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# THE WAY TO LEARN T



Young people often ask how they should read, not only what books they should read but how to read them, whether to rove or to systematize.

We have asked a group of men and women, experts in reading as well as in writing, to give from their own experience advice to those making their early ventures in the royal kingdom of good reading.

**DOROTHY L. SAYERS**, writer of our most brilliant detective stories and a most original writer on religion, led off with the characteristic letter, and then gave the lead to a series of sound and brilliant pieces of advice. She writes:

**T**HE attempt to be "helpful" is a device of the devil, and the publication of "autobiographical details" is a dissemination of poison. Here, however, are four cardinal rules for the reading of great literature:

- (1) Find out what the writer is actually saying.
- (2) Be ready to believe that he means what he says.
- (3) Read consecutively.
- (4) Practise humility.

**THE RIGHT HON. SIR NORMAN BIRKETT** became President of the National Book League last year in succession to Mr. John Masefield. He found his way among books as a youth and is the kind of book-lover who carries books in his pocket and delights in them in his library. His talk on "The Use and Abuse of Books" (the N.B.L.'s Annual Lecture for 1950) was a revelation of the mind of a delightful lover of books.

**M**EN and women vary so much that there is no rule of universal application about the best method of reading. My own experience has taught me that if you are born with a love of reading you will find your own way in the realm of books without advice from anybody. Gibbon said that he would not exchange his early and invincible love of reading for all the treasures of India. The trouble is that the advice of the eminent is so conflicting, as Alexander Ireland showed in *The Book-Lover's Enchiridion*, some seventy years ago. Let me, therefore, testify from personal experience.

I began with a very few books and I read them just because I liked them; and I have gone on doing it ever since. Heretical it may be, but I do not think it a bad thing to read idly at

times. I think there should be much more reading for the pure pleasure of doing so. I am for Mark Twain as well as for Milton; I am a great lover of the authorized version of the Bible, but I love *Three Men in a Boat* and *The Diary of a Nobody*. Yet I have never forgotten that the primary purpose of reading is to enlarge the horizons of the mind by bringing to the reader instruction in the highest sense from the lives of men and women in every age and clime.

There must always be a place reserved for the great books that have gained the verdict of Time. I am with Frederic Harrison in this that I "stand by the sentence of the World." And I think this is the best advice of all: read a few of the great books and master them, rather than have a nodding acquaintance with the many, whatever their quality may be. As C. E. Montague so penetratingly observed, "You may take a very small holding on the slopes of Parnassus or you may get shooting rights over the whole of the mountain. But there is no getting both."



**PAMELA HANSFORD JOHNSON**, mother of two children, married to C. P. Snow, herself a scientist turned novelist, was a London girl who attracted the notice of the critics with her first novel and has kept it with many successors in England and America. She has made separate reputations first as a reviewer and critic and now as a broadcaster.

**I**N my home we had the Henry Irving edition of Shakespeare, illustrated by Gordon Browne, W. H. Margetson and Maynard Brown. Before I could read, I spent hours of joy poring over the pictures. When I began to read, I studied the quotations beneath them. When reading became easy, I searched out the quotations in the text, trying to fit them into the story; and so I came to read all the plays of Shakespeare by the time I was eight. What degree of comprehension I was able to take to them is neither here nor there. I can only say that I loved them, and went on loving them more and more as understanding grew.

There is no better way for a child to come happily to reading than to live in a home with many books in it, and be allowed

to take his pick. He or she should not be forced to read what they really find boring, or they may be prejudiced against them for life. I used to detest Dickens. At twenty I rediscovered him, and am now an addict. At school, driven, in utter boredom, through novel after novel of his, I have never been able to read him since.

We must read the classics, or we can have no standard judgment for the books of our own time. Remember these books would not have become "classics" if they had not delighted thousands of people. We should read a few of the great books as we can in order to see which of them appeal to us most.

Don't give way too easily to "boredom." Real reading usually demands an effort on the reader's part, and that effort has been made, the reader will find that the book which has made him use his brains, his insight and his imagination means infinitely more to him than the "easy" novel he reads through with mild enjoyment one Sunday afternoon.



