

The Value of Books

Books are wonderful in making a magic and yet a very real environment. Those who speak to us through them are more intimate and have more influence over us than our living companions. "Tell me what you read," observed Goethe, "and I will tell you what you are." Because our experience is so limited and because books interpret the experiences of thousands of years, we naturally learn most from them. Carlyle says, "The true university of these days is a collection of books, and all education is to teach us how to read." Centuries ago Bacon complained that of the making of books there is no end. Today the condition is immeasurably more appalling and bewildering. Yet we must choose rightly the books needed for our nourishment and learn to use them skillfully. Do not plod through one book or a collection of books just because they have been highly recommended. Many ambitious readers have suffered mental indigestion and permanent discouragement from books unsuited to their nature or stage of development. The first requirement of profitable reading is interest. If the words fail to hold your active attention the book is not for you. Of course you must give a book a reasonable trial. Even if the first chapter is a little painful, the second may strike a spark that may generate a lasting fire of enthusiasm. But in the high schools and colleges many students have acquired an everlasting dislike for the finer types of drama, essay, poetry, and fiction simply because their immature minds were not ready to grapple with the humor, the irony, the philosophy, the reflections of maturity. Years of experience, of disillusion, of suffering and renewed faith are sometimes necessary for the comprehension and realization of the commonplace truths of the copybook. But even trained, educated readers differ widely in tastes and prejudices. To one, Dostoyevsky is a neurotic, a diseased, hopeless subject for the pathologist; to another, a torch of light and warmth. Just as our natures differ, they demand different nourishment, and you yourself must be the one to prescribe. Only sympathetic communion with great minds as revealed in their best books can give you the larger understanding, the perspective, that is a part of culture.

Two Kinds of Books - Books are readily separated into two classes, those of information and those of inspiration. De Quincey has put this distinction most effectively in a famous passage. He says: There is the literature of knowledge and there is the literature of power. The function of the first is to teach; the function of the second is to move. The first is a rudder; the second, an oar or a sail. The first speaks to the mere discursive understanding; the second speaks, ultimately it may happen, to the higher understanding or reason, but always through affections of pleasure and sympathy. Whatever bit of a wise man's work is honestly and benevolently done, that bit is his book, or his piece of art. It is mixed always with evil fragments, - ill done, affected, redundant work. But if you read rightly, you will easily discover the true bits, and those are the book. Now books of this kind have been written in all ages by their greatest men, by great readers, great statesmen, and great thinkers. These are all at your choice; and Life is short. You have heard as much before; yet have you measured and mapped out this short life and its possibilities? Do you know, if you read this, that you cannot read that; that what you lose today you cannot gain tomorrow? Will you go and gossip with your housemaid or your stable-boy when you may talk with queens and kings; or flatter yourselves that it is with any worthy consciousness of your own claims to respect that you jostle with the hungry and common crowd for entree here, and audience there, when all the while this eternal court is open to you, with its society wide as the world, multitudinous as its days - the chosen and the mighty of every place and time? Read widely and well and you will expand your mind enormously.

About the Author

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