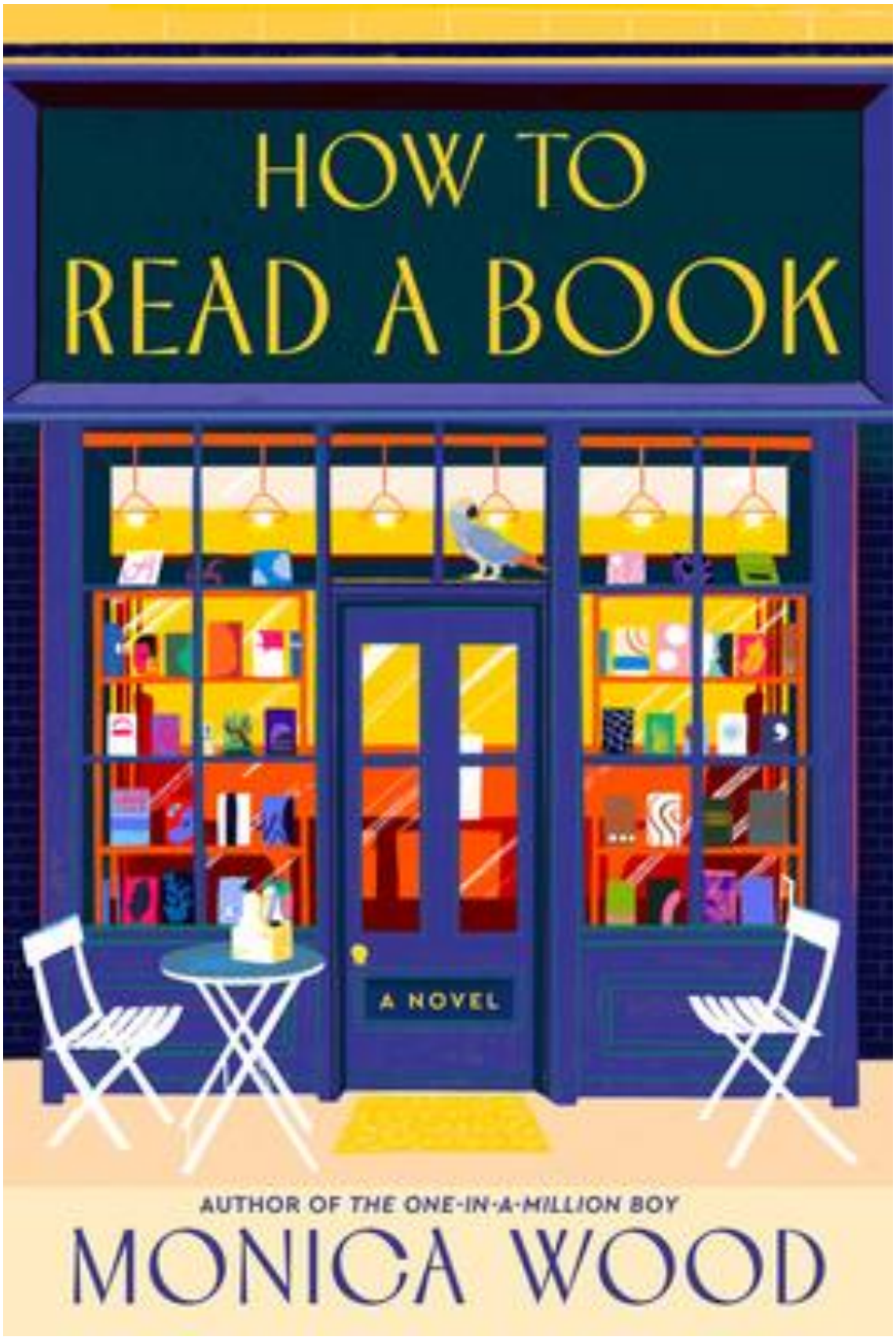
HOW TO
READ A BOOK
A NOVEL
AUTHOR OF THE ONE-IN-A-MILLION BOY
MONICA WOOD

CHAPTER 13

How to Read Practical Books

In any art or field of practice, rules have a disappointing way of being too general. The more general, of course, the fewer, and that is an advantage. The more general, too, the more intelligible—it is easier to understand the rules in and by themselves. But it is also true that the more general the rules, the more remote they are from the intricacies of the actual situation in which you try to follow them. We have stated the rules of analytical reading generally so that they apply to any expository book—any book that conveys knowledge, in the sense in which we have been using that term. But you cannot read a book in general. You read this book or that, and every particular book is of a particular sort. It may be a history or a book in mathematics, a political tract or a work in natural science, or a philosophical or theological treatise. Hence, you must have some flexibility and adaptability in following the rules. Fortunately, you will gradually get the feeling of how they work on different kinds of books as you apply them. It is important to note here that the fifteen rules of reading, in the form in which they were presented toward the end of Chapter 11, do not apply to the reading of fiction and poetry. The outlining of the structure of an imaginative work is a different matter from the outlining of an expository book. Novels and plays and poems do not proceed by terms, propositions, and arguments—their fundamental content, in other words, is not logical, and the criticism of such works is based on different premises. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that no rules at all apply to reading imaginative literature. In fact, there is a parallel set of rules for reading such books that we will describe in the

next chapter. These are useful in themselves; but the examination of them and their differences from the rules for reading expository works also throws light on the latter rules. You need not fear that you will have to learn a whole new set of fifteen or more rules for reading fiction and poetry. The connection between the two kinds of rules is easy to see and state. It consists in the underlying fact, which we have emphasized over and over, that you must ask questions when you read, and specifically that you must ask four particular questions of whatever you 128 CHAPTER 13. HOW TO READ PRACTICAL BOOKS 129 are reading. These four questions are relevant to any book, whether fiction or nonfiction, whether poetry or history or science or philosophy. We have seen how the rules of reading expository works connect with and are developed from these four questions. Similarly, the rules of reading imaginative literature are also developed from them, although the difference in the nature of the materials read causes some dissimilarities in the development. That being the case, in this part of the book we