

ESSAY

Everyone Likes Reading. Why Are We So Afraid of It?

Book bans, chatbots, pedagogical warfare: What it means to read has become a minefield.



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Everyone loves reading. In principle, anyway. Nobody is against it, right? Surely, in the midst of our many quarrels, we can agree that people should learn to read, should learn to enjoy it and should do a lot of it. But bubbling underneath this bland, upbeat consensus is a simmer of individual anxiety and collective panic. We are in the throes of a reading crisis.

Consider the evidence. Across the country, Republican politicians and conservative activists are removing books from classroom and library shelves, ostensibly to protect children from “indoctrination” in supposedly left-wing ideas about race, gender, sexuality and history. These bans have raised widespread alarm among civil libertarians and provoked a lawsuit against a school board in Florida, brought by PEN America and the largest American publisher, Penguin Random House.

PEN has also joined the chorus of voices condemning censorious piety on social media and college campuses, where books deemed problematic become lightning rods for scolding and suppression. While right and left are hardly equivalent in their stated motivations, they share the assumption that it’s important to protect vulnerable readers from reading the wrong things. Including, in one Utah county, the Bible, which was taken from schoolroom shelves, like so many other books, as a result of a parental complaint — one apparently intended to expose the absurdity of such bans in the first place.



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But maybe the real problem is that children aren't being taught to read at all. As test scores have slumped — a trend exacerbated by the disruptions of Covid — a long-smoldering conflict over teaching methods has flared anew. Parents, teachers and administrators have rebelled against widely used progressive approaches and demanded more emphasis on phonics. In May, David Banks, the chancellor of New York City's public schools, for many years a stronghold of "whole language" instruction, announced a sharp pivot toward phonics, a major victory for the "science of reading" movement and a blow to devotees of entrenched "balanced literacy" methods.

The reading crisis reverberates at the higher reaches of the educational system too. As corporate management models and zealous state legislatures refashion the academy into a gated outpost of the gig economy, the humanities have lost their luster for undergraduates. According to reports in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere, fewer and fewer students are majoring in English, and many of those who do (along with their teachers) have turned away from canonical works of literature toward contemporary writing and pop culture. Is anyone reading "Paradise Lost" anymore? Are you?

Beyond the educational sphere lie technological perils familiar and new: engines of distraction like streaming (what we used to call TV) and TikTok; the post-literate alphabets of emojis and acronyms; the dark enchantments of generative A.I. While we binge and scroll and D.M., the robots, who are doing more and more of our writing, may also be taking over our reading.

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There is so much to worry about. A quintessentially human activity is being outsourced to machines that don't care about phonics or politics or beauty or truth. A precious domain of imaginative and intellectual freedom is menaced by crude authoritarian politics. Exposure to the wrong words is corrupting our children, who aren't even learning how to decipher the right ones. Our attention spans have been chopped up and commodified, sold off piecemeal to platforms and algorithms. We're too busy, too lazy, too preoccupied to lose ourselves in books.

You could argue that these disparate concerns don't add up to a single crisis. You could point out that not all the news is bad. Sales of printed books, after dropping in the early e-book era, have crept upward over the past decade. This newspaper has reported that some young people in Brooklyn are abandoning their smartphones for "Crime and Punishment."

And the bad news is hardly new. Tyrants, philistines, religious zealots and hysterical parents have been banning books for as long as anyone can remember. The current battle between advocates of the science of reading and their pedagogical rivals is the latest skirmish in a series of "reading wars" that have convulsed American education for most of the past century, most memorably after the publication of Rudolf Flesch's best-selling "Why Johnny Can't Read" in 1955. Movies, radio and television lured earlier generations of kids away from the joy of books. On university campuses, the study of literature has been embattled and beleaguered for so long that chronicling the controversies has become a flourishing academic subfield in its own right.

But the fact that the present situation has a history doesn't mean that it isn't real. When the same cluster of problems resurfaces in every generation, something is going on. And even as it seems to overlap with other areas of perpetual contention — social inequality, identity politics, schooling, technology — the reading crisis isn't simply another culture-war combat zone. It reflects a deep ambivalence about reading itself, a crack in the foundations of modern consciousness.

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Just what is reading, anyway? What is it for? Why is it something to argue and worry about? Reading isn't synonymous with literacy, which is one of the necessary skills of contemporary existence. Nor is it identical with literature, which designates a body of written work endowed with a special if sometimes elusive prestige.

