

**“What are These Books for You?”:
Considering the Role of Reading in Life**

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It seems to be a human trait to look down on others for some reason or another, and what we’re reading—or not reading—is one way that happens a lot. Last year, the Center County Library (2023) in Center County Pennsylvania posted a meme to Instagram. It showed an image of Ken from the Barbie movie standing in between Einstein and Oppenheimer from the Oppenheimer movie. Einstein is labeled: "That science book I plan on reading." Oppenheimer is labeled: "That classic book I pretend that I read." Ken is labeled: "What I'm actually reading" Then they asked, “What are these three books for you?” Their question and this meme reveal a lot about the way we value some types of reading and criticize others. In many communities—especially academic ones—there is a clear judgment about what is worth reading and what is not, or what is highbrow and what is lowbrow. Even the terms *highbrow* and *lowbrow* imply a lot of judgement. In fact, they can be traced back to terminology that comes from phrenology, the pseudo-science of “the study of the conformation and especially the contours of the skull based on the former belief that they are indicative of mental faculties and character” (Merriam-Webster, 2024) that was often used as part of making a claim for white supremacy. From the beginning these words were used to include some and exclude everyone else, but even calling them *canon* (those works considered acceptable by the academic and formally educated) and *non-canon* (everything else) which might be more politically correct, still has clear ideas of judgement of something being better or worse. However, there are many benefits to reading both pleasurable and challenging texts and making sure we develop our literacy skills as a life-long pursuit.

Developing a strong foundation of literacy is crucial for all of us. Paper (n.d.), an educational technology company, shares a number of significant effects of not developing a strong literacy foundation. One of the experts they quote, Panneton, says that “In the workplace, [adequate literacy] may mean being proficient in several computer programs, knowing how to research and solve complex problems, or handling multiple projects,” and they note that this can affect securing and maintaining steady employment (“Employment Opportunities,” para. 1). In terms of income, they note that according to a UNESCO study on the importance of literacy, “people with higher levels of education—and higher literacy rates in turn—see an average income at the end of their careers that’s two to three times higher than what they earned when they began working” (“Income and Financial Outcomes,” para. 2). Furthermore,

According to reporters Waldman and Swaby, “for people who struggle to read, the electoral process can become its own form of literacy test—creating impenetrable barriers at every step, from registration to casting a ballot.” Indeed, the reporters’ analysis found a tie between low literacy rates in a county and the likelihood of lower voter participation. (as cited in Paper, n.d., “Elections and Voting,” para. 1)

As important as the topics already mentioned are, one final area of literacy stands out as central to our journey through life: health literacy. According to Vernon et al. (2007), “The Institute of Medicine defines health literacy as “The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions” (p. 1). They continue and emphasize the depth of how health care literacy can have a striking impact on our lives:

Securing appropriate healthcare hinges on having the necessary skills to read and fill out medical and health insurance forms, communicate with healthcare providers, and follow

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basic instructions and medical advice. At virtually every point along the healthcare services spectrum, the healthcare system behaves in a way that requires patients to read and understand important healthcare information. This information is dense, technical, and has jargon-filled language. (p. 2)

They end their review of research by noting that “These costs can be measured in both human and financial terms: premature mortality, avoidable morbidity, racial, ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in health and healthcare and enormous avoidable costs” (p. 9). Navigating these things is never easy, and a lot of them are faced when we are not in the best of situations due to our healthcare concerns, but research has shown that lacking solid literacy skills can have a documented effect on our health and healthcare. Yet, in order to prepare for this, we must face more challenging reading than simply entertaining stories and articles. We need to read to grow and develop a deeper understanding of our world. Therefore, it’s important that we understand what reading can do for us and what types of reading can help us as we work our way through life.

Resnick (2018), in her article “Let the Brows Run Wild: A Defense of Lowbrow Literature,” explains that

There is highbrow literature: [. . .] written with artistic intentions [. . .] . Highbrow lit intends to make the reader reflect and question, stretch and stride. Some examples are “Infinite Jest” by David Foster Wallace, “The Trial” by Franz Kafka, and “The Stranger” by Albert Camus.

And then, there is lowbrow lit—gross entertainment for the masses. A guilty pleasure. The literary equivalent of binge-watching “The Bachelorette” after running out of episodes from “Keeping Up with the Kardashians.” (p. 1)

Here, even Resnick, who is writing to express her love of reading without judgment and to advocate we all do it more, is imposing societal values upon us. “Values are the cultural standards that people use to decide what’s good or bad, what’s right or wrong” (Crash Course, 2017, 00:04:40), and her associating the guilty pleasure reading with *The Bachelorette* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, shows how much we have applied these judgments to so many aspects of our society now.

