richard’s” orders were attended to: “She was no scholar herself, and wouldn’t know a Shakespeare from any other book, but little Master Richard was a great reader, and whatever he wanted they were, please, to be sure and give him.”

That same evening, before a large company of guests assembled in her drawing-room, an elegant lady was boasting that her child, aged ten, “simply devoured Shakespeare.” A murmur of admiration ran round the company; but the poor vain mother in the midst of her elation did not realize the ridiculous force of her vaunting. How horrified she would been had a critical stranger dared to hint that her darling boy might be considered by some people in the light of an uncanny little abnormality, about as disagreeable as the famous bearded baby exhibited in the showman’s booth at the Fair!

If a child of nine or ten developed a craving for cigars or caviar, surely no sensible mother would give them to him? On the same grounds, therefore, she ought flatly to refuse him his Shakespeare, until he has arrived at the so-called years of discretion, for there is a divine law of economy in the

development of the human mind, which must be respected, in order that advanced age receives its full share of intellectual enjoyment, as well as early youth.

We try to subvert this law, in attempting to fill juvenile heads with mature ideas; and leave nothing of interest over for later years. For there comes a time when even the most learned philosopher, the keenest financier, the most practiced statesman will each claim his *dolce far niente*, and seek some recreation, after years of mental worry and overwork, in the pages of a fascinating author. We have witnessed the thorough enjoyment of a well-known German professor, who had spent years and years over the intricacies of two Greek prepositions, when, at sixty, he gained his first leisure to read "The Heart of Midlothian." And a similar case was that of a charming old English schoolmaster, who, at the age of eighty, was making the acquaintance of Trollope's "Doctor Thorn." "It is a beautiful book," he said, "and I am thankful that I have leisure now to enjoy it."

We do not maintain that everyone should wait until he is eighty to properly appreciate a standard English novel, but we do strongly advise the young to husband their intellectual enjoyment, to keep something in reserve for the time when only the works of experienced and philosophical authors will have a real attraction for them.

A few months ago we were travelling in an express train through Holland. Two of our companions were a little girl of thirteen and her father, both English. The heat was oppressive, and the child was tired; but her satisfaction at meeting her father again, after a year passed in a foreign boarding-school, enabled her to bear up against the fatigue of the long railway journey. Her father was delighted on his part, to have his little daughter with him once more; and took a particular pleasure in lavishing all sorts of attentions on her. He offered her fresh fruit, and then a bottle of *eau-de-Cologne*, and finally, undoing a brown paper package, he presented her with a book which he had purchased expressly for her before leaving London. "Now my dear, here is something that will delight you—but first let me cut open the pages with my penknife. There now, begin, and let me know after a little how you like it." So saying, he handed his little daughter Thackeray's "Vanity Fair!"

The child read, turning page after page with a listless, lackadaisical air; and the good father, a hale, bluff, hearty-looking specimen of a London merchant, eyed her from his corner with ever-growing disappointment. "What, don't you like it, my girl? Ah, but you must laugh when you read a little further! Oh, how I enjoyed that book last winter.?"

Of course he had enjoyed it. William Makepeace Thackeray had intended him, and his wife both, to like it; and, had he, the author, been present in that railway compartment, he would have said to the unsophisticated little lassie, "Let that stand by till later, my child, and take, in the meantime, one of my daughter's books: 'Five Old Friends with New Faces,' or 'Miss Angel.' For my daughter, Mrs. Ritchie, writes quite as well as I ever did; and just now you will enjoy her society better than mine."

As far as literary enjoyment goes, all we can say is that for those children, boys and girls, who have already "done" their Dickens and Thackeray, Scott, George Elliot, Trollope and Charles Kingsley—and "the whole of Mudie's Library"—those children's future is blighted, *unless* they shall have the

good sense when they are grown up to take these authors down from their shelves one by one, and re-read them carefully. But how few will have the good sense to do it!

