



# THE COMMITTED READER



READING FOR UTILITY, PLEASURE, AND  
FULFILLMENT IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

ROBERT A. STEBBINS

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To Landon, a testimony to the love of reading

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# Acknowledgments

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My grandson Landon Nesbitt, to whom this book is dedicated, was a significant part of its inspiration. I have recognized for several years that leisure studies needed a book-length treatment of the liberal arts reading hobbies and that I should write such a work. While I was searching for the optimal literary facture with which to carry off this project, Landon, now 12 years old, had begun much earlier to show an extraordinary interest in reading first children's and then adolescents' books. His reading, classified here as pleasurable, occurs whenever he finds a few moments, lasts for hours if circumstances allow, and frequently has him shuffling between two or three novels. He loves to describe what he has just read and to consider how things might be different were the plot and its characters changed in certain ways. His books often trigger flights of imagination, one of the many types of casual leisure enjoyed in this genre of literature. In brief, though the present volume centers on adults, Landon showed me, even as a child, some of the essential features of committed reading. Turning to the editorial side of bringing this book into the world, I deeply appreciate the efforts that Martin Dillon, acquisitions editor, put into the project. They were at once efficient, knowledgeable, and always most friendly. And thanks, too, to Kellie Hagan, production editor, who took over from Martin, quickly and effectively moving the book to publication.

# Introduction

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I've never known any trouble that an hour's reading didn't assuage.  
—Charles de Secondat

I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading! How much sooner one tires of anything than of a book! When I have a house of my own, I shall be miserable if I have not an excellent library.  
—Jane Austen

Happy is he who has laid up in his youth, and held fast in all fortune, a genuine and passionate love of reading.  
—Rufus Choate

These three quotations valorize reading, no doubt about that. They also treat reading as though it concerned only certain kinds of literature. Thus, de Secondat the eighteenth-century French philosopher also known as Montesquieu, might not be so assuaged if his hour's reading consisted of trying to decipher the fine print of an insurance policy or the instructions of how to assemble a complex piece of furniture from IKEA. Would Jane Austen, nineteenth-century English novelist, be so enamored of books were her library filled with cheap, popular novels? And Mr. Choate, a nineteenth-century lawyer and orator, might never have developed a passion for reading had he been forced, as a student, to read dull textbooks. In short, reading is a many-faceted activity, some of it enjoyable, some of it forced on us, some of it deeply rewarding, some of it bland and technical, some of it popular and some of it esoteric.

This book looks into all these facets of reading and more. Its working definition of reading is that of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (SOED), sense 5: “the extent to which one reads or has read; literary knowledge.” Acquiring a literary knowledge implies that such reading—call it committed reading—necessarily takes time and requires concentration. When we quickly glance at some printed material, we are not in this sense reading. Furthermore, there is no indication in this definition that reading is limited to the belles lettres, technical material, popular novels, newspapers, magazines, or any other type. Rather, it is all of this and more. Additionally, what the SOED definition fails to acknowledge is the existence of different types of reading material and the different motives for consuming it. I will consider the first under the headings of books, periodicals, pamphlets, and manuals. The second will be classified as utilitarian (including information seeking), pleasurable (including relaxation and escape), and fulfilling (including challenge, inspiration, and personal development). Finally, we shall see in chapter 1 that these types are pursued across life's three domains of work, leisure, and non-work obligation. By the way, according to Clark and Rumbold (2006, p. 5), pleasurable reading, the most thoroughly analyzed of the three types, also goes by an assortment of names, including “independent reading” (Cullinan,

2000), “voluntary reading” (Krashen, 2004), “leisure reading” (Greaney, 1980), “recreational reading” (Manzo and Manzo, 1995), and “ludic” reading (Nell, 1988)

In fact, common usage distinguishes somewhat better than the SOED the various kinds of reading available in modern times. When we say something is a “good read,” we are usually referring to enjoyable or fulfilling material rather than something technical. However accurate and concise the instructions to an IKEA sofa-bed, they are not a good read, although they may be described as informative. Talk about reading skills and the art of reading is actually a reference to technical and fine-arts reading, since beyond the rudimentary skills acquired in school, neither capacity is needed to read popular material. As a third example consider boring reading, a damning evaluation hurled by some students at their assigned textbooks and supplementary readings. Neither are they a good read.

So what are we doing when we consume a written passage that fails to qualify as committed reading? One activity competent readers engage in when not carefully reading written passages is skimming them. Such cursory reading might be a prelude to a committed reading of the material, an exploratory act to determine if a serious reading is in the participant’s interest. But it could also be a search for information, of the sort obtainable by a quick glance at the material. Detailed ephemeral reading is what we do with complicated material that is, however, but a few pages in length. Here we find such specimens as the IKEA instructions as well as instructions on how to fill in a modern income tax form, set up a new computer, and prepare an haute cuisine meal. We often engage in detailed ephemeral reading when we digest written material at an exhibit or on a website. Finally, we sometimes engage in both types in the course of consuming a short text like a newspaper article or a newsletter. We skim this passage and carefully read the next one or even carefully reread the one we just skimmed. No matter how we go about it, non-committed reading is also an important way of gaining information, but to properly examine such reading, would take us beyond the scope of the present work.

These two are thus residual categories in this book, such that here “reading” without qualifier will always refer to the committed variety. That cursory and detailed ephemeral reading have been set aside in this study is not to argue, however, that they are unimportant. Quite the contrary. We are faced daily with a manner of reading material, some of which can in a scanning be handled with dispatch. Further, there are also many routine situations in life where we must quickly read and understand quite ordinary but nevertheless detailed instructions. Skill at reading in general is also an aid to reading effectively and efficiently in these two areas. Nor will the two be wholly ignored; they will surface from time to time as context for this book, showing where committed reading leaves off and cursory or detailed ephemeral reading begins.