Reading is something else: an activity whose value, while broadly proclaimed, is hard to specify. Is any other common human undertaking so riddled with contradiction? Reading is supposed to teach us who we are and help us forget ourselves, to enchant and disenchant, to make us more worldly, more introspective, more empathetic and more intelligent. It's a private, even intimate act, swathed in silence and solitude, and at the same time a social undertaking. It's democratic and elitist, soothing and challenging, something we do for its own sake and as a means to various cultural, material and moral ends.

When I was a child, Saturday morning cartoons were sometimes interrupted by public service announcements from Reading Is Fundamental, an organization dedicated to putting books in the hands of underprivileged children. The group's slogan was "Reading Is Fun!" Fun and fundamental: Together, those words express a familiar utilitarian, utopian promise — the faith that what we enjoy doing will turn out to be what we need to do, that our pleasures and our responsibilities will turn out to be one and the same. It's not only good; it's good for you.

But nothing is ever so simple. Reading is, fundamentally, both a tool and a toy. It's essential to social progress, democratic citizenship, good government and general enlightenment. It's also the most fantastically, sublimely, prodigiously useless pastime ever invented. Teachers, politicians, literary critics and other vested authorities labor mightily to separate the edifying wheat from the distracting chaff, to control, police, correct and corral the transgressive energies that propel the turning of pages. The crisis is what happens either when those efforts succeed or when they fail. Everyone likes reading, and everyone is afraid of it.

Reading is a relatively novel addition to the human repertoire — less than 6,000 years old — and the idea that it might be available to everybody is a very recent innovation. For most of our history, our languages were spoken, our literary imaginations oral. In those ancient societies where writing first developed — in Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica, in Egypt and China — both its applications and access to it were restricted. Written language, associated with the rise of states and the spread of commerce, was useful for trade, helpful in the administration of government and integral to some religious practices. Writing was a medium for lawmaking, record-keeping and scripture, and reading was the province of priests, bureaucrats and functionaries. They performed rites, recited poems and circulated information within a narrow, privileged sphere.

For most of history, that is, universal literacy was a contradiction in terms. The Latin word *litteratus* designated a member of the learned elite. A general readership in the way we understand it now did not exist, even as a general human ability to read was evident from the start. Anyone could learn to do it, but the mechanisms of learning were denied to most people on the grounds of caste, occupation or gender. According to Steven Roger Fischer's lively and informative "A History of Reading" (2003), "Western Europe began the transition from an oral to a literate society in the early Middle Ages, starting with society's top rungs — aristocracy and clergy — and finally including everyone else around 1,200 years later."

Finally! This transformation gained momentum in 1455, when reading found its killer app in Johann Gutenberg's printing press. Before that, writing had been done on stone tablets and codices, scrolls of papyrus or animal skin, and bound books that were often copied by hand — objects of necessarily limited circulation. The print revolution catalyzed a global market that flourishes to this day: Books became commodities, and readers became consumers.

For Fischer, as for many authors of long-range synthetic macrohistories, the story of reading is a chronicle of progress, the almost mythic tale of a latent superpower unlocked for the benefit of mankind. "If extraordinary human faculties and powers do lie dormant until a social innovation calls them into life," he writes, "perhaps this might help to explain humanity's constant advancement." "Reading," he concludes, "had become our union card to humanity."

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This is a beautiful idea, and not one I'm inclined to quarrel with, not even to note that unions can always be broken, and progress stalled or reversed. Humanity, though, is a notoriously gnarled and thorny proposition, and it might be that the history of reading, especially in the post-Gutenberg era, reveals just what complicated and contradictory creatures we have always been.

For one thing, the older, restrictive model of literacy as an elite prerogative proved to be tenacious, even as, in early modern Europe, reading spread among the bourgeoisie, and then further down the social ladder. Nowadays parents and other concerned adults worry that young people don't read or love reading enough. Their counterparts in the 18th and 19th centuries were apt to fret that the young loved reading too much. As a middle class gained strength in Europe, claiming leisure as one of its defining features, books were among the goods most closely identified with that leisure, especially for women.

The novel, more than any other genre, catered to this market. Like every other development in modern popular culture, it provoked a measure of social unease. Novels, at best a source of harmless amusement and mild moral instruction, were at worst — from the pens of the wrong writers, or in the hands of the wrong readers — both invitations to vice and a vice unto themselves. The novelists of the period didn't hesitate to capitalize on this anxiety. In Jane Austen's "Northanger Abbey," Catherine Morland's enthusiasm for Gothic fiction leads to social embarrassment and philosophical confusion, as she disastrously (if comically) conflates her reading with reality. For Emma Bovary, the confusion between the fantasies offered by popular romances and the banality of provincial life takes on a tragic dimension. Her reading propels her down a path to ruin.

