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09 JULY 2020, THE TABLET

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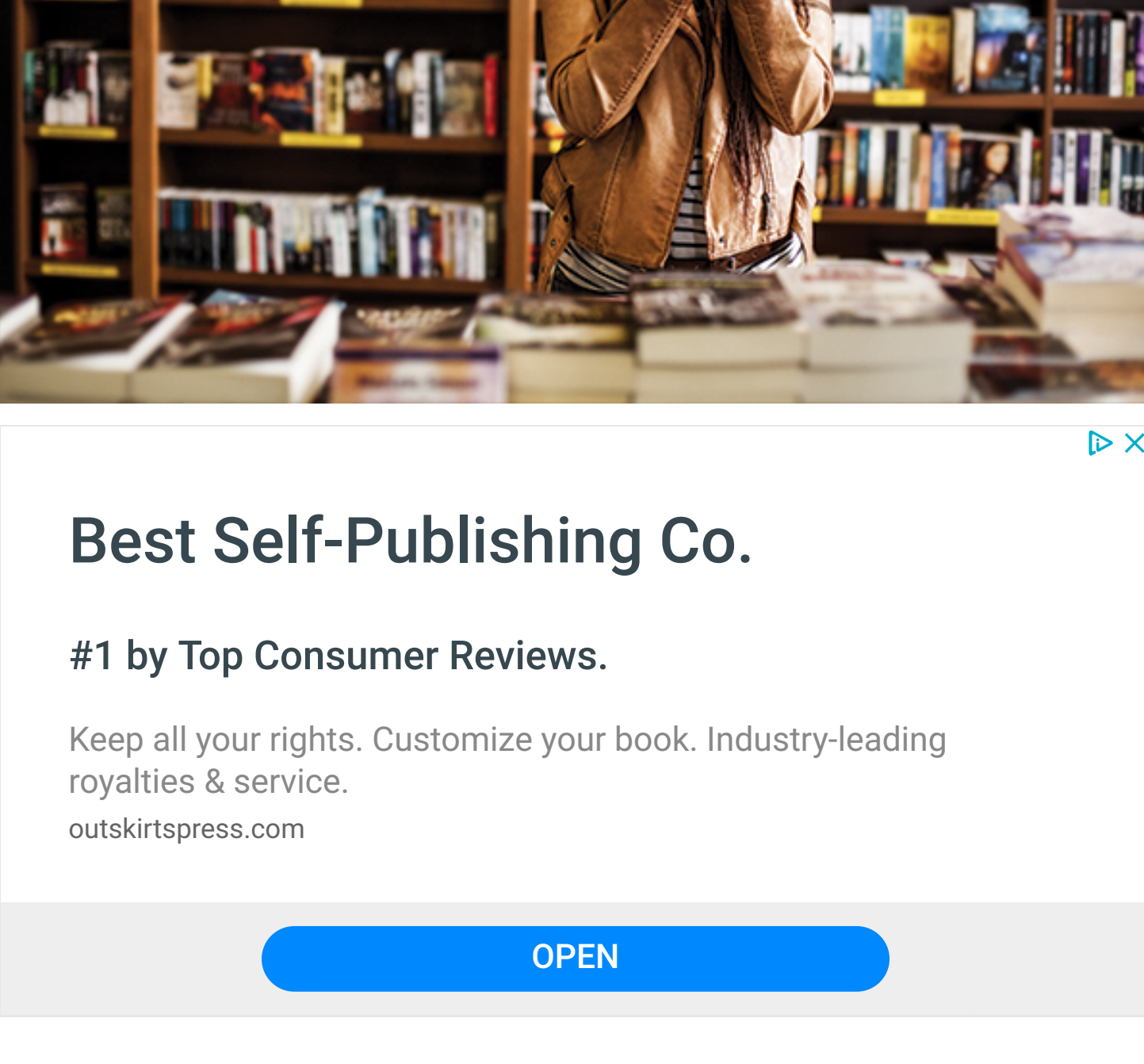
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In defence of bookworms

by Zena Hitz



The life of the mind



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‘Reading at its best is a mode of communion ...’