The world has been reading for millennia, though the practice only emerged with the invention of written language. The cuneiform and Elamite languages are believed to have been developed around 3300 BC, which were nevertheless practical creations intended to describe certain aspects of daily life. At this time language took the form of pictographs, with symbols or signs representing simple



ideas such as a local animal, plant, or quantity of objects. Reading in this rudimentary language was strictly a practical act.

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Reading as considered in this book began when written languages came to be used to communicate more complex ideas strung together to create a larger meaningful whole, whether a scientific observation, bit of commonsense information, artistic expression (poetry, stories), or philosophical or religious truth. Such reading is analyzed here as a special activity, during which the reader consumes written material enabling him to realize one or more particular ends, be they utilitarian, enjoyment, personal fulfillment, or a combination of these three. Furthermore, though most people use their eyes to read, we can certainly realize many of these ends by consuming the relevant material aurally, by hearing words originally set out to be read, or tactilely, by feeling text written in Braille. The larger point is that modern reading consists of understanding more or less complex ideas expressed, at least initially, in written language.

Yet, even today, reading is not the only way that people come to know the world in which they live. We occasionally observe certain symbols which communicate a great deal. Modern examples include a depiction of skull and crossbones (poison), a lit cigarette crossed out in various ways (no smoking), and the ubiquitous happy face. Pictures, sometimes said to be worth a thousand words, are not read but, as with symbols, are looked at and thereby, for the properly enculturated, understood. Additionally, we learn about our world from its familiar and unfamiliar sounds, feels, and smells, be they bird songs or ambulance sirens, earth tremors or heavy footfalls, cooking bacon or malodorous sewage. For people incapable of visual reading and unable to engage in aural or in Braille reading, the information and feelings provided by these other senses constitute their only contact with the physical world. Meanwhile, for the rest of us, reading is also important, albeit variously so.

That is, some people, though they know how to read, nonetheless read very little. They either prefer, or are forced, to learn about their world in other ways and to seek their leisure with minimal reliance on written words. They converse, listen to music, watch television programs produced to feature imagery (e.g., sportcasts, travelogues, graphic arts programs), and the like. Moreover, some people are unable to read. Some of them have poor, uncorrected, or uncorrectable vision. Some are illiterate, since reading is an acquired skill that they have not bothered to master sufficiently. Others are severely dyslexic and so they are unable to learn to read well. And still others are effectively illiterate, because the language they know is neither spoken nor published where they are presently living.

Since this book is about adult readers, sometimes including the committed late-teenage reader, the child reader will not be scrutinized here. Adult reading in all its manifestations has been much less studied, and it will take all the pages of this book to adequately cover the subject. Meanwhile, there is a voluminous literature on childhood reading, on how to improve it, inspire it, teach it, write material for it, and so on. The books listed on Amazon found under the search term of "reading" offer ample evidence of this. Some books for adults appear here as well, but most are manuals on how to read faster, build vocabulary, read in English

as a second language, read for optimum comprehension, and similar interests.

~~The present book strikes out in a markedly different direction. It centers on reading as a special, goal-oriented activity pursued in all three domains of life, namely, work, leisure, and non-work obligation. Reading is in this framework conscious, purposive activity, the enactment of which requires concentration with the eyes (ears, fingers) focused intently on the material at hand. Nevertheless, we can engage in this activity while involved in certain parallel activities like waiting, resting, and riding somewhere (e.g., in an airplane, automobile, or subway car). Thus reading is often part of an individual's overall lifestyle, and depending on how much and what kind of it that person does, it may evolve into a special lifestyle all its own, as epitomized in the inveterate reader.~~

Voracious committed reading, it will be pointed out later, is not for everybody some people love it to the point of making it a hobby, and others, among them many intellectuals, crave utilitarian information leading them to read assiduously for it but doing so mainly as a means to another end. What is the nature of the lifestyle created by so intense an interest? How is life organized socially and geographically around this kind of reading? How is reading distributed across life's three domains? Such questions are taken up in chapter 6. Before then we look into the theoretic basis of the study of reading set out in chapter 2 as the serious leisure perspective and the framework of library and information science. Chapter 3 examines the cultural and organizational background for reading, particularly as manifested in continuing and adult education and self-directed reading. Reading here is utilitarian, with some of it offering fulfillment as well. Casual leisure reading, or reading for pleasure, is the subject of chapter 4. In chapter 5 we consider the liberal arts hobbies, all of them centered largely, if not exclusively, on reading, a main outcome of which is personal development and self-fulfillment. But before tackling this to-do list, we need a sense of reading's situation in today's world.

# Modern Reading

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No entertainment is so cheap as reading, nor any pleasure so lasting.  
—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762)

It is possible that, in Lady Montagu’s day, utilitarian and popular, pleasurable reading were not to be found. So, given the material available for her consumption, this observation about reading’s cheapness and durability helps explain the remarkable extent of the practice in modern times.