will have more to say about these questions than about the rules for reading. We will occasionally refer to a new rule, or to a revision or adaptation of an old one. But most of the time, as we proceed to suggest approaches to the reading of different kinds of books and other materials, we will emphasize the different questions that must be primarily asked, and the different kinds of answers that can be expected. In the expository realm, we have noted that the basic division is into the practical and the theoretical—books that are concerned with the problems of action, and books that are concerned only with something to be known. The theoretical is further divisible, as we have noted, into history, science (and mathematics), and philosophy. The practical division cuts across all boundaries, and we therefore propose to examine the nature of such books a little further, and to suggest some guidelines and precautions when you read them.

The Two Kinds of Practical Books The most important thing to remember about any practical book is that it can never solve the practical problems with which it is concerned. A theoretical book can solve its own problems. But a practical problem can only be solved by action itself. When your practical problem is how to earn a living, a book on how to make friends and influence people cannot solve it, though it may suggest things to do. Nothing short of the doing solves the problem. It is solved only by earning a living. Take this book, for example. It is a practical book. If your interest in it is practical (it might, of course, be only theoretical), you want to solve the problem of learning to read. You would not regard that problem as solved and done away with until you did learn. This book cannot solve the problem for you. It can only help. You must actually go through the activity of reading, not only this book but many others. That is what it means to say that nothing but action solves practical problems, and action occurs only in the world, not in books. Every action takes place in a particular situation, always in the here and now and under a particular set of circumstances. You cannot act in general. The kind of practical judgment that immediately precedes action must be highly particular. It can be expressed in words, but it seldom is. It is almost never found in books, because the author of a practical book cannot envisage the concrete practical situations in which his readers may have to act. Try as he will to be helpful, he cannot give them concrete practical advice. Only another person in exactly the same situation could do that. Practical books can, however, state more or less general rules that apply to CHAPTER 13. HOW TO READ PRACTICAL BOOKS 130 a lot of particular situations of the same sort. Whoever tries to use such books must apply the rules to particular cases and, therefore, must exercise practical judgment in doing so. In other words, the reader himself must add something to the book to make it applicable in practice. He must