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In a transactional, technological world riven by crisis, have literature and philosophy become redundant? An American academic argues that the renewal of our inner life is fundamental to preserving our humanity

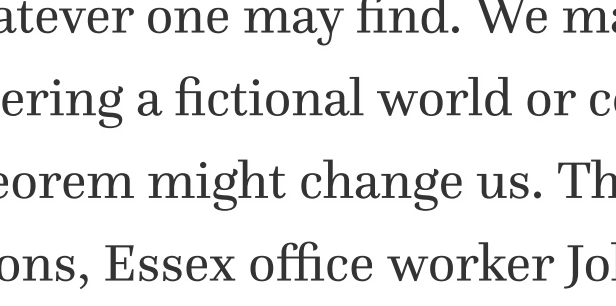
Hard-boiled bookworms like myself sometimes find ourselves in a crisis of conscience when dramatic human suffering forces its way into our awareness. When I was a PhD student in philosophy, the smoking ruins of the World Trade Center shook me out of my contemplative slumber. I felt I could not live in a library; I had to “make a difference”, to help to heal the broken fragments of the world.

The desire to make a difference is not always easy to distinguish from the urge to make a splash. So, in turn, one can end up making a spectacle of oneself. We live in a social world where the thirst for justice seems to lead on to fixed and rigid pathways, and where absurd performances can take precedence over substance. This is nothing new. Caryl Houselander wrote in 1944 of an invalid lady who could not forgive God for not permitting her to be eaten by a cannibal and so achieve martyrdom. “She could not accept herself as a sick woman,” Houselander wrote. “But she would have achieved heroic virtue as a cutlet!” We prefer the fictional role of a cannibal’s dinner to the real tedium of illness.

It is easy to snark, but difficult to know what to do. Amid a global pandemic and a powerful movement against police violence and racism, what point could there be in studying literature, philosophy, poetry or mathematics? Aren’t all those self-indulgent hobbies for quieter times? Aren’t we bound to dedicate ourselves to the welfare of our neighbours, now more than ever?

Two sets of walls divide us both from learning and from service, from the true life of the mind and the true life of the heart. The first, as I have suggested, is a tendency to dwell in fantasy. Just as we may devise a theatrical fight for justice that never leaves the realm of pixels, we can study and think precisely to avoid the demands of others. We may retreat into our imagined proofs of our superiority to others, assembling an arsenal of facts with which to bludgeon our unsuspecting enemies. So we imagine we recover status lost in erotic or athletic contests.

The second wall is our comfort. As a PhD student, luxury more than competition was my obstacle. I was comfortable, safe, travelled regularly, went to parties, and was successful at prestigious work that I loved. When the Twin Towers came down on 11 September 2001, I realised that my comfort wasn’t all there was. The fact that others suffered while I flourished seemed not right. Surely I ought to suffer for them and with them? While fantasy substitutes for reality, comfort gives an only partial view. To catch a glimpse of what has been obscured changes us.