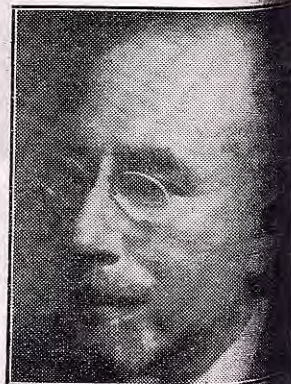
**FRANK SWINNERTON** began life in the office of J. M. Dent and educated himself by reading. He joined Chatto and Windus as a reader and made a reputation here and in America with his novel, "Nocturne," which is now in the *World's Classics*. He has been a reviewer, critic, literary journalist and broadcaster, and now writes as John O. London.

**I**F, knowing what I know, I were now to begin reading for the first time I should take two books. One would be H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*; the other Arnold Bennett's *Literary Taste, and How to Form It*. The first, an improvisation, has been condemned by experts in various historical periods; but it is fascinating and universal. The second, scorned by those who have been elaborately taught in school, though slightly out of date, is full of sense; and it has at the end a list of books which a student should read.

The reason I suggest a history is that it is a help to the understanding of any book to know something of the background against which that book was written. And since

I have used the word "background," let me recommend two excellent books which show the religious and intellectual forces of two centuries. Both books are by Professor Basil Willey; they are called *The Seventeenth Century Background*, and *The Eighteenth Century Background*.

The best way to begin, in my opinion, is to read for pleasure and knowledge. Pleasure, because unless one reads for pleasure one merely stodges—and perhaps loses heart. Knowledge, because knowledge is a very pleasant possession. As one who has always read books through to the end for fear of missing something good, but whose experience as a publisher's reader has taught him that continuing to read bad books is ruinous to the memory, I am all for setting aside anything that fails to ring some bell in the mind or imagination. But the setting aside should not be carelessly done. You are reading to discover the truth that is in other men; you should not shut those other men up merely because you don't, in your haste, agree with or "fancy" them.



# ENJOY THE BEST IN BOOKS



**H. E. BATES** worked as a provincial journalist and clerk before publishing his first novel when he was twenty. He first made his name, in this country and in America, as a short story writer, and many of his early stories appeared originally in *JOHN O' LONDON'S WEEKLY*. He is now equally well-known as a novelist and writer on country life. His novels include "Fair Stood the Wind for France" and "The Purple Plain."

**WHEN** I left school at the age of seventeen, fired with a single and almost fanatical passion to be a writer, I was given two curt and simple pieces of advice. The first was "You stand or fall by your own work," and I had, of course, not the remotest doubt that I should always stand and never fall. The second was "Read everything possible you can lay your hands on," and I promptly did. Before that I had been brought up, a trifle stiffly if not narrowly, you might think, on roughly the following books: *The Windsor Magazine* (and how admirable it was), *The Bible*, *Lorna Doone*, *Coral Island*, *Stalky and Co.* and the works of those two indefatigable Victorians, Ballantyne and Talbot Baines Reed. A classical education. Now I ran amok with literary

hunger. I ran and roamed and tasted at free will. I took huge and indigestible meals of Hardy, Conrad, Wells, Maugham, Dickens and so on; I somehow discovered, before he became fashionable, John Donne; I stumbled, unaided, on Turgenyev, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Maupassant, Stephen Crane, Bierce, Hudson, Gorki, Flaubert and others; I even kept a diary list of them, noting them down with earnest pride as a sign, no doubt, of stupendous catholicity.

That piece of advice having turned out so admirably for me I could hardly do better than hand it on to others. But for every piece of good advice there are a least a dozen profoundly bad ones, and I accordingly append the stupidest I ever heard. "Never read a book," it said, "until it has stood the test of Time." It refrained from asking, of course, who should do Time's testing.

The answer, as I see it, lies partly, even if not wholly, with those who "read everything they can lay their hands on." Their reading, like all writing, is an adventure.

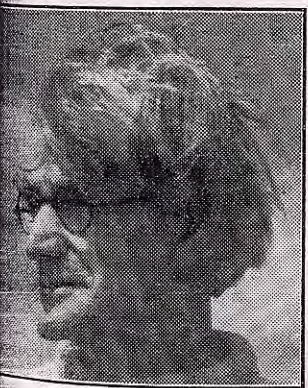
**PHYLIS BENTLEY** was educated at a famous school and took a University degree, but did most of her fruitful reading later, in the municipal library of her native town. She has portrayed the life of three centuries of West Riding history in her twelve novels, and is an authority on the Brontës.