Jacobs (2011) holds that reading is alive and well in America, notwithstanding the alarm bells being sounded over supposedly insufficient reading, reading inappropriate material, and reading in the wrong way. He says that brick-and-mortar bookstores and their online counterparts have been hugely popular, even while the latter are threatening the existence of some of the former.<sup>[1]</sup> Oprah’s Book Club, which ran from 1996 to May of 2011, was well recognized (as was its counterpart in Britain, the Richard and Judy Book Clubs; Styles, 2007, p. 5). A comparison of data for 1998 and 2008 on the proportions of book readers in the United States shows little change, with slightly over 40 percent of adults reading one book within a twelve-month period (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, Table 437; U.S. Census Bureau 2010, Table 1203). Considering public library visits as another measure of the popularity of reading, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2011, p. 7) reports in its 2009 survey that public library visitations in the United States had increased 24.3 percent since 2000. Moreover, the number of registered borrowers had risen by 4.8 percent from 2006, the first year such data were collected. Meanwhile in Canada “library usage transactions” rose 45 percent between 2000 and 2009 (Lumos Research, 2011). In England adult library visitations dropped about 9 percent between 2005 and 2008 and then remained steady through 2010 (Department of Culture, Media and Sport, 2010).

Nevertheless, the data gathered by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) are less sanguine. Gioia (2007) summarizes the findings set out in their report as they bear on the adult and late-teenage reader:

The story the data tell is simple, consistent, and alarming. Although there has been measurable progress in recent years in reading ability at the elementary school level, all progress appears to halt as children enter their teenage years. There is a general decline in reading among teenage and adult Americans. Most alarming, both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates. (p. 3)

In particular, among people 18 to 44 reading a book not required by school or work fell by 7 percent between 1992 and 2002 (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007, p. 5). This, in effect, refers to reading for “fun,” reading for leisure. Whether

this reading is popular fiction or fulfilling reading is never specified.

~~In Canada looking at the average household expenditure on books, there has been a decline from \$111 in 2005 to \$105 in 2008 (Statistics Canada, 2011, p. 104). Nonetheless:~~

Canadians continue to enjoy reading, whether it be newspapers, magazines or books. The GSS [General Social Survey] data reveal that the vast majority of Canadians read for pleasure; moreover, we read quite frequently and devote a substantial amount of our discretionary time to reading. However, fewer of us reported reading in 1998 compared to six years earlier. Eighty-two percent of adult Canadians reported reading newspapers as a form of leisure in 1998, down 10 percentage points from the 92% reporting reading in 1992. A similar drop in readership occurred with respect to magazines. Approximately seven in ten (71%) Canadians reported reading magazines in 1998, a 9 percentage point drop from nearly 80% reading magazines in 1992. Reading books also showed a drop, although less dramatic than that of newspapers or magazines. In 1998, 61% of adult Canadians reported reading books, down 5 percentage points from 1992. (Ogrodnik, 2000, p. 29)

But, since 1998, Canadian magazine and book reading has risen in 2005 to 76.8 percent and 64.9 percent, respectively (Ewoudou, 2005). If the purchase of books is declining, presumably the increased reading of them is to be accounted for by an increased use of libraries, interpersonal borrowing, and online purchases not recorded in the above surveys. Styles (2007, p. 7) writes that in Britain “more people than ever before are reading for pleasure. According to one survey, 65% of people in the UK read for enjoyment compared to 55% in 1979, with a rise in book sales of 19% in five years. Many people prefer to buy rather than borrow their books, although people are using libraries in more ways than ever before.”

Reading among contemporary Western adults, as suggested by this limited sample of surveys of their interests, remains reasonably appealing in the smorgasbord of delectable activities that tease the leisure time appetite. Nevertheless, such surveys do not begin to fully examine their reading habits, as established across the immense range of reading material of possible interest to them.

## WHAT WE READ

The scope of reading material available to many national populations today is enormous, with none of the sample statistics presented above coming anywhere near covering it. Putting aside for the moment the three broad motives for reading—for utility, pleasure, and fulfillment—the material read enabling their realization comes in four broad types. One is the periodical, the magazines, newsletters, newspapers, bulletins, and the like, which may be found online or in hard copy, sometimes both. Most of us, if we read them at all, read selectively certain articles featured within. The second type is that of the book, paperback, hardcover, large temporarily bound works (by plastic fasteners, levered clamps, metal rings, etc.),

and so on. The OED defines a book as “a collection of sheets of paper or other material, blank, written, or printed, fastened together so as to form a material whole; esp. one with sheets pasted or sewn together at the edge, with protective covers.”

To this category of reading material, we must add the e-book, downloadable into a computer or an electronic reader like the Kindle.<sup>[2]</sup> This innovation has ushered in the e-book/printed book controversy. The traditional printed book has its band of avid followers. Rawsthorn (2012) says that they find it well conceived for the job, being sturdy, light, easy to carry, and, when properly designed, downright beautiful. The e-book apologists hold, in contrast, that theirs is convenient (hundreds of books on a single digital gadget), is environmentally responsible (saves trees), lowers transportation costs, and can be interactive with sound and visuals. Rawsthorn predicts that the printed book, with its superior design, is nonetheless destined to survive, doing so as a relatively expensive niche product falling outside the sphere of popular, pleasurable reading.

de Bury speaks lovingly of print books and how they become closely and emotionally associated with the development of knowledge, pursuit of truth, and experience of personal happiness.

Moreover, since books are the aptest teachers, as the previous chapter assumes, it is fitting to bestow on them the honour and the affection that we owe to our teachers. In fine, since all men naturally desire to know, and since by means of books we can attain the knowledge of the ancients, which is to be desired beyond all riches, what man living according to nature would not feel the desire of books? And although we know that swine trample pearls under foot, the wise man will not therefore be deterred from gathering the pearls that lie before him. A library of wisdom, then, is more precious than all wealth, and all things that are desirable cannot be compared to it. Whoever therefore claims to be zealous of truth, of happiness, of wisdom or knowledge, aye, even of the faith, must needs become a lover of books. (de Bury, 1909, pp. 17-18)

What is more, books have their fragrances. British novelist George Robert Gissing once said that “I know every book of mine by its smell, and I have but to put my nose between the pages to be reminded of all sorts of things.” Would de Bury and Gissing feel the same about today’s e-book?

