

HOW

TO

Essays

READ

NOW

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AUTHOR OF AMERICA IS NOT THE HEART

First published in the United States in 2022 by Viking, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC.

First published in hardback in Great Britain in 2022 by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 83895 492 5

EBook ISBN: 978 1 83895 494 9

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books

An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd

Ormond House

26–27 Boswell Street

London

WC1N 3JZ

www.atlantic-books.co.uk

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**HOW
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**AUTHOR'S NOTE,
OR A VIRGO
CLARIFIES THINGS**

In the years since my debut novel came out, I've been thinking a lot about how to read. Not about how to write—I wouldn't trust a book about how to write by a debut novelist, any more than I would trust a book about how to swim by someone who'd accomplished the exceptional achievement of not having drowned, once. But reading? Most days when I look back at my childhood, it feels like first I became a reader; then I became a person. And in the postdebut years of touring, and traveling—in hotel rooms in Auckland and East Lansing, on festival stages in Manila and Rome, in bookstores in London, and in the renovated community library of my hometown, Milpitas—a thought came back to me, again and again; a ghost with unfinished business, a song I couldn't get out of my head: we need to change how we read.

The *we* I'm talking about here is generally American, since that's the particular cosmic sports team I've found myself on, through the mysteries of fate and colonial genocide—but in truth, it's a more capacious *we* than that, too. A *we* of the reading world, perhaps. By readers I don't just mean the literate, a community I don't particularly issue from myself, although I am, in spite of everything, among its fiercest spear-bearers. I mean something more expansive and yet more humble: the *we* that is in the world, and thinks about it, and then lives in it. That's the kind of reader I am, and love—and that's the reading practice I'm most interested in, and most alive to myself.

The second thought that has come to my house and still won't grab its coat and leave is this: the way we read now is simply not good enough, and it is failing not only our writers—especially, but not limited to, our most marginalized writers—but failing our readers, which is to say, ourselves.

When I talk about reading, I don't just mean books, though of course as a writer, books remain kin to me in ways that other art forms—even ones I may have come to love with an easier enthusiasm, in

recent years—aren't. At heart, reading has never just been the province of books, or the literate. Reading doesn't bring us to books; or at least, that's not the trajectory that really matters. Sure, some of us are made readers—usually because of the gift (and privilege) of a literate parent, a friendly librarian, a caring kindergarten teacher—and as readers, we then come to discover the world of books. But the point of reading is not to fetishize books, however alluring they might look on an Instagram flat lay. Books, as world-encompassing as they are, aren't the destination; they're a waypoint. Reading doesn't bring us to books—books bring us to reading. They're one of the places we go to help us to become readers in the world. I know that growing up, film and TV were as important to my formation as a critical thinker—to the ways in which I engaged with “representation” in any real sense—so I can't imagine not writing about them, even in a book supposedly about reading.

When I talk about how to read now, I'm not just talking about how to read books now; I'm talking about how to read our world now. How to read films, TV shows, our history, each other. How to dismantle the forms of interpretation we've inherited; how those ways of interpreting are everywhere and unseen. How to understand that it's meaningful when Wes Anderson's characters throw Filipinx bodies off an onscreen boat like they're nothing; how to understand that bearing witness to that scene means nothing if we can't *read* it—if we don't have the tools to understand its context, meaning, and effect in the world. That it's meaningful to have seen HBO's *Watchmen* and been moved and challenged by its subversive reckoning with the kinds of superhero tropes many kids, including myself, grew up on. Books will always have a certain historical pride of place in my life—but it's also because of books that *reading* can have a more expansive meaning in that life, both practically and politically.

In a more personal sense, as a first-generation American from a working-class / fragilely middle-class upbringing, most of the people in my life simply don't read: aren't sufficiently confident in their English, or don't have the leisure time, or have long found books and reading culture intimidating and foreclosed to them (for all my love of independent bookstores, I've also been glared at like a potential

shoplifter in enough of the white-owned ones to temper that love). I don't want a book called *How to Read Now* to speak only to the type of people who read books and attend literary festivals—and in the same vein, I don't want it to let off the hook people who think they don't read at all. I can't write a book about reading that tells people there's only one type of reading that counts—but equally, just because you don't read books at all doesn't mean you're not reading, or being read in the world. Of course, *How to Read Now* runs off the tongue a little easier than *How to Dismantle Your Entire Critical Apparatus*.

