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Building a Home Library

READING GOOD BOOKS is not something to be indulged in as a luxury. It is a necessity for anyone who intends to give his life and work a touch of quality. The most real wealth is not what we put into our piggy banks but what we develop in our heads.

Books instruct us without anger, threats and harsh discipline. They do not sneer at our ignorance or grumble at our mistakes. They ask only that we spend some time in the company of greatness so that we may absorb some of its attributes.

You do not read a book for the book's sake, but for your own.

You may read because in your high-pressure life, studded with problems and emergencies, you need periods of relief and yet recognize that peace of mind does not mean numbness of mind.

You may read because you never had an opportunity to go to university, and books give you a chance to get something you missed.

You may read because your job is routine, and books give you a feeling of depth in life.

You may read because you see social, economic and philosophical problems which need solution, and you believe that the best thinking of all past ages may be useful in your age, too.

You may read because you are tired of the shallowness of contemporary life, bored by the current conversational commonplaces, and wearied of shop talk and gossip about people.

Whatever your dominant personal reason, you will find that reading gives knowledge, creative power, satisfaction and relaxation. It cultivates your mind by calling its faculties into exercise.

It is well to have some destination in mind. As Arnold Bennett remarks in *Literary Taste* (a Pelican Book), a man starting out for a walk says to himself that he will reach some given point, or that he will progress at a given speed for a given distance, or that he will remain on his feet for a given time. He makes

these decisions according to his ambition, his physical capacity and his pleasure. So with reading.

Books are a source of pleasure the purest and the most lasting. They enhance your sensation of the interestingness of life. Reading them is not a violent pleasure like the gross enjoyment of an uncultivated mind, but a subtle delight.

Reading dispels prejudices which hem our minds within narrow spaces. One of the things that will surprise you as you read the Greek, Hebrew and Christian books; the Roman, French, Italian and British books; the books of philosophy, poetry and politics, and the books that just tell about people having fun, is that human nature is much the same today as it has been ever since writing began to tell us about it.

Some people act as if it were demeaning to their manhood to wish to be well-read, but you can no more be a healthy person mentally without reading substantial books than you can be a vigorous person physically without eating solid food.

Perusal of good books will give you a mind of your own, bulwarked against the seduction of slogans. Through books you escape from the ephemeral challenge of a crossword puzzle to the actual challenge of working out the why and wherefore of a segment of life. By borrowing the aid of a superior understanding you double your own understanding, meeting what the writer says with your personal thoughts.

The proper function of books is associated with intellectual culture in which you steer clear of generalities and indefinite views. You enlarge your critical sense regarding events and personalities and trends, so that you are no longer at the mercy of theorists and demagogues.

It is perfectly possible for a man, one who only gives to reading the leisure hours of a business life, to acquire such a general knowledge of the laws of nature and the facts of history that every great advance made in science and government and business shall be to him intelligible and interesting.

Choosing books

In deciding what books to read and what books to have in your private library you need to take a wide sweep. There is a book to match your mood whatever it may be. There are books that are gentle and quieting, and books that are exciting and inspiring. All that mankind has done and thought, gained and lost: it is lying as in magic preservation in the pages of books. You should have a good selection of them within arm's reach.

As you read, your taste will become trained so as to increase your capacity for pleasure, enabling you to enter into a great variety of experiences. It will reject books that are fifth-rate, fraudulent and meretricious. You will not allow trash in books' clothing into your library.

You will, of course, have utility books on your shelves. There are some books which one must read if he is to progress in his job. The man who depends only upon his own experience is confined to narrow limits both of place and time. Non-readers are seldom remarkable for the exactness of their learning or the breadth of their thinking.

When you come to choose the general books for your library you may be torn between buying new books and buying old books. The good books of the hour, like the good books of all time, contain the useful or pleasant talk of some person whom you cannot otherwise converse with. They can be very useful often, telling you what you need to know; very pleasant often, as a personal friend's talk would be. They may be bright accounts of travel, good-humoured and witty discussions of events, lively or pathetic story-telling, or firm fact-reporting by men and women concerned in the events of passing history.

Perhaps the problem of old and new may be solved in this way: if you have not read a book before, it is to all intents and purposes new to you whether it was printed yesterday or three centuries ago. Apply the tests of appropriateness, taste and truth, and you can read ancient or modern with assurance.

Read great books

Whatever you read, read "greats". A great book is one that, shining through time and space, lights our lives, illuminating depths within us we were not conscious of. It is one of the great thrills of life to uncover thoughts we did not know we were capable of having.

All the greatest books contain food for all ages, and have things of consequence to say to us here and now.

There is no positive hierarchy among books, but we cannot go wrong when we peruse masterpieces. These are not designed to rouse your admiration but to wake up your mind and spirit.

"A classic," Mark Twain said, "is something that

everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read." The word "classical" applied to books or music simply means what has worn best. The consent of the ages has marked them out for all time.