The third type of reading material is the pamphlet, defined in the OED as “a group of several printed or (formerly) written pages, fewer than would make a book, fastened together without hard cover and issued in a single or (formerly) periodical work; esp. one of which the text is of a minor, ephemeral or controversial, nature.” Position papers of, say, a political party or an activist organization often fit this definition, as do the detailed policy statements occasionally issued by government or by nonprofit associations. Reports and working papers designed to share ideas and generate discussion, common in scientific and technical fields, constitute yet another genre of pamphlet. Brochures, though they may contain some of what is set out in a larger pamphlet,

are too small for our purposes to be considered reading material.

The fourth type is the manual, the conceptual home of an assortment of practical small volumes: guidebooks, cookbooks, repair and handyman books, instructional books, and the like. For some readers textbooks fall into this set. The object of any manual is to make available helpful information bearing on how to solve a certain problem, reach a certain goal, realize a certain project. The sheet or two of instructions on how to assemble or operate something do not amount to a manual as just defined and, hence, are not reading material as examined in this book.

Cutting points are a problem in this typology, new as it is. For example, when is a book small enough to be thought of as a pamphlet? Perhaps it is less a matter of size than whether there are enough pages to allow for an enduring binding. We may not be able to judge a book by its cover, but we may be able to judge whether it is a book by that property. The cutting point between brochure and pamphlet is also vague. Only careful research can settle these questions.

## **The Nature of Reading**

These four types of publications contain an array of reading material, and the motives for reading them can be identified as utilitarian, pleasurable, and fulfilling. The use of manuals is usually driven by utilitarian interests, though some articles, books, and pamphlets may also be sought out for this reason. The pleasure found in reading popular fiction usually comes in book form (including the various kinds of e-books) or it may occasionally appear as a series of installments in a periodical. The same holds for the belles lettres, literature known for its fine, aesthetic qualities, the reading of which contributes to self-fulfillment. Short stories, whether popular or fine art, may be as short as an article and appear in a periodical. Commercial and fine-arts plays, though meant to be presented on a stage, because they are fiction, may also be read like one would read a novel. Many dramatic texts are book-length. Finally, the essay, usually classified as prose or nonfiction, is a belletristic treatise on a certain subject. It, too, varies considerably in length, running from a work as small as an article to one as large as a good-sized book.

The scholarly scientific (social and physical) and humanistic literature has a home in all this, albeit in a most complex way. The journals in these areas—they are periodicals—provide readers with technical articles, which may be viewed by them as either utilitarian or fulfilling, maybe both. An article that affords a new understanding of a research problem or theoretic puzzle may well be seen by some of its readers as enlightening and hence a vehicle for further personal development. Scholarly monographs and graduate student theses can have the same impact, as can working papers (a kind of pamphlet).

Where does poetry fit in modern reading? Many of the finest poems are short, challenging the principle that reading amounts to an enduring activity, because it takes some time and demands concentration. The justification for including short fine-arts poems in our field of reading material is that, to fully understand them, they must be read slowly and deliberately, possibly several times. Fine-arts poetry

whatever its length, is not doggerel; it is neither trivial nor pedestrian verse.

Where do textbooks fit in this classificatory scheme? It was stated above that textbooks may be classified as manuals, depending on the orientation of their readers. Nonetheless, as will be observed in the next chapter, postsecondary students are, at bottom, serious leisure participants preparing themselves for a career in what they hope will be "devotee work," itself a special kind of serious leisure. Given this orientation, their texts are not manuals, for reading books required as part of a course of instruction in a program they like is fulfilling. And this even while these books survey the area covered, necessarily avoiding a deep treatment of it and, nowadays, being written for the lowest common denominator of reading proficiency of the targeted audience. Textbooks written for advanced students (upper-level undergraduates and graduate students), though usually also required, discuss the area in greater detail and assume a greater reading proficiency. For people who read texts outside the framework of a course, as part of their own adult or informal continuing education, their goal is even more obviously one of fulfillment. Where textbooks assume a clear utilitarian role is when students must read them in required courses they would rather not take, usually those forced on them by the educational institution in its drive to turn out well-rounded graduates. Mann's (2000) study of university student course reading revealed that, as an activity, they liked their reading in varying degrees, but always with the view of it as problematic, as "work."

## WHO READS AND WHY

Official statistics on the reading interests of a population, whether provided by governments or private organizations, never profile those interests in the detail set out in the preceding two sections. Mostly, their data center on reading books in general, with some data focused somewhat more pointedly on reading done for pleasure. It is rare to find information on samples of reading interests focused on manuals, pamphlets, and periodical articles. And reading for utilitarian purposes or for fulfillment is generally ignored in such surveys. Moreover, following Nell (1988, pp. 4-6), some people read for utilitarian, pleasurable, and self-fulfilling reasons, a pattern that further complicates efforts to gain a full understanding of contemporary readership.