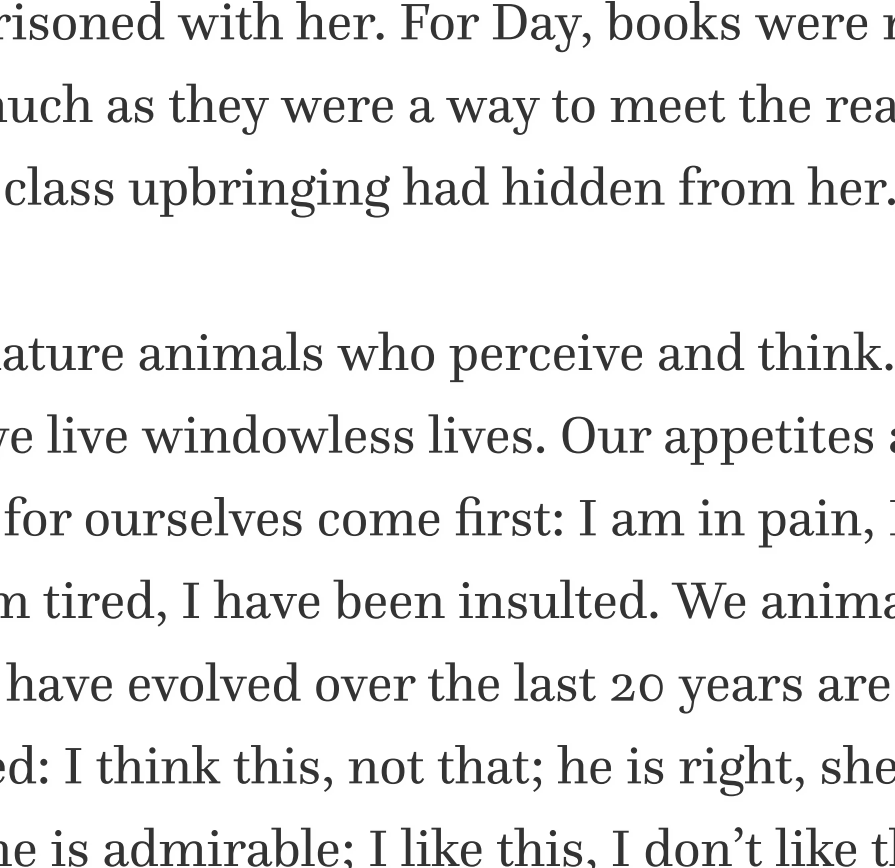


BRILLIANT

When we read or study seriously, not to compete for status or to distract ourselves, we encounter the object of our attention in all of its messy, unpredictable reality. Such reading and thinking involves discipline to undertake, and a willingness to surrender to whatever one may find. We may not know in advance how entering a fictional world or considering a philosophical theorem might change us. The great chronicler of peregrine falcons, Essex office worker John Baker, may not have known in advance that he would find himself admiring the colour of blood, as he learned over time to identify with his bloodthirsty birds. Learning requires abandonment, the fear of which has to be overcome at the outset.

Our intellectual comfort is our certainty, our confidence, our sense of righteousness. It is the ease of life with others who share our views. Any encounter with the real threatens to unsettle that comfort, leaving us in confusion or loneliness, just as a drive through an impoverished neighbourhood may mar the beauty of one’s own luxurious garden, or a visit to the hospital may reveal our health to be the accident it is.

Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker movement, opened up houses of hospitality all over the United States, and began a tradition of Catholic anti-war activism, protesting against the atom bomb and nuclear weapons testing. She might seem above all a woman of action. And yet in an interview with a biographer, she said something surprising: she wanted to be remembered especially as a lover of books.



ANNIE CLOTH BUY 3 GET 4TH 50% OFF

We are by nature animals who perceive and think. Yet for the most part we live windowless lives. Our appetites and aspirations for ourselves come first: I am in pain, I am hungry, I am tired, I have been insulted. We animals of the screen who have evolved over the last 20 years are more sophisticated: I think this, not that; he is right, she is wrong; he is evil, she is admirable; I like this, I don’t like that; smiley face, angry face; heart, retweet.

In every book is at least one other human being: an author. The author offers us a way of seeing, glimpses from high places or low from which we had not yet examined things. Sometimes the author shares other people with us, and we come to see their thoughts, desires and limitations. Reading at its best is a mode of communion more than it is a vehicle of distraction.