**IMAGINE** that all readers of *JOHN O' LONDON'S WEEKLY* make use of their local Public library. Now all such libraries issue two tickets to their readers, one for fiction and one for "serious" works. I suggest that readers follow the plan given by this system, and read regularly a book for "improving their minds" and another book just for fun. Presently these categories will overlap, I hope. The "improving" book ought to form part of some kind of reading plan. Are you interested in poetry? Local history? European history? Drama? Economics? Browse the shelf devoted to that subject; pick a book which catches your fancy, and read it faithfully. That book will give you the titles of other books on the subject, so that many paths through your chosen territory open before you;

explore them well. If there is a society in your town devoted to your subject, join it and gain the benefit of other people's reading.

If you feel uncertain how to choose a subject in advance, try to systematize your reading as you go along. You enjoyed a novel of Hardy's? Good. Then read all his novels; most of his poems; a Hardy biography and a couple of books of criticism about his work. You are interested in Italy, or Russia? Good. Read their history, the biographies of their famous men, their novels, memoirs, poems and plays. You will find not only your knowledge, but your understanding, your perception, your power to read intelligently greatly increased by the attempt you have made to link and compare various facets of your subject.

A subject continuously "read" resembles the view of a landscape from a window whose shutters are successively removed. As we throw aside those shutters our outlook—and so our whole capacity for intelligent living—expands.



**HOWARD SPRING**—journalist, critic, novelist—became an errand-boy at the age of twelve. Later he joined the staff of a local Cardiff newspaper, and after some years on the "Manchester Guardian," succeeded Arnold Bennett as book critic on the London "Evening Standard." Became a best-selling novelist with "My Son, My Son!" in 1938.

**SINCE** my childhood, circumstances have changed towards what I should call an anti-reading direction. Winter nights when I was young were reading nights. There was no wireless or television, no cinema; we had no money for the theatre. It was reading or nothing. Young people to-day have many distractions. Even then, not all children read, and I can offer no advice on how to make a reader. It rests with parents as much as with children. For myself, I never advised my children on reading. I left lying about the sort of books I thought it would be good for them to read, and they read them.

I cannot remember a time when I was not myself a reader; but here again I cannot give advice. I can only tell my

experience, for I no more know how a reader is made than how a writer is made. All I can say is that life without books was always unthinkable to me, and that one thing led to another.

To make young people realize this unfolding nature of books, that somewhere, if they will only begin, is their own level, and that, having found it, it is the step of a staircase; that is the problem. For from one grade of reading there is always a step to another. As an example, I remember how a single line of Wordsworth quoted in a poor novel seemed to me so moving that I wanted to read Wordsworth, and I did, and Wordsworth led me into all the Lake school. So it goes; it is an endless unfolding.

The way to find one's own sort of reading is simply to read till one finds it. I have never gone on with books that bored me, but I have tried to realize that the fault might be in me, not in the book; and so I have come to many of them again, and found I was now ready to take what they had to give.

**M. J. MACALISTER BREW**, writer and broadcaster, has had the experience of work among young people and has done research in adolescent education and juvenile delinquency in many countries. Her books include "In the Service of Youth" and "Normal Education." She is now Education Adviser to the National Association of Girls' Clubs and Mixed Clubs.

**I WAS** lucky in having a home where there were plenty of books and magazines about, and lucky, too, in not having to be "reading" guided. Though on trying *Sartor Resartus* at 8 I complained that there seemed to be a lot of "reading" before you got to the story! I think that gives the key, however, since I would say that if you want to be a happy reader begin by reading for the story. Happily, English literature has been enriched by hundreds of great story writers from Stevenson to Conrad (if you like adventure stories), from the Brontës to Hardy (if you like romance). Don't worry about books that bore you—I believe that there is a time in our development when we can "take" a book. Ruskin, during the war years, became precious to

me—before that his writing had seemed "just words." I can't remember when the reading of poetry became important to me. For the person groping towards poetry I would suggest a good modern anthology to begin with.

Three other milestones in my reading adventures may be of help to those trying to plan their reading. The one was passed at about ten years of age when Arthur Mee's wonderful monthly *My Magazine* opened out a vista of delight in the biographies of famous men and women. The other was passed a few years later, on picking up a second-hand copy of a little handbook by Wilfred Whitten about epitaphs; it directed my attention to the fascinating reading material which lies to our hand in the Church, the churchyard, and so to local histories and sociology.

The third milestone was passed when I realized from *JOHN O' LONDON'S* (what I stupidly had not grasped before) that you can get help in compiling reading lists from the reviews and advertisements of a literary journal.