These research weaknesses have not, however, prevented some observers from issuing gloomy predictions about the future of reading in the modern Western world, an aperçu of which is presented later in this chapter. To be sure, much of today's reading is centered on utilitarian and pleasurable material. The latter will be conceptualized in the next chapter as hedonic, as casual leisure, which nevertheless is not without some redeeming features. The former, meanwhile, as hinted at in the discussion above about students and textbooks, often serves as a powerful resource for finding self-fulfillment and personal development in the serious pursuits (serious leisure and devotee work).

In short, when we regard contemporary reading as a leisure activity in all the complexity of the second, the patterns of reading today and their meaning to

readers present a much more optimistic picture than portrayed for us by official statistics. From this angle reading is often a positive experience, however utilitarian, pleasurable, or fulfilling. Erica Jong, an American writer and feminist, once observed: “a book burrows into your life in a very profound way because the experience of reading is not passive” (2003, p. 124).

## **Reading as Positive Activity**

The study of positiveness in the social sciences explores how, when, where, and why people pursue those things in life that they desire, the things they do to create for themselves and (sometimes) society a worthwhile existence that is, in combination, substantially rewarding, satisfying, and fulfilling. I recently set out a positive sociology (Stebbins, 2009a) that joins the somewhat older field of positive psychology in following its interest in uncovering people’s strengths and promoting their positive functioning (Snyder and Lopez, 2007, p. 3). As a complement to this branch of psychology, however, positive sociology centers on social meanings, interpersonal interaction, human agency, and the personal and social conditions in which these three unfold with reference to particular human activities. It centers on what people can do and want to do to make their lives worth living, which includes for some of them a fair amount of committed reading.

Reading can be a positive experience, whether that reading be utilitarian, pleasurable, or fulfilling. That said, there are times when we may be drawn or compelled to read about the negative side of life, about one or more of its multitude of problems. Most reading in the social sciences is of this nature, for they have focused and continue to focus on explaining and handling the various problematic, negative aspects of existence that many people dislike, which make their lives disagreeable (see also Jeffries et al., 2006). Controlling or even ameliorating these problems, to the extent this is truly effective, brings welcome relief to those people. Still, managing a community problem in this way, be the problem rampant drug addiction, growing domestic violence, persistent poverty, or enduring labor conflict, is not the same as people pursuing something they like. Instead control of or solutions to these problems bring, in effect, a level of tranquility to life—these efforts make life less disagreeable. This, in turn, gives those who benefit from them some time, energy, and inclination to search for what will now make their existence more agreeable, more worth living, such as by reading a popular novel or a selection of poems written by W. B. Yeats.

Is reading about the negative side of life necessarily a negative experience? Some readers, in their role as citizens, define as an obligation the reading of articles and books about problematic current events and situations. Such reading may be both utilitarian and fulfilling: utilitarian because the material informs the readers about the nature of the problem and its possible solution; fulfilling because it increases their knowledge and understanding of the world in which they live. At the same time such knowledge and understanding can be highly unsettling. Thus a deeper appreciation of global warming gained by perusing a scientifically credible book on the matter will probably increase the anxiety of people living in



areas subject to tornados and hurricanes. In short, reading some material can have both a positive and a negative effect on its readers. Moreover, such activity may be understood by them as both a kind of leisure and an instance of nonwork obligation. Here reading spans two of life's three domains.

## **The Skills of Reading**

Francine Prose (2009), in explaining how to be a good writer, emphasizes the *priori* need to be able to read well. She says:

I read for pleasure, first, but also most analytically, conscious of style, of diction, of how sentences were formed and information was being conveyed, how the writer was structuring a plot, creating characters, employing detail and dialogue. And as I wrote I discovered that writing, like reading, was done one word at a time, one punctuation mark at a time." (locations 86-91, Kindle edition)

Reading in this careful way is accomplished not only word by word, but also sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, and so on as the reader ponders why the writer has chosen the words used, formed the sentences as they appear on the printed page, paragraphed entire passages, and in general structured the text (book, article, poem, etc.) as this person did. Prose also concentrates on the narration of the story, its various characters, and the dialogue among them. In all this, the committed reader occasionally considers how the text might be improved a bit or at least differently created, as in using alternative words, sentences, paragraphing, narratives, and the like.

There is to be sure more to the skill of reading than this dissecting of text. In novels and short stories there are plots to be analyzed and, if appreciably imaginative, to be admired for their originality. Good writing makes liberal use of alliteration, metaphor, hyperbole, simile, and other figures of speech intended to vividly and imaginatively communicate meaning. Careful readers will also notice these creations, marvel if warranted at their effectiveness and imaginativeness, and possibly, as a playful aside, even take a turn at supplying some of their own.

Much of what has just been said also applies to reading skillfully essays, other nonfiction, utilitarian writing, and even some scientific tracts. Here, too, choice of words, structure of sentences, paragraphing, and the layout of the overall work are of utmost importance. There are no plots, but an absorbing use of the figures of speech is always welcome.

Essays and utilitarian texts differ from fictional reading in that they must meet scholarly standards. In other words, there must be adequate evidence for all claims put forth, the logic of the argument must be easily apparent, the work must be grounded in the literature of the relevant fields bearing on the subject of the text, and so on. Skilled readers of such material, using these criteria, will know how to evaluate it.

In sum, the skills of reading fall into two great categories: artistic and analytic

Choice of words, structure of paragraphs, imaginativeness of plot, figures of speech, and so on comprise the artistic side of reading (and writing), whereas readers become analytic when they weigh evidence, consider the logic of an argument, and assess how well the work relates to the literature. Utilitarian and fulfilling reading draw on one or both of these sets of skills, while reading for pleasure may be, and indeed often is, done without significant presence of either. This point about pleasurable reading—the hedonic undertaking that it is—will be elaborated in the next chapter under the title of “casual leisure” as well as in chapter 4.