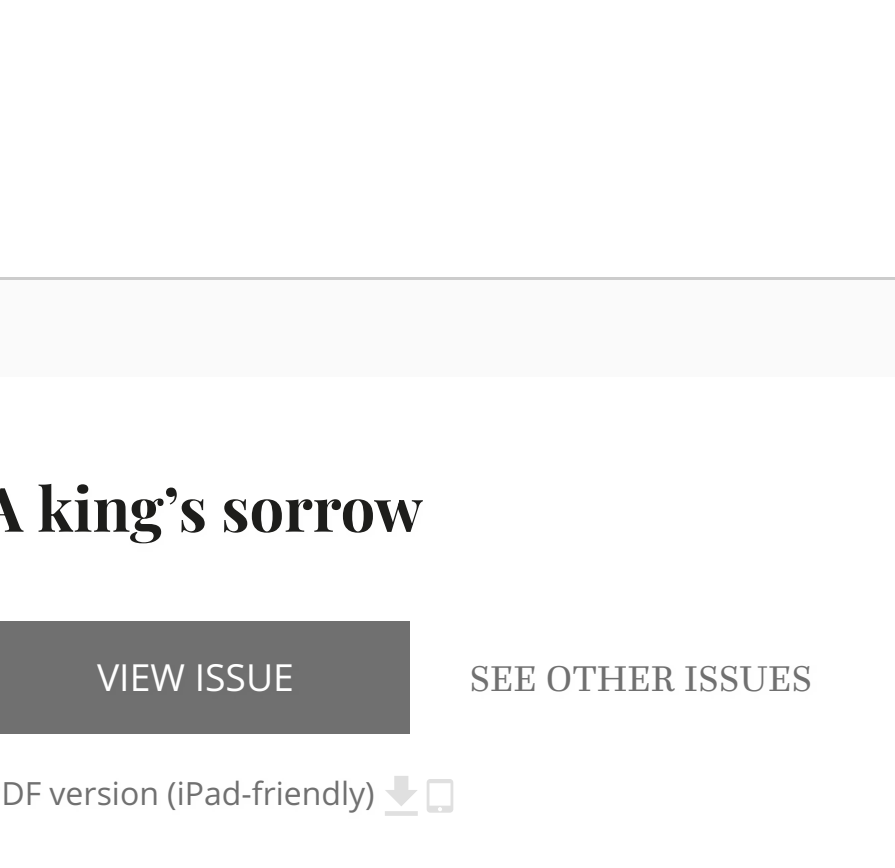
Augustine said that love could not bind people together if no one learnt anything from anyone else. He meant, I think, that books and learning develop our capacities to love and to choose. So too, they give us a dignity beyond our ordinary usefulness as a grocer, a barrister, or a cleaner. They open up points of connection with other human beings, where we see them, and they us, not as vehicles for power or for pleasure, but as fellow travellers or fellow labourers in the endeavour of understanding. Like all common endeavours, learning is a bond of unity in which our differences first drop away, then return graced with new worth.

The memoirs of the marginalised and the impoverished testify to the power of learning to elevate and to forge bonds of unity. The oppressed find through books, plays, poetry and astronomy a dignity denied them in ordinary life. Jonathan Rose’s wonderful book, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, collects many such testimonies. The black American scholar and activist, W.E.B. Du Bois, writes of finding among dead authors such as Aristotle or Balzac a community of equals where skin colour dropped into irrelevance. Many black American leaders and authors describe their education in similar terms. They find a freedom in old books often denied them by living neighbours.

We live these days under a funny kind of authoritarianism. We are not meant to pick up a great book and encounter the author as an equal, but to sit at the feet of an expert who tells us how to think. Likewise in service: we are not meant to simply visit our neighbour, get to know them, and help as we can, but we must support top-down initiatives, five-point plans and policies – all designed from on high by people who do not know those whose lives they will shape. But we ourselves will not grow in either learning or love unless we look at one another at eye level.

Through serious reading, Du Bois found a community of the dead, and his own dignity. Dorothy Day found a way to build a community of the living that offered a window on to the whole of humanity. She felt, reciting the Psalms in jail, that she experienced the sufferings of others through the sufferings of Christ.

The mystical body of Christ, in the world of the living, is a suffering body. We resist serious reading, just as we avoid the suffering of our flesh-and-blood neighbours, because we do not want ourselves to suffer. If we are to pick up the fragments of a broken world, we must steel ourselves for pain, fear and uncertainty. Serious reading provides both practice in endurance and fuel for reimagining the future. Real change is organic, and so requires patience. Patience, as Gerard Manley Hopkins says, comes those ways we know.



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Zena Hitz is a tutor at St John’s College in Annapolis, Maryland. Her latest book, *Lost In Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*, is published by Princeton University Press at £18.99 (Tablet price £17.09).