add his knowledge of the particular situation and his judgment of how the rule applies to the case. Any book that contains rules—prescriptions, maxims, or any sort of general directions—you will readily recognize as a practical book. But a practical book may contain more than rules. It may try to state the principles that underlie the rules and make them intelligible. For example, in this practical book about reading, we have tried here and there to explain the rules by brief expositions of grammatical, rhetorical, and logical principles. The principles that underlie rules are usually in themselves scientific, that is, they are items of theoretical knowledge. Taken together, they are the theory of the thing. Thus, we talk about the theory of bridge building or the theory of contract bridge. We mean the theoretical principles that make the rules of good procedure what they are. Practical books thus fall into two main groups. Some, like this one, or a cookbook, or a driver's manual, are primarily presentations of rules. Whatever other discussion they contain is for the sake of the rules. There are few great books of this sort. The other kind of practical book is primarily concerned with the principles that generate rules. Most of the great books in economics, politics, and morals are of this sort. This distinction is not sharp and absolute. Both principles and rules may be found in the same book. The point is one of relative emphasis. You will have no difficulty in sorting books into these two piles. The book of rules in any field will always be immediately recognizable as practical. The book of practical principles may look at first like a theoretical book. In a sense it is, as we have seen. It deals with the theory of a particular kind of practice. You can always tell it is practical, however. The nature of its problems gives it away. It is always about a field of human behavior in which men can do better or worse. In reading a book that is primarily a rule-book, the major propositions to look for, of course, are the rules. A rule is most directly expressed by an imperative rather than a

declarative sentence. It is a command. It says: “Save nine stitches by taking a stitch in time.” That rule can also be expressed declaratively, as when we say, “A stitch in time saves nine.” Both forms of statement suggest—the imperative a little more emphatically, but not necessarily more memorably—that it is worth while to be prompt. Whether it is stated declaratively or in the form of a command, you can always recognize a rule because it recommends something as worth doing to gain a certain end. Thus, the rule of reading that commands you to come to terms can also be stated as a recommendation: good reading involves coming to terms. The word “good” is the giveaway. That such reading is worth doing is implied. The arguments in a practical book of this sort will be attempts to show you that the rules are sound. The writer may have to appeal to principles to persuade you that they are, or he may simply illustrate their soundness by showing you how they work in concrete cases. Look for both sorts of arguments. CHAPTER 13. HOW TO READ PRACTICAL BOOKS 131 The appeal to principles is usually less persuasive, but it has one advantage. It can explain the reason for the rules better than examples of their use. In the other kind of practical books, the kind dealing mainly with the principles underlying rules, the major propositions and arguments will, of course, look exactly like those in a purely theoretical book. The propositions will say that something is the case, and the arguments will try to show that it is so. But there is an important difference between reading such a book and reading a purely theoretical one. Since the ultimate problems to be solved are practical—problems of action, in fields where men can do better or worse—an intelligent reader of such books about “practical principles” always reads between the lines or in the margins. He tries to see the rules that may not be expressed but that can, nevertheless, be derived from the principles. He goes further. He tries to figure out how the rules should be applied in practice. Unless it

is so read, a practical book is not read as practical. To fail to read a practical book as practical is to read it poorly. You really do not understand it, and you certainly cannot criticize it properly in any other way. If the intelligibility of rules is to be found in principles, it is no less true that the significance of practical principles is to be found in the rules they lead to, the actions they recommend. This indicates what you must do to understand either sort of practical book. It also indicates the ultimate criteria for critical judgment. In the case of purely theoretical books, the criteria for agreement or disagreement relate to the truth of what is being said. But practical truth is different from theoretical truth. A rule of conduct is practically true on two conditions: one is that it works; the other is that its working leads you to the right end, an end you rightly desire. Suppose that the end an author thinks you should seek does not seem like the right one to you. Even though his recommendations may be practically sound, in the sense of getting you to that end, you will not agree with him ultimately. A:nd your judgment of his book as practically true or practically false will be made accordingly. If you do not think careful and intelligent reading is worth doing, this book has little practical truth for you, however sound its rules may be. Notice what this means. In judging a theoretical book, the reader must observe the identity of, or the discrepancy between, his own basic principles or assumptions and those of the author. In judging a practical book, everything turns on the ends or goals. If you do not share Karl Marx's fervor about economic justice, his economic doctrine and the reforms it suggests are likely to seem to you practically false or irrelevant. You may think, as Edmund Burke did, for example, that preserving the status quo is the most desirable objective; everything considered, you believe that to be more important than removing the inequities of capitalism. In that case, you are likely to think that a book like The Communist Manifesto is preposterously false. Your main

