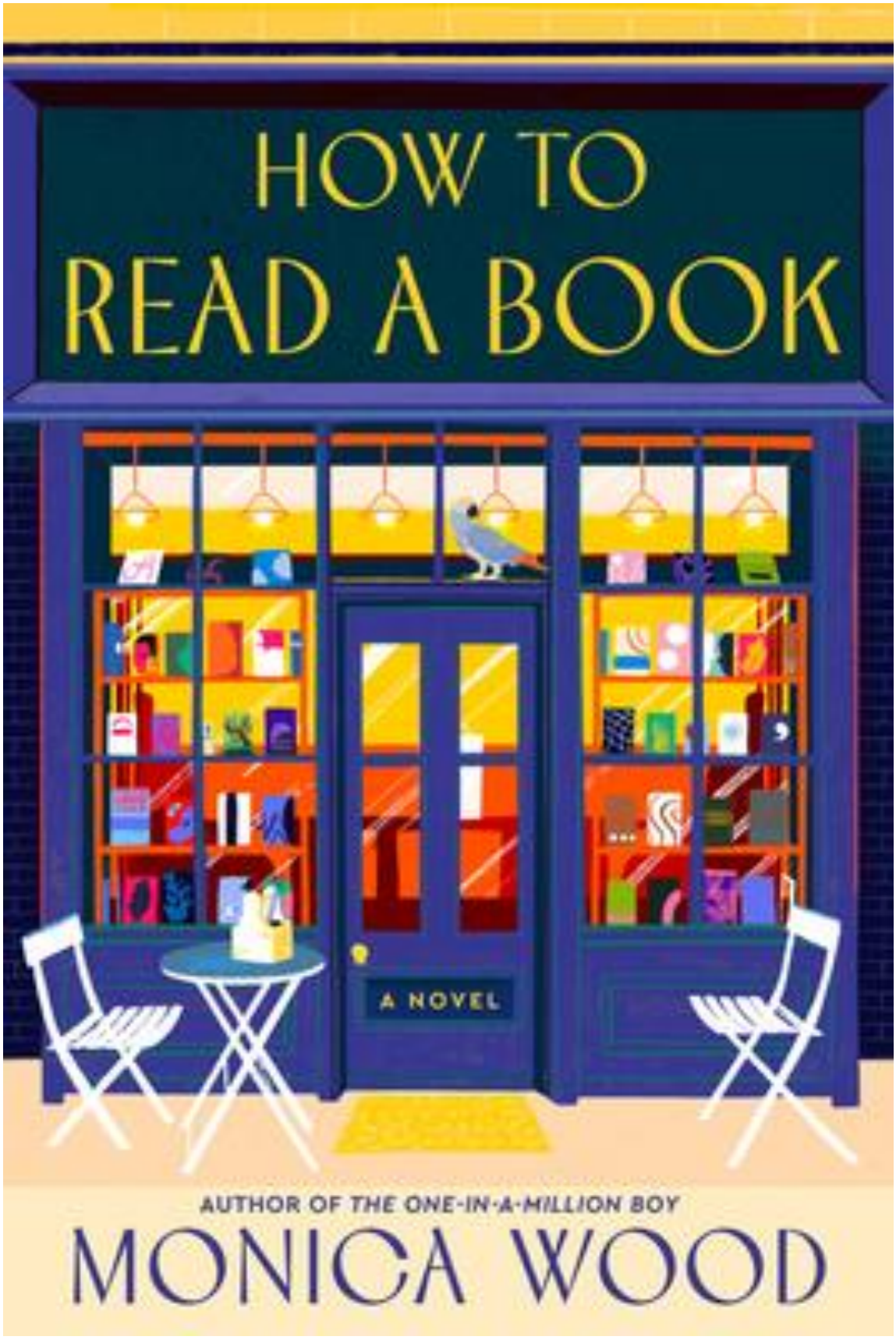
HOW TO
READ A BOOK
A NOVEL
AUTHOR OF THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY
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Chapter 2

The Levels of Reading

In the preceding chapter, we made some distinctions that will be important in what follows. The goal a reader seeks—be it entertainment, information or understanding—determines the way he reads. The effectiveness with which he reads is determined by the amount of effort and skill he puts into his reading. In general, the rule is: the more effort the better, at least in the case of books that are initially beyond our powers as readers and are therefore capable of raising us from a condition of understanding less to one of understanding more. Finally, the distinction between instruction and discovery (or between aided and unaided discovery) is important because most of us, most of the time, have to read without anyone to help us. Reading, like unaided discovery, is learning from an absent teacher. We can only do that successfully if we know how. But important as these distinctions are, they are relatively insignificant compared to the points we are going to make in this chapter. These all have to do with the levels of reading. The differences between the levels must be understood before any effective improvement in reading skills can occur. There are four levels of reading. They are here called levels rather than kinds because kinds, strictly speaking, are distinct from one another, whereas it is characteristic of levels that higher ones

