

# I'd Rather Be READING



THE DELIGHTS AND DILEMMAS  
OF THE READING LIFE

ANNE BOGEL



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For everyone who's ever finished a book  
under the covers with a flashlight  
when they were supposed to be sleeping.



Ah, how good it is to be among people  
who are reading!

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

Books wrote our life story, and as they  
accumulated on our shelves (and on  
our windowsills, and underneath our  
sofa, and on top of our refrigerator),  
they became chapters in it themselves.  
How could it be otherwise?

—ANNE FADIMAN

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# Introduction

## *The Pages of Our Lives*

Can you recommend a great book?” Because I’m a writer, certified book nerd, and all-around bookish enthusiast, people ask me this question all the time. I talk about books like it’s my job—and in a sense, it is. I make book recommendations every day.

When a reader tells me they’re looking for a great book to read, it doesn’t seem like a complicated question, or like they’re asking for too much. I can imagine where they’re coming from because I’ve been there myself. Maybe they’ve read through a string of mediocre titles, or maybe it’s been a while since they’ve read anything at all. Maybe they’re in a slump, reading-wise, and it’s killed the confidence they once had in choosing good titles for themselves. They’re

not in the mood to take a chance; they're looking for a sure thing—a book they're guaranteed to love.

But no library or bookstore has a dedicated shelf for “great books,” at least not the kind we're talking about here. Maybe they have a section of impressive-looking hardbacks, those hundred or so titles some consider to be the foundation of Western literature—Plato, Cicero, Dante. Those Great Books are easy enough to find, but they're not what you're looking for when you want a great book.

You're looking for a book that reminds you why you read in the first place. One written well and that will feel like it was written just for you—one that will make you think about things in a new way, or feel things you didn't expect a book to make you feel, or see things in a new light. A book you won't want to put down, whose characters you don't want to tell good-bye. A book you will close feeling satisfied and grateful, thinking, *Now, that was a good one.*

If I could read only great books for the rest of my days, I would be happy. But finding those books—for myself or any other reader—isn't so easy. A “great” book means different things to different people.

When we talk about reading, we often focus on the books themselves, but so much of the reading life is about the reader as an active participant. To put a great book



in your hands, here's what I need to know: When you turn to the written word, what are you looking for? What themes speak to you? What sorts of places do you want to vicariously visit? What types of characters do you enjoy meeting on the page? What was the last story you wished would never end? Which was the last volume you hurled across the room?

Without the details of what “great” means to you, and without knowing what kind of reader you are, the question might be simple, but it's impossible to answer. To hand you a great book, I don't just need to know about books; I need to know *you*.

A book is just printed words on a page: you can shelve it, shred it, ship it around the world. It's a commodity you can buy and sell, highly prize, or box up in your basement and leave to mildew. We both loan them and discard them.

But avid readers know a great book doesn't exist only in the realm of the material. The words between those covers bring whole worlds to life. When I think of the characters and stories and ideas contained on a single shelf of my personal library, it boggles my mind. To readers, those books—the ones we buy and borrow and trade and sell—are more than objects. They are opportunities beckoning us. When we read, we connect with them (or don't) in a personal way.

Sometimes the personal nature of reading is kind of a pain, making it difficult to find a great book for an individual reader. Sometimes finding the right book feels like a hassle—especially if you’re standing in the bookstore aisle or perusing the library stacks or even scrutinizing the teetering pile on your nightstand, debating what to read next—when all you want to do is find a book you will love, that you’ll close in the span of a few hours or days or weeks and say, “That was *amazing*.” A great book. That’s all you want. But reading is personal. We can’t know what a book will mean to us until we read it. And so we take a leap and choose.

Sometimes we’ll choose a book that’s all wrong for us; that’s a peril of the reading life. Sometimes we’ll read through a string of mediocre titles, or we’ll find ourselves in a slump. Sometimes we’ll read a perfectly good book, but the timing’s all wrong; the same book means different things to different people, or in different seasons of life. Since reading is personal, it can be tricky. (Not such a commodity after all, eh?)

We are readers. Books are an essential part of our lives and of our life stories. For us, reading isn’t just a hobby or a pastime; it’s a lifestyle. We’re the kind of people who understand the heartbreak of not having your library reserves come in before you leave town for vacation and the exhilaration of stumbling upon the new Louise Penny at

your local independent bookstore three whole days before the official publication date. We know the pain of investing hours of reading time in a book we enjoyed right up until the final chapter's truly terrible resolution, and we know the pleasure of stumbling upon exactly the right book at exactly the right time.

