

I'm a Reader

"I'm a reader," I say, "but not in the usual way." I have my own reading style. I have not read much of what my friends have read, I do not care much for fiction, and I cannot bear to see a broken spine. Still I read anything that piques my curiosity, be it a title that makes me think, an author I know and love, or just a cover that catches my eye (I am guilty of that sin). People know what I read because I am not a passive reader. I am an active reader, one who believes that reading is only part of a process. Finishing a book and then forgetting about it is not my style. I read, I think, I learn, and I discuss.

Browsing any one of my nearly dozen bookshelves reveals Matt Ridley's *Genome* next to John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty" and Jacques Barzun's *From Dawn to Decadence* next to David Berlinski's *A Tour of the Calculus*. Even Harold Schechter and David Everitt's *The A to Z Encyclopedia of Serial Killers*, where I first heard of my first-choice college – Amherst – from an entry describing Professor Sarat's course called *Murder*, is neatly tucked away. I read these books for fun, but that is not all I gained from them. If there is a discussion, debate, or brainstorm going on within my visual or auditory range, I will soon be engrossed in the conversation, excitedly relating what I have read about it. Arguing free will versus determinism? Ridley gives a brilliant explanation of the effect our genes have on the choices we make as adults. Contemplating the proper limits on the freedom of speech? Mill's logic against censorship is hard to shake. A flood of examples could continue but are unnecessary. The point is that I read to learn because I am thirsty for knowledge.

I recall a tale in which a man wanted to learn the secrets of the world, so he sought the greatest teacher of his age, Socrates. "Do you desire knowledge?" Socrates asked him. The man replied, "Yes." So Socrates took him to a river and together they waded out until they were

about waist-deep. Socrates grabbed the man's head and pushed him under the water, and after holding him there for half a minute, Socrates let him up and asked, "Do you desire knowledge?" The man replied, "Yes." Then Socrates held him under again, this time for a full minute. When he let the man go, Socrates asked, "Do you desire knowledge?" A little short of breath, the man still answered, "Yes." Socrates grabbed the man a final time. The man began to struggle and to try to break free, but Socrates kept him under. After three agonizing minutes, Socrates finally let the man go. He threw his head above the water flailing his arms and gasping for air, and he could not respond when Socrates asked, "Do you desire knowledge?" Waiting until the man caught his breath, Socrates said to him, "When you desire knowledge that much, come back to me."

I will not be so cliché as to say that I desire knowledge that much, but I will say that such is my philosophy on reading. I desire knowledge so much that I extend a book's offerings beyond its pages. Reading a book is only the first step for me. The next step is finding someone else who has read the book and "talking" to him or her about it. I emphasize talking because I do not mean idle chatter, but real discussion and analysis, a real exchange of ideas. That is where all knowledge lies: in communication with others. Writing is just a transportable, easily produced and distributed version of what someone has to say, so reading must always be a secondary source. Educated and informed discussion is the primary source for knowledge, and reading is the first step to such discussion. The rest, however, is up to us. Reading shows us a map to the well of knowledge; we must use follow the map by communicating with others in order to gulp from the well.