

3 Tips from Ernest Dimnet on Choosing Books—For Yourself and For Your Children

I have a problem. This problem doesn't consume me, but it often concerns me. It can lead me to inaction and make me doubt my judgment.

The problem is this—I often struggle with how to choose a book.

I have this problem with my home library, my local library, and my work library. Most often, I second guess my audiobook selections for my commute to work, though apps like libro.fm make the choices easier. Sometimes my wife helps me out and recommends one. However, choosing a book is usually a very personal thing, and what I like to read is not always what my wife likes to read (and vice versa).

Recently though, I stumbled upon some guidance for solving this conundrum. In an age in which books abound and publishers marketing muddies the selection process, [*The Art of Thinking*](#) by Ernest Dimnet (1866–1954) provides guidance for option overloaded bibliophiles.

While Dimnet—a French priest, writer and lecturer—does not recommend specific titles to choose, he does provide a process for choosing the best books for you ... the reader.

1. Choose Books That Keep You Awake and Alert

You should choose books that animate you and draw you in—those that you would read delightedly.

“What they are *you* know best, and I do not know in the

least. A book, like a landscape is a state of consciousness varying with readers...read *that* kind of books which you and nobody else know to be thought-productive for you...what books help [you] the best to think?"

2. Do Not Read Good Books. Read the *Best* Books

Dimnet reminds us that life is too short to read books that are mediocre and uninteresting.

"This simple recipe is as infallible as good air and food are in physical hygiene. Yet, it is a fact that nineteen out of twenty modern people quake away from it...The notion that masterpieces are boresome school-books interpreted by dull teachers, or examination stuff, is a marvelous product of education...None of the inferior stuff to which our children are treated, while we look on powerless, can ever give them the feeling of elation, nay, the amusement which great books naturally produce. ... This is what classics do when they are not killed by those who teach them. ... So, if you want to be vitalized into the power of thinking real thoughts, and if you want never to know one dull instant while reading, do what has been done by the best specimens of mankind since there have been books, resolutely leave out whatever is not of the best."

3. Avoid Mental Lozenges

Read books that stand the test of time and are not just short-lived dopamine hits pushed by publishers.

"[H]ere is an easy recipe. Nobody can twit you with an affection of indifference to the present time if you leave out books which you find are forgotten three months, that

is to say, twelve short weeks, after their publication. Do not read those. You will be surprised to see how few there will be left to read...Draw up a list of the American writers whose works published several years ago are still on the shelves where the eye and hand consciously travel. Those are the ones it would be unforgivable to desert, even for the superior reading, but you will see how few they are."

As to how you might consider choosing books for your children, Dimnet has you covered there too:

"Parents anxious to give their children the best of everything should as resolutely pack away trash of all kinds from their reach as if it were poison. It is surprising that intelligent people anxious to do their best should not realize that no book ought to be left in the nursery that is inferior to [Robinson Crusoe](#), [The Arabian Nights](#), or [Perrault's Fairy Tales](#). You do not wish your children to be too clever? You do not want them to be like the twelve-year old mature little women of the eighteenth century? Open the window, listen for one instant to the young people's conversation out on the lawn this week-end, and you will be reassured. Only too glad will you be if you can teach them to prefer distinction to vulgarity when they see it."

Why should we listen to Ernest Dimnet you might still ask? Because of rare results. Quoting Joseph de Maistre who was himself intellectually nourished on Racine's verses by his mother as a little child, Dimnet speaks to the impact of choosing books wisely: "His ears, having thus early drunk in such nectar, ever after rejected sour stuff."

Our culture is full of sour stuff. We could all use a little bit more nectar.

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