judgment will always be in terms of the ends, not the means. We have no practical interest in even the soundest means to reach ends we disapprove of or do not care about. CHAPTER 13. HOW TO READ PRACTICAL BOOKS 132 The Role of Persuasion This brief discussion gives you a clue to the two major questions you must ask yourself in reading any sort of practical book. The first is: What are the author's objectives? The second is: What means for achieving them is he proposing? It may be more difficult to answer these questions in the case of a book about principles than in the case of one about rules. The ends and means are likely to be less obvious. Yet answering them in either case is necessary for the understanding and criticism of a practical book. It also reminds you of one aspect of practical writing that we noted earlier. There is an admixture of oratory or propaganda in every practical book. We have never read a book of political philosophy—however theoretical it may have appeared, however "abstract" the principles with which it dealt—that did not try to persuade the reader about "the best form of government." Similarly, moral treatises try to persuade the reader about "the good life" as well as recommend ways of leading it. And we have tried continuously to persuade you to read books in a certain way, for the sake of the understanding that you may attain. You can see why the practical author must always be something of an orator or propagandist. Since your ultimate judgment of his work is going to tum on your acceptance of the goal for which he is proposing means, it is up to him to win you to his ends. To do this, he has to argue in a way that appeals to your heart as well as your mind. He may have to play on your emotions and gain direction of your will. There is nothing wrong or vicious about this. It is of the very nature of practical affairs that men have to be persuaded to think and act in a certain way. Neither practical thinking nor action is an affair of the mind alone. The emotions cannot be left

out. No one makes serious practical judgments or engages in action without being moved somehow from below the neck. The world might be a better place if we did, but it would certainly be a different world. The writer of practical books who does not realize this will be ineffective. The reader of them who does not is likely to be sold a bill of goods without his knowing it. The best protection against propaganda of any sort is the recognition of it for what it is. Only hidden and undetected oratory is really insidious. What reaches the heart without going through the mind is likely to bounce back and put the mind out of business. Propaganda taken in that way is like a drug you do not know you are swallowing. The effect is mysterious; you do not know afterwards why you feel or think the way you do. The person who reads a practical book intelligently, who knows its basic terms, propositions, and arguments, will always be able to detect its oratory. He will spot the passages that make an "emotive use of words." Aware that he must be subject to persuasion, he can do something about weighing the appeals. He has sales resistance; but this need not be one hundred percent. Sales resistance is good when it prevents you from buying hastily and thoughtlessly. But the reader who supposes he should be totally deaf to all appeals might just as well not read practical books. CHAPTER 13. HOW TO READ PRACTICAL BOOKS 133 There is a further point here. Because of the nature of practical problems and because of the admixture of oratory in all practical writing, the "personality" of the author is more important in the case of practical books than theoretical. You need know nothing whatever about the author of a mathematical treatise; his reasoning is either good or not, and it makes no difference what kind of man he is. But in order to understand and judge a moral treatise, a political tract, or an economic discussion, you should know something about the character of the writer, something about his life and times. In reading: Aristotle's Politics, for example, it is

highly relevant to know that Greek society was based on slavery. Similarly, much light is thrown on The Prince by knowing the Italian political situation at the time of Machiavelli, and his relation to the Medicis; or, in the case of Hobbes' Leviathan, that Hobbes lived during the English civil wars and was almost pathologically distressed by social violence and disorder. What Does Agreement Entail in the Case of a Practical Book? We are sure that you can see that the four questions you must ask about any book are somewhat changed in the case of reading a practical book. Let us try to spell out these changes. The first question, What is the book about?, does not change very much. Since a practical book is an expository one, it is still necessary, in the course of answering this first question, to make an outline of the book's structure. However, although you must always try to find out (Rule 4 covers this) what an author's problems were, here, in the case of practical books, this requirement becomes the dominant one. We have said that you must try to discern the author's objectives. That is another way of saying you must know what problems he was trying to solve. You must know what he wanted to do—because, in the case of a practical work, knowing what he wants to do comes down to knowing what he wants you to do. And that is obviously of considerable importance. The second question does not change very much, either. You must still, in order to answer the question about the book's meaning or contents, discover the author's terms, propositions, and arguments. But here again it is the last aspect of that task (covered by Rule 8) that now looms most important. Rule 8, you will recall, required you to say which of the author's problems he solved and which he did not. The adaptation of this rule that applies in the case of practical books has already been stated. You must discover and understand the means the author recommends for achieving what he is proposing. In other words, if Rule 4 as adapted for practical books is Find out what

