

The Death of Reading

I read [Mere Christianity](#) by C. S. Lewis for the first time last December. A lifelong Christian and Narnia superfan, I'm late to the party, I know. But as the dust settled from an election that shined a glaring spotlight on our cultural divisions—political, social, economic, theological—I was feeling out of sorts. Christian leaders I respected as well as people close to me who had helped shape my own faith were on the other side of the divide, and I needed a touchstone, something to help reorient me in the foundations of the faith, so I could move forward. I reached out to one of the great Christian thinkers of the twentieth century and found the solace I needed in his book.

This is the power of books. They let us escape, try on new points of view, and explore what it means to be human. The great works give readers a shared experience and a shorthand for big ideas. Describing something as Orwellian is a big hit lately, if you haven't noticed. We return to old favorites again and again when we need the familiarity of a trusted friend. Books can heal the spirit and soothe the soul like nothing else can.

In her lovely bestselling [book](#), *The Little Paris Bookshop*, Nina George explores the healing power of books. She tells the story of Jean Perdu, a bookseller who has a knack for uncovering just the right book to heal whatever is ailing his customers. He is so good at dispensing bookish remedies a local therapist sends patients to his bookshop, the *Literary Apothecary*, with a "prescription" for their literary needs. One person might be described as "Kafkaesque with a touch of Pynchon" and another as "a splendid example of Potter-under-the-stairs syndrome." Perdu can always find just the right book to soothe anxiety or help mend a broken heart.

Literature can be a healing agent. Unfortunately, Americans

are reading less today than they have in the past. Philip Yancey lamented our shift away from reading and toward digital distractions in a recent *Washington Post* [op-ed](#), "The Death of Reading Is Threatening the Soul." Technology and social media have combined to retrain our brains to graze along the surface of information rather than hone our concentration to delve deeply into meatier content. Neuroscientists tell us finding new and interesting information gives our brains a little dopamine hit, and, like lab rats, we keep clicking those web links to keep that happiness hormone flowing. The average American spends ten hours per day getting their media fix.

I am as guilty as anyone else is. A "quick" look at Twitter turns into thirty minutes or more of following links through articles across the web. I can't remember the last time I got truly lost in a book where hours passed without me noticing. Where I once devoured books, I now "take a break" after each chapter or two to see what's happening on Twitter. Five minutes turns into ten, and then, well, it's time to put the book down and make dinner.

Our time online is not making us happier either. The more we [use](#) social media sites like Facebook the less happy we are. Looking at our friends' carefully curated online lives leaves us with a sense that maybe our lives aren't so great in comparison, plus the time we spend on our devices takes away from the face-to-face interactions we need to build a strong social network. We know our time online is making us unhappy, but we still struggle to kick the habit.

We need to find our way back to the deep, focused reading so many of us enjoyed in the past. "Commitment to reading is an ongoing battle," Yancey declares. "We have to build a fortress with walls strong enough to withstand the temptations of that powerful dopamine rush while also providing shelter for an environment that allows deep reading to flourish." In an age of information overload, we could use the soothing balm of a good piece of literature; we need to tune out digital

distractions and pick up a book. I'm making a commitment to myself to carve out more time for distraction-free, focused reading. I hope you will too.

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