

Read, Kids, Read

Frank Bruni - NYTimes
MAY 12, 2014



As an uncle I'm inconsistent about too many things.

Birthdays, for example. My nephew Mark had one on Sunday, and I didn't remember — and send a text — until 10 p.m., by which point he was asleep.

School productions, too. I saw my niece Bella in "Seussical: The Musical" but missed "The Wiz." She played Toto, a feat of trans-species transmogrification that not even Meryl, with all of her accents, has pulled off.

But about books, I'm steady. Relentless. I'm incessantly asking my nephews and nieces what they're reading and why they're not reading more. I'm reliably hurling novels at them, and also at friends' kids. I may well be responsible for 10 percent of all sales of ["The Fault in Our Stars,"](#) a teenage love story to be released as a movie next month. Never have I spent money with fewer regrets, because I believe in reading — not just in its power to transport but in its power to transform.

So I was crestfallen on Monday, when a new [report](#) by Common Sense Media came out. It [showed](#) that 30 years ago, only 8 percent of 13-year-olds and 9 percent of 17-year-olds said that they "hardly ever" or never read for pleasure. Today, 22 percent of 13-year-olds and 27 percent of 17-year-olds say that. Fewer than 20 percent of 17-year-olds now read for pleasure "almost every day." Back in 1984, 31 percent did. What a marked and depressing change.

I know, I know: This sounds like a foggy's crotchety lament. Or, worse, like self-interest. Professional writers arguing for vigorous reading are dinosaurs begging for a last breath. We're panhandlers with a better vocabulary.

But I'm coming at this differently, as someone persuaded that reading does things — to the brain, heart and spirit — that movies, television, video games and the rest of it cannot.

There's research on this, and it's cited in a recent article [in The Guardian by Dan Hurley](#), who wrote that after "three years interviewing psychologists and neuroscientists around the world," he'd concluded that "reading and intelligence have a relationship so close as to be symbiotic."

In terms of smarts and success, is reading causative or merely correlated? Which comes first, "The Hardy Boys" or the hardy mind? That's difficult to unravel, but several studies have suggested that people who read fiction, reveling in its analysis of character and motivation, are more adept at reading people, too: at sizing up the social whirl around them. [They're more empathetic.](#) God knows we need that.

Late last year, neuroscientists at Emory University [reported](#) enhanced neural activity in people who'd been given a regular course of daily reading, which seemed to jog the brain: to raise its game, if you will.

Some experts have doubts about that experiment's methodology, but I'm struck by how its findings track something that my friends and I often discuss. If we spend our last hours or minutes of the night reading rather than watching television, we wake the next morning with thoughts less jumbled, moods less jangled. Reading has bequeathed what meditation promises. It has smoothed and focused us.

Maybe that's about the quiet of reading, the pace of it. At Success Academy Charter Schools in New York City, whose students significantly outperform most peers statewide, the youngest kids all learn and play chess, in part because it hones "the ability to focus and concentrate," said Sean O'Hanlon, who supervises the program. Doesn't reading do the same?

[Daniel Willingham](#), a psychology professor at the University of Virginia, framed it as a potentially crucial corrective to the rapid metabolism and sensory overload of digital technology. He told me that it can demonstrate to kids that there's payoff in "doing something taxing, in delayed gratification." A new book of his, "Raising Kids Who Read," will be published later this year.

Before talking with him, I arranged a conference call with [David Levithan](#) and [Amanda Maciel](#). Both have written fiction in the young adult genre, whose current robustness is cause to rejoice, and they rightly noted that the intensity of the connection that a person feels to a favorite novel, with which he or she spends eight or 10 or 20 hours, is unlike any response to a movie.

That observation brought to mind a moment in "The Fault in Our Stars" when one of the protagonists says that sometimes, "You read a book and it fills you with this weird evangelical zeal, and you become convinced that the shattered world will never be put back together unless and until all living humans read the book."

Books are personal, passionate. They stir emotions and spark thoughts in a manner all their own, and I'm convinced that the shattered world has less hope for repair if reading becomes an ever smaller part of it.