Be aware that committed readers of utilitarian and fulfilling literature are not necessarily, possibly even not usually, competent writers of it. Becoming a competent writer in these two areas rests on, among other conditions, years of experience and practice at the craft. Such people have developed and can now apply the requisite artistic and analytic skills. Given these accomplishments they also know how to read well; they make good readers. This division of expertise is analogous to being, for instance, a competent amateur musician and a knowledgeable hobbyist reader of music history and music theory.

## **Reading in the Three Domains of Life**

Reading is an activity, a type of pursuit wherein participants mentally or physically (often both) think or do something, motivated by the hope of achieving a desired end (Stebbins, 2009a). Life is filled with activities, both pleasant and unpleasant: sleeping, mowing the lawn, taking the train to work, having a tooth filled, eating lunch, playing tennis matches, running a meeting, and on and on. Activities, as this list suggests, may be categorized as work, leisure, or nonwork obligation. They are, furthermore, general. In some instances they refer to the behavioral side of recognizable roles, for example, commuter, tennis player, and chair of a meeting. In others we may recognize the activity but not conceive of it so formally as a role, exemplified in someone sleeping, mowing a lawn, or eating lunch (not as patron in a restaurant). A reader in a public library is enacting a role (library patron), but someone reading while sitting on a bench or lying on the grass in a park is engaged in an activity, even while it is not recognizable as a role.

This definition of activity gets further refined in the concept of core activity: a distinctive set of interrelated actions or steps that must be followed to achieve the outcome or product that the participant seeks. As with general activities, core activities are pursued in the domains of work, leisure, and nonwork obligation. Consider some examples in serious leisure: a core activity of alpine skiing is descending snow-covered slopes, in cabinet making it is shaping and finishing wood, in volunteer fire fighting it is putting out blazes and rescuing people from them, and in committed reading it is intently consuming printed (or aurally presented) text. In each case the participant takes the interrelated steps necessary to successfully ski downhill, make a cabinet, rescue someone, or peruse the material. In casual leisure, core activities, which are much less complex than in serious leisure, are exemplified in the actions required to hold sociable

conversations with friends, savor beautiful scenery, offer simple volunteer services (e.g., handing out leaflets, directing traffic in a theater parking lot, clearing snow off the neighborhood hockey rink), and read entertaining books and articles. Work-related core activities are seen in, for instance, the actions of a surgeon during an operation, the improvisations on a melody by a jazz clarinetist, and the study of professional journal articles. The core activity in mowing a lawn (nonwork obligation) is pushing or riding the mower; in committed reading among university professors it is the requirement of grading term papers, which some define as disagreeable. Executing an attractive core activity and its component steps and actions is a main feature drawing participants to the general activity encompassing it, because this core directly enables them to reach a cherished goal. It is the opposite for disagreeable core activities. In short the core activity has motivational value of its own, even if more strongly held for some activities than others and even if some activities are disagreeable but still have to be done.

At the activity level all of everyday life may be conceptualized as being experienced in one of three domains: leisure, work, and nonwork obligation (Stebbins, 2009a). Reading is no exception. The domain of leisure is the subject of chapter 2, while the other two are covered in this section. Rather little will be said about reading in these initial presentations, leaving to chapters 3 through 5 the task of exploring its complex fit in each domain.

## **Work**

Work, says Herbert Applebaum (1992, p. x), has no satisfactory definition, since the idea relates to all human activities. That caveat aside, he sees work, among other ways, as performance of useful activity (making things, performing services) done as all or part of sustaining life, as a livelihood. Some people are remunerated for their work, whereas others get paid in kind or directly keep body and soul together with the fruits of their labor (e.g., subsistence farming, hunting, fishing). Work, thus defined, is as old as humankind, since all save a few privileged people have always had to ensure their own livelihood. The same may be said for leisure, to the extent that some free time has always existed after work. Today, in the West, most work of the kind considered here is remunerated, but the nonremunerated variety is evident, too. The most celebrated example of the latter is house work, but there are also livelihood-related activities that we tend to conceive of as nonwork obligation (e.g., do-it-yourself home repairs, money-saving dress making). Work, as just defined, is activity people have to do, if they are to meet their economic needs. And though some exceptions are examined later in this section, most people do not particularly like their work. In other words, were their livelihood somehow assured, many of these people would take up more pleasant activities, assuming of course, that they were aware of them and that the activities were accessible.

For many Westerners working time consumes a major part of everyday life, commonly eating up many hours a week from age seventeen or eighteen to sixty-five or seventy and, nowadays, even older. So work is not only a person's livelihood

but a major component of his or her lifestyle. But to keep work in perspective, we need to underscore further how much of life for the Westerner is actually not work at all, in that it consists of activity other than that devoted to making a living. In this regard, Applebaum's definition overlooks the fact that making things and performing services can also occur as serious leisure, as any furniture maker or career volunteer, for example, would readily acknowledge.

Moreover, work is not even a universal feature of most Westerners' lifelong existence. First, during childhood and adolescence, most people are not engaged, or are engaged rather little, in work activities. Second, during their working years, some people wind up being unemployed (get fired, laid off, disabled), placing them at least temporarily outside the work force. Third, most people retire, though this status may be blurred because some of them remain partially employed during some or all of this stage of life.