There are many arguments for the value of what is generally considered lowbrow literature. Many researchers and writers point out that one of the most commonly disparaged genres, fan fiction, is actually very important at this point in society, noting that fan fiction and other online communities open up the chance to share perspectives and voices of historically underrepresented groups. White (2024), an autistic librarian, whose work primarily focuses on neurodiversity in children’s books, points out that “comics, manga, and other illustrated books are especially popular with readers who are neurodivergent, English Language Learners, or [those] still developing their reading skills” (p. 12). Furthermore, Yang in his *History of Comics in Education*, “identifies five attributes of comic books that add to the learning experience: motivating, visual, permanent, intermediary, and popular. Based on the authors’ experience, the popularity of comic books not only attracts and keeps the students’ attention; it also bridges socioeconomic, generational and cultural gaps” (as cited in Gerde & Foster, 2008, p. 247). The value of creating a pathway into reading for those struggling with it, and forms of writing that can “bridge socioeconomic, generational and cultural gaps” cannot be understated. Clearly, there are multiple ways in which we’ve overlooked the value of a number of different genres.

In addition, it’s no secret that comic books, fan fiction, manga, and many other contemporary genres have made their way into classes at universities, and these are found in more

than literature courses. Gerde and Foster (2008) both researchers at universities in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, make a case for comics as valuable for college students getting ready to move into the workplace in their article “X-Men Ethics: Using Comic Books to Teach Business Ethics”: “Comic books are a modern form of narrative and can be effective in teaching the complexities and social context of specific topics, from critiques of capitalism to faulty products or discrimination in the workplace” (p. 245). They go on to say, “Comic books also serve as an intermediary; students can address emotionally charged topics such as discrimination in the workplace in a unique environment, one removed from them” (p. 247), and end their work, noting that “As a mature literary form, comic books communicate ideas and concerns about universal topics—ethical behavior, the role of organizations, and the institutions of business and government” (p. 254). Understanding that what we easily dismiss as trivial stories are human stories is probably the greatest strength of anyone who looks beyond restricted classifications of literature and delves into works traditionally looked down upon by the establishment.

Yet, even the literature that may be looked down upon by some shows promise in improving our brain function. According to Kwik (2023) reading, for at least 30 minutes a day has a number of positive effects on the brain from strengthening it by developing stronger neural networks, to reducing stress, enhancing creativity and imagination, improving memory, concentration, focus, and vocabulary, improving communication skills and mental health, as well as simply being entertaining.

On the other hand, we should not shy away from difficult texts. In his article “Helping Students Read Complex Texts,” Boryga (2024) says,

Learning how to make sense of a technical science text, for example, may come in handy if students decide to work in HVAC or simply want to understand the effects of

prescribed medicine. The skills they use to make sense of a history text may help in future legal careers, or to understand complicated tax or mortgage documents. [Literacy expert] Shanahan says, that when we teach students how to push through difficult texts, “what we’re really doing is showing them how to gain access to all of these different sites of power in our society.” (para. 8)

These are clear examples of college to real-life situations when advance reading skills will pay off. Indeed, we cannot always anticipate most situations when we might need this ability. Ben-Chaim (2016) notes that

Knowledge enables human beings to adapt to, and change, their physical and social environment. [. . .]. Valuable knowledge, then, is not just a statement of fact that individual persons can communicate to one another; rather, it is the ability to understand a state of affairs in a manner that enhances a person's quality of life. [. . .]. *The reason to learn arises when a person finds out that her knowledge does not enable her to adequately understand, control, or manage a particular state of affairs* [emphasis added]. (p. 74)

Knowing that we will never know everything we need to know, leads to the understanding that we must develop a higher ability to read and write than we think we will need so that we can continue to help and improve ourselves throughout our lives.

In their article “The Challenge of the Challenging Text,” Shanahan et al. (2012) compare learning to read harder texts to physical therapy: “Initially, such therapy is often painful and exhausting, and it’s tempting to cheat on the exercises a bit.” However, they contend that physical therapists “need to keep the patient’s head in the game, because working past the pain is

beneficial,” and then they compare that experience to learning how to deal with challenging texts:

Similarly, it can be tough for students to hang in there and stick with a text that they have to labor through, looking up words, puzzling over sentences, straining to make connections. Teachers may be tempted to try to make it easier for students by avoiding difficult texts. The problem is easier work is less likely to make readers stronger.” (p. 62)

This, of course, is the important part. While it may be an impressive feat to read Shakespeare for the sake of Shakespeare, the more important reading is the type we do to secure our lives and future in our jobs, our economic situations, and our wellbeing. Some of that is simply difficult reading, so continuing to challenge ourselves is key.

In the end, we live in a society that on one hand pushes us to live fast and read even faster, not paying attention to deeper details; on the other hand, so much of our society is filled with information we’re required to deal with that seems to get denser and deeper by the day. While reading for enjoyment can help us improve our basic abilities in the first case and provide us with enjoyment and distraction that helps us in numerous other ways, pushing ourselves to dig into lengthier, challenging texts will benefit us in very important aspects of our lives. Overall, it’s important to find the balance—a little bit of Ken, a little bit of Oppenheimer, and even a little bit of Einstein.

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