How many, through untimely efforts at forced acquaintanceship, like the little girl in the train, will have formed entirely false conceptions about the merits of really class authors! The consequence is we so frequently meet with young men and young women of twenty-one, who have a deep-rooted horror of having to read any masterpiece through, and, to beguile the time, take refuge in the silliest, most superficial of penny weeklies. When they have skimmed limp society-paper, have wanly smiled at the column of stale jokes and yawned over the puzzles at the end, they throw it out of the window for what it is worth. That sorry bit of printed matter represents literature to them. These young persons' heads seem empty enough now, and yet they were duly stuffed and crammed with the English Classics, mediaeval and modern, at home and at school, about the age of twelve.

In the eyes of a true literary connoisseur it is just as bad form to read fast, as to eat fast; and I think no one ought to be accused of pedantry, who protests against the vulgar habit of peeping at the end of a volume, so as to discover the *dénouement* before reading the entire contents of a novel. I know at a dinner it would scarcely be compatible with good breeding to ask the servant what is coming next, or to stretch out one's hand to the *épergne* in the middle of the table, and help one's self to dessert before the roast-beef and *entrees* had been passed round. And yet that is precisely what the impatient reader does, who "skims" and "skips" and cuts open the last pages of his book after finishing the first chapter! At that rate he may go to the library once every day for a new novel.

I remember a lady-friend of mine, who, being indisposed, was ordered by her physician to remain in bed for a few days. Her acquaintances proposed to lend her some books to help the hours to pass less tediously, and their offer was gladly accepted. We sent a very interesting new work which our friend had not read, and which we thought might occupy her pleasantly at intervals for at least half a week. The same evening, however, her maid was round with the book returned. "Her mistress had read it through, and wished very much to have three others about the same length for tomorrow." That lady was ill for ten days, and during that time she went through twenty standard English works, which had taken the authors ten long years in all to write. Like most people who read in this unsatisfactory style, our invalid was little the wiser afterwards, for she had mixed up the different plots in her head, had forgotten the names of the characters, and had never for an instant paused to reflect what meaning or lesson was to be derived from any one of them. Beauty in the books there was none for her after she had run them through. They were amusing enough at the time, but she still hoped to light on something more diverting, something to make the time fly still faster! She didn't really want books to make her think, but only to make her laugh.

This habit of reading at random, and capriciously passing over what seems to be prosy is generally acquired early, and the consequence is that, instead of the shrewd, intellectual, well-informed, "wise-and witty" set of folk, who, according to Macaulay and Sydney Smith, must have flourished by shoals in our grandfathers' young days, we meet at our dances and picnics and social gatherings too many great, placid-faced nonentities, both male and female, who can talk in monosyllables about dogs and sports, but would consider it a bore to have to speak about books at all.

In order to attain the threefold result set forth by Lord Bacon in his essay on Studies; namely, “delight,” “ornament” and “ability,” it is very necessary to pursue our readings with some sort of system. Apart from the treasures of devotional literature, which in no country exist in such rare variety and abundance as in our own happy England, we would in general recommend our young reader to pursue the following subjects simultaneously, History, Biography, and Fiction; to study them for his own personal pleasure, and always to have a volume appertaining to each of these divisions on hand. The reader, as he follows the narrations of the graphic historian, whether it be Macaulay or Green, Motley or Lord Mahon, will invariably find his interest and enjoyment enhanced by accepting the aid of a correct atlas by which to realize the positions of the places he is reading about, for, having looked up for the towns and rivers, the battlefields and fortresses, he may feel as well-supplied as a judge upon the Bench, with all the details of the case vividly set out before his mind, and especially if he takes the trouble to read and compare the different accounts of contemporaneous events, he shall be rewarded with the consciousness of having grasped the whole situation, of having entirely mastered one particular portion of the world’s history.