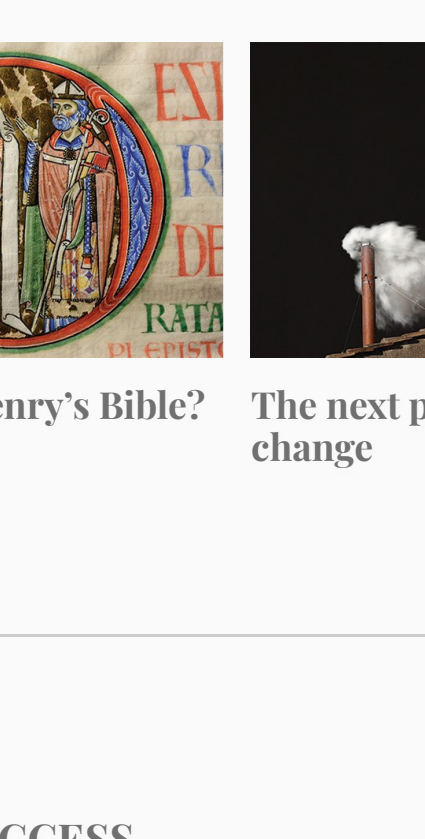


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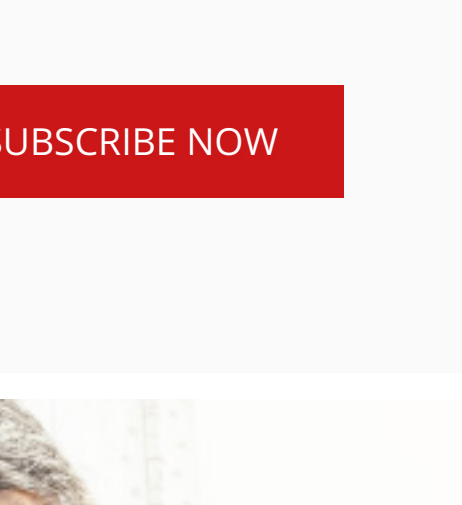
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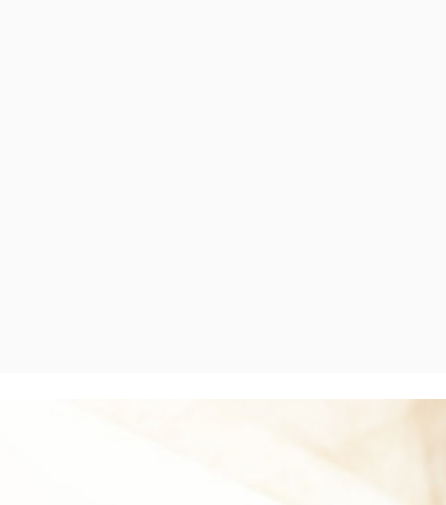
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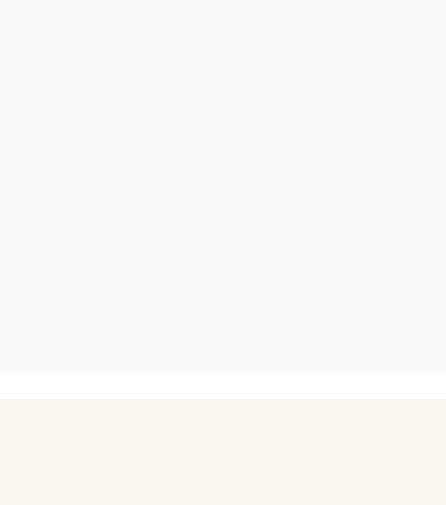
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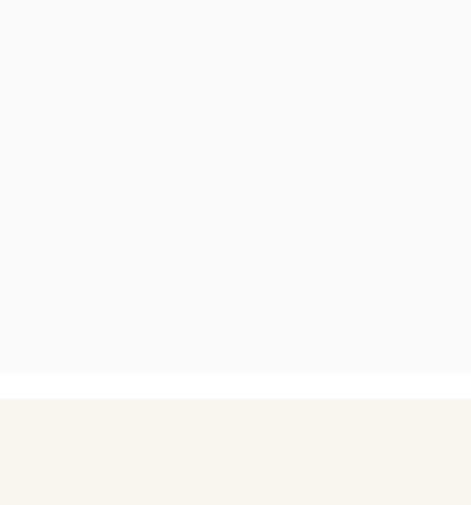
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