There are few one-size-fits-all prescriptions for the reading life. This spurs all sorts of readerly dilemmas, but it also brings readers endless delight.

In this book, we'll dive into the personal nature of reading—what shapes us as readers, what we bring to the page. We'll explore how to read, how to choose good books, and what happens when we read bad ones. We'll dive into why we connect with some books so powerfully. We'll peek into other people's reading lives. And we'll enjoy every minute of it, because that's the kind of people we are.

How good it is to be among people who are reading.



# 1



## Confess Your Literary Sins

In David Lodge's campus novel *Changing Places*, two college professors—one American, one British—swap teaching roles for a year. In one memorable scene, the British academics invite their American guest to play a party game called Humiliation. Players confess important literary works they haven't yet read, and points are scored based on how many other players have already read them. The person with the most—and most egregious—gaps in their personal reading history wins. If everyone but you has read that book, you're going to be great at Humiliation.

Those fictional professors aren't the only ones who enjoy shocking and delighting their fellow readers by spilling the

guilty secrets of their reading lives, sharing those works they suspect everyone but them has already read, or perhaps the books they love but feel they shouldn't. Why can we not help but laugh when we discover an English prof has never read *Hamlet* (as in *Changing Places*), or that a serious friend has a thing for Sophie Kinsella novels, or that a soft-spoken friend is obsessed with celebrity memoirs, or our friend with the religion PhD has never read C. S. Lewis?

Why do these revelations delight us so? Screenwriters have a name for it. They call it the comedy gap, that gap between what we *expect* to happen and what *actually* happens. Or, in this case, what we *expect* a person's reading life to be like and what it's *truly* like.

In 2011, I named my new blog *Modern Mrs Darcy*, because it captured the timeless and timely nature of what I wanted to write about—and because I love Jane Austen.\* Almost exactly five years later, in 2016, I started a podcast called *What Should I Read Next?* devoted to book talk, reading recommendations, and literary matchmaking. The funny thing about creating a blog using a name from a Jane Austen novel, or casting yourself as a literary matchmaker, is how many readers you meet feel as though a conversation with you is an invitation to play Humiliation.

\**Emma* and *Persuasion* are my *other* very favorite Jane Austen novels, but *Modern Mrs Knightley* didn't have the same ring, and Anne Elliot and I share a first name, which seemed confusing.

Since I began these projects, I've been surprised to find myself a magnet for readers' literary confessions: so many readers feel compelled to confess important literary works they haven't yet read, or that they love the "wrong" books, or that they don't read much at all lately.

These readers are acutely aware of their own gap: that divide between what they *think* their reading life should be like and what it's *really* like.

Sometimes I think they're sharing in fun. They're content with their choices and opinions, but they appreciate the pleasure of divulging guilty secrets and see in me a kindred spirit, one who will appreciate their confession. But the truths of many readers' reading lives make them uncomfortable; their gap isn't a source of amusement, but frustration. They're certain their taste is questionable, their opinions are wrong, their reading habits are poor, and it's only a matter of time before the Book Police track them down. They're carrying guilty reading secrets that make them feel as though they aren't *real* readers. They're partly terrified of being found out and partly feel they might burst if they can't tell *someone* their bookish secrets.

Often that someone is me: these readers find me—in person or online—and say, "I don't usually tell people this . . ." before spilling their secrets:

They've never read Shakespeare or Chaucer, Brontë or Austen, Hawthorne or Dickens, or any other author you might possibly have been assigned in high school.

They *were* assigned these books in school, but never read them.

They wrote their term papers on Important Novels without reading the important novels. (The better their grade, the worse they feel.)

They've never read Jane Austen. Specifically, they've never read *Pride and Prejudice*. They once read Jane Austen, but they don't understand the fuss. They attempted Jane Austen but couldn't get past the first chapter. They read *Pride and Prejudice*, but they liked the movie better—and not even the one with Colin Firth, which they think I could understand, but the other one. The crown of their home library is a beautiful Jane Austen box set—and they *still* haven't read Jane Austen.

They're an English Lit major who did all the required reading—and hated a healthy percentage of it. They think *Moby-Dick* is trash. Also, *The Sound and the Fury*. And everything by James Joyce.

