

1.1 Why do we read?

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Wise words from Mark Twain.

Why do we read? The simple answer is for pleasure. But what exactly is the nature of that pleasure? Reading removes us from the structure of our lives, from the routine, the sequential habits of our day-to-day living. We enter instead another time zone. The plot, characters and setting occupy us, and while we read we inhabit the others' reality. The pleasure therefore is derived from escaping our own small, limited and often repetitive lives and entering an exotic elsewhere.

But perhaps there is also the attraction of reserving something private for ourselves, something outside of the public world of relationship, family, work and occupation; something that is not encumbered by the stricture of time and self.

Some of us feel it necessary to read, that we read to see ourselves, and (to borrow from Heaney), "to set the darkness echoing". Wittgenstein says we can experience only that for which we have a language, so we read to expand our language. We look for the story to help

us learn more about ourselves, to tell us what we think, how we feel and how we perceive the world.

I'm reading *Crooked Heart* by Lisa Evans, and Mattie, the old and eccentric godmother, tells Noel, our young protagonist, that "hobbies are for people who don't read books". We are bombarded by popular culture, by advertising, television, fashions and trends – to read is to build your own imagination and strengthen resistance to prevailing commercial forces. We read to recognise what is true of human nature, and fiction most adequately grapples with what motivates us. Our values and assumptions are challenged; we are invited to empathise with entirely different points of view.

We read to feel less lonely, to feel more connected to the greater reality of what has happened or is happening or may happen outside of our direct experience. We read to assure ourselves that the search for meaning is relentless and that many creative minds have made all sorts of wild and wonderful sense of it all, or not – but even the chaotic, complex texts are bound in covers and are structured into comprehensible stories.

We read to discover the consequences of actions without bearing any of the responsibility. We read with *Schadenfreude*, with pity, empathically; we look for validation, catharsis and humour and find common sense, confusion, absurdity and righteousness. We read because we know instinctively that nature, books, music and love help us live life more intensely and in, dare I say it, truth. We read because we love the language, the images it evokes, the landscapes it conjures, the mire of human desire, anguish and beauty. We read to send us to sleep dreaming of different sunsets and boulevards, oceans and bogs. We read to know that there is someone tracing a life very like our own, or not at all alike but recognisable all the same, and making of it a moment worth sharing. In Tim Winton's book *Breath* the protagonist says: "I liked books – the respite and privacy of them – . . . Whenever I sank into them I felt free."

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