include lower ones. So it is with the levels of reading, which are cumulative. The first level is not lost in the second, the second in the third, the third in the fourth. In fact, the fourth and highest level of reading includes all the others. It simply goes beyond them. The first level of reading we will call Elementary Reading. Other names might be rudimentary reading, basic reading or initial reading; any one of these terms serves to suggest that as one masters this level one passes from nonliteracy to at least beginning literacy. In mastering this level, one learns the rudiments of the art of reading, receives basic training in reading, and acquires initial reading skills. We prefer the name elementary reading, however, because this level of reading is ordinarily learned in elementary school. The child's first encounter with reading is at this level. His problem then (and ours when we began to read) is to recognize the individual words on the page. The child sees a collection of black marks on a white ground (or perhaps 14 CHAPTER 2. THE LEVELS OF READING 15 white marks on a black ground, if he is reading from a blackboard); what the marks say is, "The cat sat on the hat." The first grader is not really concerned at this point with whether cats do sit on hats, or with what this implies about cats, hats, and the world. He is merely concerned with language as it is employed by the writer. At this level of reading, the question asked of the reader is "What does the sentence say?" That could be conceived as a complex and difficult question, of course. We mean it here, however, in its simplest sense. The attainment of the skills of elementary reading occurred some

time ago for almost all who read this book. Nevertheless, we continue to experience the problems of this level of reading, no matter how capable we may be as readers. This happens, for example, whenever we come upon something we want to read that is written in a foreign language that we do not know very well. Then our first effort must be to identify the actual words. Only after recognizing them individually can we begin to try to understand them, to struggle with perceiving what they mean. Even when they are reading material written in their own language, many readers continue to have various kinds of difficulties at this level of reading. Most of these difficulties are mechanical, and some of them can be traced back to early instruction in reading. Overcoming these difficulties usually allows us to read faster; hence, most speed reading courses concentrate on this level. We will have more to say about elementary reading in the next chapter; and in Chapter 4, we will discuss speed reading. The second level of reading we will call Inspectional Reading. It is characterized by its special emphasis on time. When reading at this level, the student is allowed a set time to complete an assigned amount of reading. He might be allowed fifteen minutes to read this book, for instance—or even a book twice as long. Hence, another way to describe this level of reading is to say that its aim is to get the most out of a book within a given time—usually a relatively short time, and always (by definition) too short a time to get out of the book everything that can be gotten. Still another name for this level might be skimming or pre-reading. However,

we do not mean the kind of skimming that is characterized by casual or random browsing through a book. Inspectional reading is the art of skimming systematically. When reading at this level, your aim is to examine the surface of the book, to learn everything that the surface alone can teach you. That is often a good deal. Whereas the question that is asked at the first level is “What does the sentence say?” the question typically asked at this level is “What is the book about?” That is a surface question; others of a similar nature are “What is the structure of the book?” or “What are its parts?” Upon completing an inspectional reading of a book, no matter how short the time you had to do it in, you should also be able to answer the question, “What kind of book is it—a novel, a history, a scientific treatise?” CHAPTER 2. THE LEVELS OF READING 16 Chapter 4 is devoted to an account of this level of reading, so we will not discuss it further here. We do want to stress, however, that most people, even many quite good readers, are unaware of the value of inspectional reading. They start a book on page one and plow steadily through it, without even reading the table of contents. They are thus faced with the task of achieving a superficial knowledge of the book at the same time that they are trying to understand it. That compounds the difficulty. The third level of reading we will call Analytical Reading. It is both a more complex and a more systematic activity than either of the two levels of reading discussed so far. Depending on the difficulty of the text to be read, it makes more or less heavy demands on the reader.

Analytical reading is thorough reading, complete reading, or good reading—the best reading you can do. If inspectional reading is the best and most complete reading that is possible given a limited time, then analytical reading is the best and most complete reading that is possible given unlimited time. The analytical reader must ask many, and organized, questions of what he is reading. We do not want to state these questions here, since this book is mainly about reading at this level: Part Two gives its rules and tells you how to do it. We do want to emphasize here that analytical reading is always intensely active. On this level of reading, the reader grasps a book—the metaphor is apt—and works at it until the book becomes his own. Francis Bacon once remarked that "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Reading a book analytically is chewing and digesting it. We also want to stress that analytical reading is hardly ever necessary if your goal in reading is simply information or entertainment. Analytical reading is preeminently for the sake of understanding. Conversely, bringing your mind with the aid of a book from a condition of understanding less to one of understanding more is almost impossible unless you have at least some skill in analytical reading. The fourth and highest level of reading we will call Syntopical Reading. It is the most complex and systematic type of reading of all. It makes very heavy demands on the reader, even if the materials he is reading are themselves relatively easy and unsophisticated. Another name for this level might be

comparative reading. When reading syntopically, the reader reads many books, not just one, and places them in relation to one another and to a subject about which they all revolve. But mere comparison of texts is not enough. Syntopical reading involves more. With the help of the books read, the syntopical reader is able to construct an analysis of the subject that may not be in any of the books. It is obvious, therefore, that syntopical reading is the most active and effortful kind of reading. We will discuss syntopical reading in Part Four. Let it suffice for the moment to say that syntopical reading is not an easy art, and that the rules for it are not widely known. Nevertheless, syntopical reading is probably the most rewarding of all reading activities. The benefits are so great that it is well worth the trouble of learning how to do it.