The danger wasn't restricted to women. Goethe's "The Sorrows of Young Werther" was blamed for an epidemic of romantic suicides among impressionable male readers. Victorian America, perpetually worried that its footloose young men were on the road to perdition, classified novel-reading along with drinking and gambling among the causes of dissipation and debility.



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Such superstition now seems comparatively benign, a quaint chapter in the never-ending saga of middle-class anxiety about what the kids are getting up to. More consequential — and more revealing of the destabilizing power of reading — was the fear of literacy among the laboring classes in Europe and America. "Reading, writing and arithmetic," the Enlightenment political theorist Bernard Mandeville asserted, were "very pernicious to the poor" because education would breed restlessness and discontent. "Men who are to remain and end their days in a laborious, tiresome and painful station of life, the sooner they are put upon it at first, the more patiently they'll submit to it for ever after."

Nowhere was this brutal notion pursued with more ferocity than in the American South. "It was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read," Frederick Douglass writes in his "Narrative of the Life" recalling the admonitions of one of his masters, whose wife had started teaching young Frederick his letters. If she persisted, the master explained, their chattel would "become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."

Reflecting on these words, Douglass writes, "I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty — to wit, the white man's power to enslave the Black man." From that moment, he grasped that "the pathway from slavery to freedom" ran through the printed word, and "that education and slavery were incompatible with each other."

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word.

“Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave” — the first of Douglass’s memoirs, published in 1845, when millions of Americans were still in bondage — is partly a heroic origin story, the account of how a young man endured horrific adversity to emerge as one of the leading orators and intellectuals of his time. It is also a carefully argued treatise on the nature of freedom, one that rescues that sparkling and elusive idea from abstraction, grounding it in the ethics and psychology of lived experience.

Among Douglass’s most powerful and painful revelations is that, on the subject of reading, his master was right. Completing his primary education with the help of white schoolchildren whom he bribed with scraps of bread, young Frederick found a copy of “The Columbian Orator,” a popular anthology of inspirational speeches and essays, many on the subject of liberty.

“As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing.” Douglass’s account of this anguish is one of the most lacerating parts of a book that does not shy away from the depiction of suffering. His despair mirrors his earlier exhilaration and arises from the same source. “I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!”

Douglass’s literary genius resides in the way he uses close attention to his own situation to arrive at the essence of things — to crack the moral nut of slavery and, in this case, to peel back the epistemological husk of freedom. Some of his pain, as predicted by Mandeville and Master Hugh, comes from the discrepancy between his thinking and his circumstances. He has freed his mind, but the rest has not followed. In time it would, but freedom itself brings him uncertainty and terror, an understanding of his own humanity that is embattled and incomplete.

Substitute “reading” for “freedom” in that last sentence and the meaning stays the same. It may be unwise to universalize Douglass’s experience, but at the same time it’s hard to read these passages in the “Narrative” without a jolt of recognition. Here, the autobiographical touches on the mythic, specifically on the myth of Prometheus, whose theft of fire — a curse as well as a blessing bestowed on a bumbling, desperate species — is a primal metaphor for reading. That fire lights our way and scorches our fingers, powers our factories and burns down our houses. Reading liberates and torments us, enlightens and bewilders us, makes and unmakes our social and solitary selves. Every reader has experienced something like Douglass’s liberating epiphany, and also something like his annihilating agony.

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In the early 2000s, my children attended a lovely, diverse, progressive public elementary school in Brooklyn. The methods of reading instruction associated with Columbia University’s Teachers College were in full bloom there. Students were encouraged to think of themselves as writers and readers, and to draw pictures of themselves absorbed in those activities. There were parent-attended “publishing parties” when writing projects were completed. The rooms were furnished with well-stocked, low-slung bookshelves and carpeted risers where young readers could curl up with “just-right books,” selections matched to their interests and levels of proficiency.

The point was not only to teach basic skills — in the view of the science-of-reading critics, that was barely being done at all — but also, and more urgently, to instill in the children a familiarity and comfort with books and what was inside them that would make them lifelong bibliophiles.