Why are the classics so often recommended? Arnold Bennett wrote in *Literary Taste*: "You are not in a position to choose among modern works. To sift the wheat from the chaff is a process that takes an exceedingly long time. Modern works have to pass before the bar of the taste of successive generations. Whereas, with classics, your taste has to pass before the bar of the classics."

Reading the classics is not to worship at the shrine of antiquity. We do not wish to look at life through the eyes of dead Greeks, but what those eyes saw of life is of help in interpreting what is going on today.

Making a list

So here you are at the crucial question: what sort of books shall I read? You cannot sail through the sea of books like a ship without pilot or rudder.

No single person is fitted to declare which are the hundred or thousand best books, but it is worthwhile to look at the lists that great men in art, science, business, education and statesmanship have made as their choices.

It is evident from these lists that whether our reading be great or small it should be general. If the demands of making a living leave only a short time for reading, that is all the more reason why our reading should remind us of the vast expanse of human thought and the wonderful variety of human nature.

Do not go overboard about one author or one subject, however exalted. You can become a bore if you read too much of one kind of stuff. You may tire your companions to death with dinosaurs, if you read exclusively about the Mesozoic period, or you may jade your friends by falling into the poses and speech of the characters in Dickens' novels if they become your specialty.

Judicious reading should leave no great type of thought, no dominant phase of human nature, wholly a blank. St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland, has built its course of study around some hundred great books. They make strange shelf-fellows. They include saints (Augustine and Aquinas); a thief (François Villon); the first war correspondent (Herodotus); a surgeon (Galen); a statesman (Cicero); a revolutionist (Marx); a traveller (Homer); a playwright (Euripides); scientists (Aristotle, Newton, Einstein); philosophers (Socrates, Kant, Plato); an artist (Leonardo) and novelists (Tolstoy, Flaubert, Fielding, Thackeray).

Fortunately, nobody can pick your books for you. You have to do it yourself, fitting them to your needs and desires.

Any general list of books to read must necessarily be arbitrary, but there are several guides to start your thinking. There is a book called *Have You Read 100 Great Books* (Jasper Lee Company, New York) which provides in its 144 pages fifty lists of books, ancient and modern, every one prepared by a respected figure in literature, history, science or education.

Selection is helped by several paperbacks: *The Lifetime Reading Plan* by Clifton Fadiman (Avon); *Books that Changed the World* by Robert B. Downs (Mentor); *Much Loved Books* by James O'Donnell Bennett (Premier); *Highlights of Modern Literature* (Mentor).

From these you may make a list of books you wish to own. Then visit the book stores and the second-hand book stores regularly with your list in hand. When you find a book that is on your list, at a price you wish to pay, buy it. Then your library will be truly hand-picked, special to you.

One man, who did not wish to be bound by any ready-made catalogue, prepared his own book and reading list in this way: he adapted the Dewey Decimal Classification System which was originated by Melvil Dewey to serve as a method that would index books. The numbers you see on the backs of library books are likely Dewey numbers: "025.8" indicates to the librarian that the book so marked is about library administration and has special reference to book arrangement and preservation.

The Dewey System has ten classes, every one divided and sub-divided many times. The classes are: 000 General works; 100 Philosophy; 200 Religion; 300 Social sciences; 400 Philology; 500 Pure science; 600 Applied science; 700 Arts and recreation; 800 Literature; 900 History.

Covering the field of knowledge

In pursuit of a general reading plan to cover all fields of knowledge, you make sure that you obtain books in every class. Then you follow through the classes in order, reading a book in each.

You may read Henry David Thoreau's essay on "Civil Disobedience" and recall that from it Mahatma Gandhi derived his passive disobedience régime. When Dr. Will Durant's *Story of Philosophy* was published in 1926 it leaped into immediate popularity which has continued through the years. It does not teach you philosophy, but it does provide a chart of the province of philosophy and leads you into many entrancing books in which the writers discuss hopes and doubts that present themselves with undiminished interest to every man and woman.

You will enjoy and profit by the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, his dispassionate gravity, his noble forgetfulness of self, and his tenderness toward others. You will enjoy applying the *Discourses* of Epictetus to

modern life as one suburban Montreal group did a few years ago. There are surprisingly many chapters which can be read as of today, though they were written in the first century.

When you come to the "200" class you will read the *Bible* freshly like a book, not droningly and dully. This is made simple in *The Bible Designed to be Read as Living Literature*. The King James Version is retained as to text, but the type is clear and easily read, the poems are set out as poetry and the drama as drama. Every great religion has its own books, and all are worth dipping into for their revelation of the way people in all ages have satisfied their need for spiritual expression.

When you come to science, a good book with which to start is *Science and the Modern World*, by Alfred North Whitehead (Macmillan Company, 1926; Pelican 1938). He takes you from the first century of modern science, starting in 1600, to this century's rejection of preconceived ideas and acceptance of an open-minded search for secure foundations.

In the social sciences you will find books which started great human movements, books like *Capital*, by Karl Marx and *The Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine.

In the 800 class you will read the great dramas: *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* and *King Lear* and *Peer Gynt*, which transcend all factual statement in their illumination of the dark complexity of human dilemmas and the ambiguity of human behaviour.