Fourth, even when working full-time in the West as measured by a nation's average work week, workers typically have considerably more nonwork time than work time. Given a full week of 168 hours, an American average work week of 34.8 hours (author calculation from 2005 OECD data reported in *The Economist*, 2006, p. 88), and 70 hours for sleep, and bodily maintenance (including fitness activity) 63.2 hours of nonwork time remain for family, leisure, and nonwork obligations.<sup>[3]</sup> *The Economist* (2006) also reports that the time working-age Americans, for example, devote to leisure activities has risen by 4 to 8 hours a week over the past 4 decades. This pattern is broken by those who decide (or are forced) to work longer hours or are pressed to put in excessive time meeting nonwork obligations.

## **Devotee Work**

What is critical for the study of leisure in all this is the presence of a small proportion of the working population in the West who find it difficult to separate their work and leisure. These workers, for whom the line between the two domains is blurred, do rely on their work as a livelihood but do this as "occupational devotees" (Stebbins, 2004a). That is, they feel a powerful occupational devotion, or strong, positive attachment to a form of self-enhancing work, where the sense of achievement is high and the core activity is endowed with such intense appeal that the line between this work and leisure is virtually erased. Further, it is by way of the core activity of their work that devotees realize a unique combination of, what are for them, strongly seated cultural values (Williams, 2000, p. 146): success, achievement, freedom of action, individual personality, and activity (being involved in something). Other categories of workers may also be animated by some, even all, of these values, but fail for various reasons to realize them in gainful employment.

Occupational devotees turn up chiefly, though not exclusively, in four areas of the economy, providing their work there is, at most, only lightly bureaucratized: certain small businesses, the skilled trades, the consulting and counseling occupations, and the public- and client-centered professions. Public-centered professions are found in the arts, sports, scientific, and entertainment fields, while

those that are client-centered abound in such fields as law, teaching, accounting, and medicine (Stebbins, 1992, p. 22). It is assumed in all this that the work and its core activity to which people become devoted carries with it a respectable personal and social identity within their reference groups, since it would be difficult, if not impossible, to be devoted to work that those groups regarded with scorn. Still, positive identification with the job is not a defining condition of occupational devotion, since such identification can develop for other reasons, including high salary, a prestigious employer, and advanced educational qualifications.

The fact of devotee work for some people and its possibility for others signals that work, as one of life's domains, may be highly positive. Granted, most workers are not fortunate enough to find such work. For those who do find it, however, the work meets six criteria (Stebbins, 2004a, p. 9). To generate occupational devotion

1. The valued core activity must be profound; to perform it acceptability requires substantial skill, knowledge, or experience or a combination of two or three of these.
2. The core must offer significant variety.
3. The core must also offer significant opportunity for creative or innovative work, as a valued expression of individual personality. The adjectives "creative" and "innovative" stress that the undertaking results in something new or different, showing imagination and application of routine skill or knowledge. That is, boredom is likely to develop only after the onset of fatigue experienced from long hours on the job, a point at which significant creativity and innovation are no longer possible.
4. The would-be devotee must have reasonable control over the amount and disposition of time put into the occupation (the value of freedom of action), such that he can prevent it from becoming a burden. Medium and large bureaucracies have tended to subvert this criterion, for, in interest of the survival and development of their organization, managers have felt they must deny their nonunionized employees this freedom and force them to accept strict deadlines and heavy workloads. But no activity, be it leisure or work, is so appealing that it invites unlimited participation during all waking hours.
5. The would-be devotee must have both an aptitude and a taste for the work in question. This is, in part, a case of one man's meat being another man's poison. John finds great fulfillment in being a physician, an occupation that holds little appeal for Jane who, instead, adores being a lawyer (work John finds unappealing).
6. The devotees must work in a physical and social milieu that encourages them to pursue often and without significant constraint the core activity. This includes avoidance of excessive paperwork, caseloads, class sizes, market demands, and the like.

This sounds ideal, if not idealistic, but in fact occupations and work roles exist that meet these criteria. These criteria also characterize serious leisure (see

Stebbins, 2004a, chap. 4), which gives further substance to the claim being put forward here that such leisure and devotee work occupy a great deal of common ground. When this happens the scope of leisure and the positive lifestyle extend beyond the domain of leisure into that of work, conceptual recognition of which occurs in the next chapter in the idea of “serious pursuit.”

## **Nonwork Obligation**

Obligation outside that experienced while pursuing a livelihood is terribly understudied (much of it falls under the heading of family and/or domestic life, while obligatory communal involvements are also possible) and sometimes seriously misunderstood (as in coerced “volunteering”). To speak of obligation is to speak not about how people are prevented from entering certain leisure activities—the object of much of the research on leisure constraints—but about how people fail to define a given activity as leisure or redefine it as other than leisure, as an unpleasant obligation. Obligation is both a state of mind, an attitude—a person feels obligated—and a form of behavior—he must carry out a particular course of action, engage in a particular activity. But even while obligation is substantially mental and behavioral, it roots, too, in the social and cultural world of the obligated actor. Consequently, we may even speak of an overarching culture of obligation that springs up around many work, leisure, and nonwork activities (see Stebbins, 2009a, pp. 53–54).