It is hard to imagine a scene of instruction more completely antithetical to the ones recalled in Douglass’s “Narrative.” That isn’t an accident. One of the main projects of American education over the past half-century and more has been to unwind the legacy of oppression that denied so many people full access to the benefits of learning. My children’s classrooms embodied a central ideal of this project: to institutionalize the sense of freedom that Douglass had gained through struggle and opposition.

This is a noble vision with an evident paradox at its heart. Efforts to protect children — or citizens, for that matter — from the terror of freedom, to cocoon their reading within safe boundaries of vocabulary and representation, will always fail. Reading, like democracy or sexual desire, is an unmanageable, inherently destabilizing force in human life. Many of the revolutionary governments of the 20th century began with programs to promote mass literacy and then, as soon as those succeeded, set about banning books, imprisoning writers and replacing literature with propaganda. School curriculums enact milder, less overtly repressive versions of the same impulse.



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A school, however benevolently conceived and humanely administered, is a place of authority, where the energies of the young are regulated, their imaginations pruned and trained into conformity. As such, it will inevitably provoke resistance, rebellion and outright refusal on the part of its wards. Schools exist to stifle freedom, and also to inculcate it, a dialectic that is the essence of true education. Reading, more than any other discipline, is the engine of this process, precisely because it escapes the control of those in charge.

The Utah Bible ban (which is now being appealed) proves as much: It testifies both to the relentless, nihilistic logic of censorship, which can find subversion anywhere, and also to the subversive power of reading, which is what sets the censors off in the first place. The Old and New Testaments are full of sex, violence, magic, ethnic hatred and radical egalitarianism. Their history is an object lesson in the power and danger of reading itself. Literal wars have been fought over how they should be interpreted. Their most famous English translator was executed for heresy.

There is no way to limit a student's reading to just-right books, or to ensure that she reads them in just the right way. The right way might be the wrong way: the way of terror, discontent. Apostles of reading like to quote Franz Kafka's aphorism that "a book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us." By itself, the violence of the metaphor is tempered by its therapeutic

implication. Less frequently quoted is Kafka's previous sentence: "What we need are books that hit us like the most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we love ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like a suicide."

Are those the books you want in your child's classroom? To read in this way is to go against the grain, to feel oneself at odds, alienated, alone. Schools exist to suppress those feelings, to blunt the ax and gently thaw the sea. That is important work, but it's equally critical for that work to be subverted, for the full destructive potential of reading to lie in reach of innocent hands.

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In his short, strange book "The Pleasure of the Text," the French critic and philosopher Roland Barthes distinguished between two kinds of literary work:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria: the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.

This is not far from Kafka, though the language leans toward eroticism rather than angst. *Jouissance*, the French word translated as "bliss," also means orgasm, and Barthes's understanding of the term leans heavily on an understanding of sex as a destructive, disruptive force. Like Kafka's ax, the text of bliss may not be something that belongs in school libraries. But even though Barthes, writing in the wake of modernism and in the grip of structuralist theories of language, has in mind particular books and authors — Marcel Proust and the Marquis de Sade are among his touchstones — he is really describing modalities of reading. To a member of the slaveholding Southern gentry, "The Columbian Orator" is a text of pleasure, a book that may challenge and surprise him in places, but that does not undermine his sense of the world or his place in it. For Frederick Douglass, it is a text of bliss, "bringing to crisis" (as Barthes would put it) his relation not only to language but to himself.

If you'll forgive a Dungeons and Dragons reference, it might help to think of these types of reading as lawful and chaotic. Lawful reading rests on the certainty that reading is good for us, and that it will make us better people. We read to see ourselves represented, to learn about others, to find comfort and enjoyment and instruction. Reading is fun! It's good and good for you.

Chaotic reading is something else. It isn't bad so much as unjustified, useless, unreasonable, ungoverned. Defenses of this kind of reading, which are sometimes the memoirs of a certain kind of reader, favor words like *promiscuous*, *voracious*, *indiscriminate* and *compulsive*. Those terms, shadowed by connotations of pathology and vice, answer a vocabulary of belittlement — *bookworm*, *bookish*, *book-smart* — with assertions of danger. Bibliophilia is lawful. Bibliomania is chaotic.

The point is not to choose between them: This is a lawful publication staffed by chaotic readers. In that way, it resembles a great many English departments, bookstores, households and classrooms. Here, the crisis never ends. Or rather, it will end when we stop reading. Which is why we can't.

Audio produced by Tally Abecassis.

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