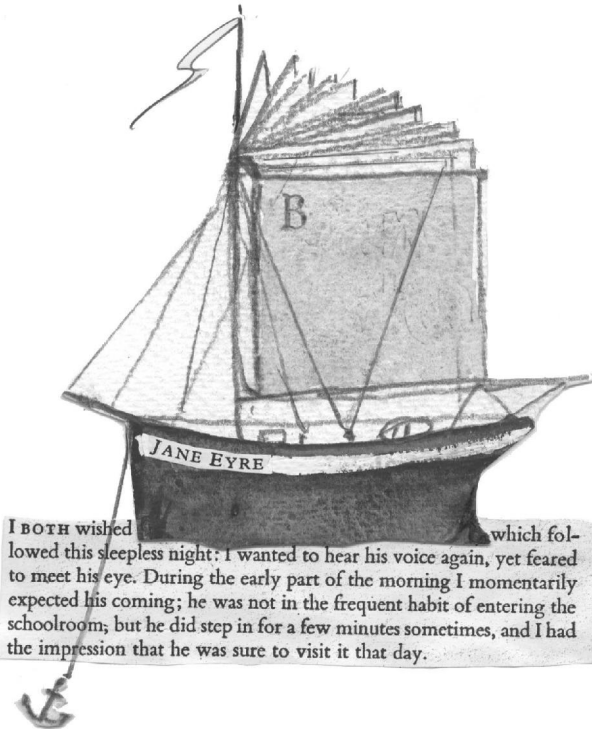
They don't understand the love for *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *East of Eden*, *The Great Gatsby*, and any number of beloved American classics. They just don't care. (“Can you say *boring*?”)



They hate *Charlotte's Web*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Giving Tree*.

They hate the Twilight series so much they want to flip over bookstore displays.

They finally succumbed to the hype and read the Harry Potter series, and they think it's drivel.



I BOTH wished which followed this sleepless night: I wanted to hear his voice again, yet feared to meet his eye. During the early part of the morning I momentarily expected his coming; he was not in the frequent habit of entering the schoolroom; but he did step in for a few minutes sometimes, and I had the impression that he was sure to visit it that day.

They teach ninth-grade English by day and currently binge on the Twilight series at night, for the sixth time in as many years. (“Please don’t tell my students.”)

They don’t understand how anyone could not love *The Catcher in the Rye*. They are obsessed with Holden Caulfield. They wonder what this says about them. They are not adolescent males, so they’re pretty sure it’s not good.

They’re obsessed with the Harry Potter books.

They’ve read the Outlander series eight times. They’re counting down to the next installment the way they once counted down to their wedding day or the birth of a child. They wrote Diana Gabaldon a fan letter, begging her to write faster.

They own forty-two cozy mysteries, whose covers all feature a skein of yarn, a pie, or both.

They are addicted to firehouse romances, the kind whose covers bear rippled torsos, and they don’t even bother to buy the more sedate-looking Kindle versions anymore, because the e-reader experience just isn’t the same.

They tried to read the latest thought-provoking National Book Award winner on the beach but couldn’t get into it. So they made an emergency vacation bookstore run for a stack of baby-blue books by Elin Hilderbrand, Mary Kay Andrews, and Dorothea Benton Frank, whose covers all bore sandy beach scenes, all of which were inhaled that week. (They still haven’t read the award winner.)

They haven't read much of anything lately, unless their iPad counts. Or *In Style* magazine. Or the tabloid covers in the grocery checkout line.

They've had the same book sitting on their nightstand for three years and haven't opened it once.

They've never, not ever, read a book over three hundred pages long.

They've tried and tried, but they haven't enjoyed a book written by a woman in years. Or a man. Or a white person. Or someone who doesn't live in England or the United States. Or Alaska. Or the American South.

They checked a book out of the library four years ago—and still haven't returned it. They're afraid to show their face at the library until they pay down their overdue balance, which now equals the cost of a nice dinner out. The library canceled their card because of lost books and overdue fines.

They ordered pizza so they could skip making dinner and finish their book. They ate cereal for dinner so they could finish their book. They forgot to eat dinner because they were finishing their book.

The last time they finished a great story, the book hang-over lasted three days. They were so caught up in their book that they let the kids draw on the walls so they could get to the last page. They locked themselves in the bathroom so they could read undisturbed.

They think they might love books too much.

Whatever it may be, they're sure they're the only one with this issue.

Reader, whatever secret you're keeping, it's time to spill it. I'll take your confession, but the absolution is unnecessary. These secrets aren't sins; they're just secrets. No need to repent. C. S. Lewis once wrote, "Friendship . . . is born at the moment when one man says to another, 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'"

Reader, you're not the only one. Keep confessing to your fellow readers; tell them what your reading life is *really* like. They'll understand. They may even say, "You too?" And when they do, you've found a friend. And the beginnings of a great book club.