If you start your reading of history with Wells' *Outline of History* you obtain not only an over-all view of the story of mankind from the beginning up to recent years, but an introduction to many fascinating byways to be explored through other books.

When planning your history reading, do not omit your own country. *The New York Times* said in its 1865 review of Francis Parkman's latest book about French pioneers in the New World: "He writes like a scholar and a gentleman, and all who have read his *History of the Conspiracy of Pontiac* — probably the most thorough and complete historical account of a single separate act in the great drama of European civilization that our literature has seen — will be glad to meet him in the more extended field of investigation opened out in this elegant volume" (*France and England in North America*).

Marc Lescarbot, who wrote the drama "The Theatre of Neptune" which was presented at Port Royal in 1606 as Canada's first theatrical performance, was also an historian. He published an entertaining account of the discoveries in the New World under the title *Histoire de la Nouvelle France*. An edition in English was published by the Champlain Society in Toronto.

How to read

It is obvious that reading is not refined idleness. The person who hopes to make something worth while out of his reading cannot afford to disport himself in the flowery pastures of frivolous and trivial literature. It is legitimate to read a book for no other reason than to divert your mind from a troublesome idea, but it need not be a sleazy book.

It is impossible to give any method to our pursuit of the best till we get nerve enough to reject the weeds that threaten to overgrow our little patch of fruit-bearing reading.

You will find it unprofitable to approach a book with a blank mind and passive understanding, as one enters a cocktail party. Between these covers are thoughts worthy of your attention, ideas to solve your problems, inspiration that may enlighten your life. You have seen a child turning the pages of a Christmas catalogue, his eyes sparkling in anticipation of the new things to be seen. That is the sort of expectancy you should bring to your books.

Read boldly and in an unprejudiced way. Francis Bacon wrote: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Passive perusing may be all very well for escape stories, but it won't do at all for books which can improve one's mind, stir one's ambitions, pacify one's perturbations.

Some people are deterred from attempting what are regarded as stiff books for fear they should not understand them, but it is wise and stimulating to read close to the upper limits of your mental powers. Your mind is probably capable of more than you give it credit for, if only you press it somewhat, and accept the challenge of something a little difficult.

When you have your own books you can make reading easier, remembering more certain, and review quicker, if you read with pencil in hand. It is a poor objection to say "it would spoil the book", for you did not buy the book as a dealer to sell it again, but as a scholar. Intelligent marking gives a kind of abstract of the book, picking out the key sentences.

Your family library

There are few hobbies more satisfying than the gradual collecting of good books.

Possession of books does not give knowledge, but it does make knowledge readily available. You may sit in a small home library and see the endless procession of human thought and passion and action as it passes. Even to build some shelves before you begin to stock books gives you exhilaration and excitement, because on those shelves you are going to place books that will become part of your intellectual life and that of your family.

When you have a number of selected books you do not need to decide beforehand what friends you will

invite to spend the evening with you. When supper is over and you sit down for your hour of companionship with the great writers, you give your invitation according to your inclination at the time. And if you have made a mistake, and the friend is, after all, not the one you want to talk with, you can "shut him up" without hurting his feelings. These are friends who speak only when you want to listen, and keep silent when you want to think.

It may not suit the décor of your living-room to have shelves full of books there. But books are accommodating in this regard also: they can be stacked anywhere. E. M. Forster, author of *A Passage to India*, said that he had books not only in his library but in his bedroom, in his sitting-room, and in a bathroom cupboard.

A library is not to be regarded as a solemn chamber, but may be some small snug corner, perhaps in the cellar, almost entirely walled in by books. It is a place where you go to take counsel with all that have been wise and great and good and glorious among the men who have gone before you. It is pleasant to sit down in that corner just being aware that these authors, with their accumulated wisdom and charm, are waiting for you to open a conversation.

Building such a personal library is not an expensive undertaking. Millions of people have discovered books during the past thirty years through the book clubs and the paperback editions. Included are some of the very best books ever written.

No matter how tight your budget strings may be pulled, Shakespeare and Toynbee and Franklin and Whitehead and Socrates and Santayana and Churchill and Durant will visit you. They come dressed in faded leather from the secondhand book store, or in paper from the up-to-date book dealer and the railway news stand, at the cost of less than a dollar each. They represent, whether dressed in the brilliant finery of dust-covers or in ragged buckram, the world's accumulated hoard of mellow beauty and practical wisdom.

Children deserve such a library. Homes with no books, parents who read only the daily paper and an occasional magazine, have a negative influence upon the intellectual development of children.

Do not waste time in deciding what books to provide for your children: start giving them some of the best within their understanding. Books should be chosen, not for their freedom from evil, but for their possession of good. Dr. Johnson said: "Whilst you stand deliberating which book your son shall read first, another boy has read both."

Read and stock no mean books, but those which exalt and inspire. Literature exists so that where one man has lived finely thousands may afterwards learn to live finely. Reading a good book makes you feel warm and comfortable inside you. Your mind is cultivating appreciation of the excellent.