the author wants you to do, then Rule 8, as similarly adapted, is Find out how he proposes that you do this. The third question, Is it true?, is changed somewhat more than the first two. In the case of a theoretical book, the question is answered when you have compared the author's description and explanation of what is or happens CHAPTER 13. HOW TO READ PRACTICAL BOOKS 134 in the world with your own knowledge thereof. If the book accords generally with your own experience of the way things are, then you must concede its truthfulness, at least in part. In the case of a practical book, although there is some such comparison of the book and reality, the main consideration is whether the author's objectives—that is, the ends that he seeks, together with the means he proposes to reach them—accord with your conception of what it is right to seek, and of what is the best way of seeking it. The fourth question, What of it?, is changed most of all. If, after reading a theoretical book, your view of its subject matter is altered more or less, then you are required to make some adjustments in your general view of things. (If no adjustments are called for, then you cannot have learned much, if anything, from the book.) But these adjustments need not be earth-shaking, and above all they do not necessarily imply action on your part. Agreement with a practical book, however, does imply action on your part. If you are convinced or persuaded by the author that the ends he, proposes are worthy, and if you are further convinced or persuaded that the means he recommends are likely to achieve those ends, then it is hard to see how you can refuse to act in the way the author wishes you to. We recognize, of course, that this does not always happen. But we want you to realize what it means when it does not. It means that despite his apparent agreement with the author's ends and acceptance of his means, the reader really does not agree or accept. If he did both, he could not reasonably fail to act. Let us give an example of what we mean. If, after completing Part Two of this book,

you (1) agreed that reading analytically is worthwhile, and (2) accepted the rules of reading as essentially supportive of that aim, then you must have begun to try to read in the manner we have described. If you did not, it is not just because you were lazy or tired. It is because you did not really mean either (1) or (2). There is one apparent exception to this contention. Suppose, for example, that you read an article about how to make a chocolate mousse. You like chocolate mousse, and so you agree with the author of the article that the end in view is good. You also accept the author's proposed means for attaining the end—his recipe. But you are a male reader who never goes into the kitchen, and so you do not make a mousse. Does this invalidate our point? It does not, although it does indicate an important distinction between types of practical books that should be mentioned. With regard to the ends proposed by the authors of such works, these are sometimes general or universal—applicable to all human beings—and sometimes applicable only to a certain portion of human beings. If the end is universal—as it is, for example, with this book, which maintains that all persons should read better, not just some—then the implication discussed in this section applies to every reader. If the end is selective, applying only to a certain class of human beings, then the reader must decide whether or not he belongs to that class. If he does, then the implication applies to him, and he is more or less obligated to act in the ways specified by the author. If he does not, then he may not be so obligated. We say "may not be so obligated" because there is a strong possibility that CHAPTER 13. HOW TO READ PRACTICAL BOOKS 135 the reader may be fooling himself, or misunderstanding his own motives, in deciding that he does not belong to the class to which the end is relevant. In the case of the reader of the article about chocolate mousse, he is probably, by his inaction, expressing his view that, although mousse is admittedly delicious, someone else—perhaps his wife—should be the one to make

it. And in many cases, we concede the desirability of an end and the feasibility of the means, but in one way or another express our reluctance to perform the action ourselves. Let someone else do it, we say, more or less explicitly. This, of course, is not primarily a reading problem but rather a psychological one. Nevertheless, the psychological fact has bearing on how effectively we read a practical book, and so we have discussed the matter here.