*To be continued...*

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# The Art of Book Reading

Written by Mrs. A. Caumont

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*Continued...*

In reading the *biographies* of great and distinguished men and women, it is a very good plan to have a notebook and pencil at hand, with which to mark down the names as they occur, no matter whether these may be given in the alphabetical register at the end of the work or not. In this way the reader suddenly becomes familiar with the friends and acquaintances, with the correspondents and contemporaries of his favorite heroes; and by the time he has perused four or five biographies of eminent persons moving in the same sphere of life, and about the same time, he will have a delightful opportunity of verifying the truth of the trite observation that “the world is, after all, a very small place.” As a proof, we have only to read the “Letters” of some of our famous musicians, such as Mendelssohn and Beethoven; the “Lives” of such statesmen as Bunsen Von Moltke, or the “Memoirs” of three or four of those polished men of genius who have thrown such a halo of literary romance around the name of Holland House.

In biographies, therefore, let us try to remember the names—for they are not mentioned for nothing—and moreover to get acquainted with the dates and the places; and note how often the very same people came together at the very same time. In this way we shall have whole pictures correctly painted out before our minds, and we shall experience the same delight that we might have in entering some large Assembly—say the House of Commons on a great debate night, with a good guide who points out “the Speaker” and the “leader of the Opposition” and “the popular agitators” all by name. For in a biography it is not the doings and sayings of the one individual, but all those with whom he or she come into contact, that render the volume interesting and entertaining. And our advice to the student is, whether the subject of his perusal belong to the category of History or of Biography, to go on and continue reading with his eyes open after he has closed the book; that is to say, let him find out all he possibly can relating to his subject from other sources than the printed volume—from masterpieces on the walls of the picture-galleries, from old prints and engravings, and, if possible, by actually visiting the spots hallowed and immortalized by the author’s faithful pen. For he who has not visited Stratford-on-the-Avon, or at least seen some picture of it, has not thoroughly read Washington Irving’s “Sketchbook;” and no Londoner can be said to have completely studied English History who has not paid his personal homage to the Tower, the National Gallery and Hampton Court.

The well-known Dublin professor, Dr. George Stokes, when lecturing to his students in Trinity College on his favorite subject, Old Irish History, whilst referring to ancient manuscripts, rare coins, and the famous “Book of Kells,” never misses an opportunity of urging them to go forth to the book of Nature with wide-open eyes, and find in some picturesque country ruin or some interesting old city corner the corollary of the lesson learnt in the classroom. In this delightful power of

illustrating his subject dwells the secret of Professor Stokes's success; but there is nothing to hinder every student adopting the same pleasant method of completing his historical information.

Books of Fiction, like all works of art, claim as their rightful due to be enjoyed leisurely, calmly and thoughtfully, for it must be as mortifying to an author to think of his book being glanced over superficially, "skimmed," and "skipped," as for a painter to have his picture "skied," or hung in an unfavorable light.

It is very curious to observe how the degree of pleasure to be derived from a well-written novel or tale varies, according to the degree of culture in the reader. Some minds remain so simple and unsophisticated, as only to experience a *subjective* charm in the work. Its artistic beauty pleases and amuses them personally, whilst they are engaged with it; and that is all, the delight ends there. But apart from this surface quality, every book has what we may designate its *objective* interest for the intellectual reader. In turning the pages, and whilst panting over the fate of the hero or heroine, and whilst laughing at the humorous, and sobbing at the heartrending touches of saddest pathos, he keeps at the same time an attentive eye on the entire plot; observes the unity of grouping, the poetic justice, and the whole construction of the story as a work of art from the introduction to the *dénouement* at the end.

Besides what we have just termed the "subjective" and the "objective" method of reading, there remains the *deductive*; and these three apply to the perusal of more works than mere books of fiction. A thoughtful, intelligent reader accustomed to observe and compare, may deduct, from the volume he has in his hand, an immense amount of information respecting the writer. Supplied with a certain kind of circumstantial evidence, he can get to know what were his, the writer's, favorite authors, his likes and dislikes, what temperament he had, what books he had read, what he had loved and suffered, and what experiences he had undergone; for a good writer is a true child of nature, and betrays himself unconsciously through his pen. Thus, in reading Macaulay, one is forcibly reminded of certain passages of Voltaire's "Charles the Twelfth" and "Louis the Fourteenth," and one may easily trace the influence of Charles Dickens's "David Copperfield" when reading Alphonse Daudet's terribly pathetic story of "Jack". We can sometimes, through his work, trace different, and even opposing elements which have influenced the same author at different times of his career; just as with the various pictures executed by a celebrated painter at different stages of his artistic development, and which the connoisseur at once divides and catalogues as the products of the master's "earlier," "maturer," and "later" "school," or as the outcomes of his happier or unhappier moods. These are niceties in the Art of Book Reading only to be attained by those who read with an enlightened and cultivated understanding, whose desire is not merely for "delight," and "ornament" but as Bacon adds, "for ability:" ability to judge of the merits of a book, which in itself is a worthy aim.