Obligation fits in the domainal approach in at least two ways: leisure may include certain agreeable obligations and the third domain of life—nonwork obligation—consists of disagreeable requirements capable of undermining positiveness in life in general. Agreeable obligation is very much a part of some leisure, evident when such obligation accompanies positive commitment to an activity that evokes pleasant memories and expectations (these two are essential features of leisure; Kaplan, 1960, pp. 22–25). Still, it might be argued that agreeable obligation in leisure is not really felt as obligation, since the participant wants to do the activity anyway. But my research in serious leisure suggests a more complicated picture. My respondents knew that they were supposed to be at a certain place or do a certain thing and knew that they had to make this a priority in their day-to-day living (this exemplifies discretionary time commitment, chap. 6). They not only wanted to do this, they were also required to do it; other activities and demands could wait. At times, the participant’s intimates objected to the way he or she prioritized everyday commitments, and this led to friction, creating costs for the first that somewhat diluted the rewards of the leisure in question. Agreeable obligation is also found in devotee work and the other two forms of leisure, though possibly least so in casual leisure.

On the other hand disagreeable obligation has no place in leisure, because, among other reasons, it fails to leave the participant with a pleasant memory or expectation of the activity. Rather it is the stuff of the third domain: nonwork obligation. This domain is the classificatory home of all we must do that we would rather avoid that is not related to work (including moonlighting as part of

livelihood). These tend to fall into three categories:

**Unpaid labor:** Activities people do themselves even though they could hire someone else to do them. These activities include mowing the lawn, house work, shovelling the sidewalk, preparing the annual income tax return, do-it-yourself projects, and a myriad of obligations to friends and family (e.g., caring for a sick relative, helping a friend move to another home, arranging a funeral).

**Unpleasant tasks:** Required activities for which no commercial services exist or, if they exist, most people would avoid using them. Such activities are exemplified in checking in and clearing security at airports, attending a meeting on a community problem, walking the dog each day, driving in city traffic (in this discussion, beyond that related to work), and errands, including routine grocery shopping. Reading lengthy reports fits here, for some people. There are also obligations to family and friends in this type, among them, driving a child to soccer practice and mediating familial quarrels. Many of the “chores” of childhood fall in this category. Finally, activities sometimes mislabeled as volunteering are, in fact, disagreeable obligations from which the individual senses no escape. For example, some parents feel this way about coaching their children’s sports teams or helping out with a road trip for the youth orchestra in which their children play.

**Self-care:** Disagreeable activities designed to maintain or improve in some way the physical or psychological state of the individual. They include getting a haircut, putting on cosmetics, doing health-promoting exercises, going to the dentist, and undergoing a physical examination. Personal and family counseling also fall within this type, as do the activities that accompany getting a divorce.

Some activities in these types are routine obligations, whereas others are only occasional. And, for those who find some significant measure of enjoyment in, say, grocery shopping, preparing the annual income tax return, walking the dog, do-it-yourself projects, or taking physical exercise, these obligations are defined as agreeable; they are effectively leisure. Thus what is disagreeable in the domain of nonwork obligation rests on personal interpretation of the actual or anticipated experience of an activity. So most people dislike or expect to dislike their annual physical examination, but possibly not the hypochondriac.

Nonwork obligation, even if it tends to occupy less time than the other two domains, is not therefore inconsequential. I believe the foregoing types support this observation. Moreover, some of them may be gendered (e.g., housework) and accordingly, occasional sources of friction and attenuation of positiveness in lifestyle for all concerned. Another leading consequence for positive lifestyle laid down by nonwork obligation is that the second reduces further (after work is done) the amount of free time for leisure and, for some people, devotee work. Such obligation may threaten the latter, because it may reduce the time occupational devotees who, enamored as they are of their core work activities, would like to put in at work as, in effect, overtime.

## EXPLAINING THE POPULARITY OF ADULT READING

Adult reading is holding its own among the vast array of activities in the three

domains that either demand or invite our time. Part of the explanation for this pattern is economic and geographic and is the subject of this section. Other parts of it are sociological and social psychological. They will be considered in subsequent chapters.

## **Economics of Adult Reading**

First, note that books and periodicals (chiefly magazines and newspapers) are on the whole, inexpensive compared with many other accessories for leisure and work. True, specialized academic monographs can set back the individual purchaser by well over a hundred dollars (tax and shipping not included), while only institutional libraries can (often reluctantly) afford today's encyclopedias, handbooks, and similar resources. But offsetting these extravagances to some extent are the vibrant used-book businesses, the growing availability of e-books, the practice of borrowing books from libraries or from friends and colleagues, and the paperback market.

Otherwise, magazines and newspapers, being much cheaper to produce than hardcover books, are consequently more affordable, especially if acquired by subscription. Pamphlets are commonly free of charge, often because they carry messages their writers want others to read without being discouraged in this regard by having to pay for them. Manuals usually carry a price tag but often an affordable one. Nonetheless, those who buy them as a means to an end (e.g., travel, legal solutions, do-it-yourself, psychological peace) often face substantial costs once they set about applying what they have learned.

On top of these arrangements are the various book services that sell to subscribers at discounted rates. Book stores have similar arrangements for faithful customers and for special demographic categories known for their low income, among them, retirees, university students, and the unemployed. All this adds up to the conclusion that, often, reading need not be an expensive activity, which appears to be a factor in its continuing appeal in the present depressed economy. For those so inclined they can pursue it as one kind of more or less "nonconsumptive leisure" (Stebbins, 2009b, pp. 118-26).

## **Geographic Basis of Adult Reading**

This section looks at the geographic opportunities for acquiring reading material. The use of public and private space for reading that material will be taken up in chapter 6 under the heading of "reading environments."

When considering the geographic distribution of acquisition points for reading material, what first comes to mind are the bookstores and libraries in town. The former are located where their owners believe they will attract sufficient patrons such as in shopping centers, trendy shopping districts, city centers, and smaller regional commercial centers located in the reasonably moneyed parts of the community. These establishments are situated for easy access by car or mass transit, if not both.



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