In advising the young folks to do themselves justice in their reading, and to secure for themselves the maximum amount of satisfaction to be derived from literature, let us persuade them early to adopt a scholarly method in the dealings with books.

To begin at the beginning, accustom them to treat their volumes with respect, even when they are still too young to love them for their contents. Explain to the little ones that it is naughty to substitute the atlas for a blotter, and to use the big dictionary for pressing ferns and seaweed! Tell them how Molière, in one of his comedies, ridiculed the ignorant Frenchman who folded his cravats inside a large copy of Plutarch! Start every boy and girl from their very infancy with a little library all their own. Accustom them later to catalogue their books, and to arrange them in order; and to keep a notebook, in which to insert the title of each work as they have read it. Remember that the condition of the books in a household bears witness for, or against, the gentility of the family, and it is not a good sign if the mother gives the baby a volume to play with, to suck with his little wet mouth, and crumple with his chubby hands, and tear with his little clawlike nails. We have seen such sights, and heard Nurse's prophecy that "the darling will be a professor someday, for only see how he fastens on the learning!" Nor is it a good sign when boys and girls are allowed to scribble over their schoolbooks, and use them as receptacles for birthday cards and foreign stamps.

A clever advocate once pleaded that his client, the prisoner at the Bar, must be insane, from the fact that, as a boy, he had always torn his books out, leaf by leaf, to read them; "for," he argued, "surely no one ought to be judged as a responsible being who could willfully mishandle his books in such a manner!"

The *choice* of our books is almost as important as the choice of our friends; for, if the saying holds true that "you know a man by his friends," it is equally true that you can judge of a person by the book he chooses to read. It has often happened that after a man's death, a peep into his library has given a truer estimate of his real character than anything to be gathered from years of intercourse with him. We are told that the poet, Molière, when he died, left a well ordered library behind him, and that his filial affection was discovered by the place of honor accorded among his books to one volume in particular—his mother's Bible.

May our young readers never possess books they should be ashamed to show! There is, of course, less risk of this for those still in the nursery and the schoolroom, because every careful parent knows exactly what his boys and girls are reading. Papa, when he has time, lays down his newspaper, and begs Charlie to read aloud that thrilling scene between the native and the sea-captain in the "Boys' Own Annual" and Mamma, when her Maisie's blue eyes are closed in slumber, will fold up her needlework, to have a peep through the pages that were apparently so fascinating. For the mother's heart is ever careful of unseen influences over her darling.

The time when real danger is to be apprehended in fiction is later on, when Charlie and Masie have, as the Germans express it, "worn out their childhoods' shoes," have left the nursery and schoolroom joys behind them. Then, if their taste has not become *blasé* by premature surfeiting at intellectual feasts, the whole garden of literature is before them. Like our first parents in Paradise, they may "take and eat." But, alas, as in every earthly paradise, there grows the tree that bears the forbidden fruit, and there lurks the tempter close at hand, to praise and recommend it above all wholesomer diet. It may be very tempting, but our hearts, and our innate sense of right and wrong, must tell us whether we are right in partaking of it! The noblest animal, the horse, will turn his head



away from the fountain when he perceives that it has become polluted; and so must the *real lady* and the *true gentleman* turn away offended at the first impure sentiment they meet with in the pages they are reading, and fling the volume to the back of the grate, where it can occasion no further mischief.

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