I've been an inveterate reader all my life, and yet I'm writing this book at the time in my life when I have the least faith I've ever had in books, or indeed reading culture in general. (The fact that this sentiment coincides with having become a published author doesn't escape me.) For my sins, I haven't lost faith in the capacity of books to save us, remake us, take us by the scruff and show us who we were, who we are, and who we might become; that conviction has been unkillable in me for too long. But I have in some crucial way lost my faith in our capacity to truly be commensurate to the work that reading asks of us; in our ability to make our reading culture live up to the world we're reading in—and for.

When I first began writing this book, I was in Aotearoa, also known as New Zealand, as a guest at the Auckland Writers Festival. Much happened in between those stolen, heady moments of writing on hotel room couches in the spring of 2019 and the (not quite) postpandemic world we now find ourselves in—worrying about the nurses in my family still working on the front lines; supporting loved ones who'd lost their jobs; mourning loved ones who'd lost their lives; joining the many marches here in the Bay to protest the anti-Black police brutality that took the lives of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, among so many others, as well as the rise in anti-Asian hate, fueled by Trump's virulently racist coronavirus rhetoric. I'd also rolled into lockdown after already being essentially confined at home in convalescence for over two months: in December 2019, just before Christmas, I'd been hospitalized for emergency surgery due to the internal hemorrhaging caused by an ectopic pregnancy, in which my left fallopian tube was surgically removed in a unilateral

salpingectomy. This was my second pregnancy loss, after complications with a D&C for a miscarriage at twelve weeks left me in and out of King's College Hospital over the summer of 2017, back when I was still living in London and editing my first novel, *America Is Not the Heart*.

All this to say, when I look back at the inception of this book, I can't help but feel that I'm looking at it from an entirely different world. In 2018 and 2019, the things I'd witnessed and experienced in the publishing industry during those early first-novel book tours and festivals made it distressingly clear to me that there was also something profoundly wrong with our reading culture, and particularly the ways in which writers of color were expected to exist in it: the roles they were meant to play, the audiences they were meant to educate and console, the problems their books were meant to solve. It started to feel like it would be impossible to continue working in this industry if I didn't somehow put down in writing the deep-seated unease I had around this framing.

I wanted to write about the reading culture I was seeing: the way it instrumentalized the books of writers of color to do the work that white readers should have always been doing themselves; the way our reading culture pats itself on the back for producing "important" and "relevant" stories that often ultimately reduce communities of color to their most traumatic episodes, thus creating a dynamic in which predominantly white American readers expect books by writers of color to "teach" them specific lessons—about historical trauma, farflung wars, their own sins—while the work of predominantly white writers gets to float, palely, in the culture, unnamed, unmarked, universal as oxygen. None of these are particularly new issues; Toni Morrison's landmark, indispensable *Playing in the Dark* remains the urtext on the insidious racial backbone of our reading culture. But I was occasionally alarmed during book tour events when I would make reference to *Playing in the Dark*, and realize that many in the audience had not read it and, indeed, seemingly hadn't ever had a substantial reckoning with the politics, especially racial politics, of their reading practices.

That was then. I still believe in reading, and I still very much want to write this book; I have written it, after all. But there was the intellectual idea of writing a book called *How to Read Now*, in a critical attempt to contend with the racial politics and ethics of how we read our books, our history, and each other—and there was the actual lived practice of writing that book, in the midst of the historic social upheaval brought to us by a global pandemic whose grotesquely racist coverage and criminally incompetent mismanagement under Trump’s America has not only utterly upended the daily lives of everyone I know, but has laid bare the outrageous truths many of us have always known, in particular regarding the true value of Black and Brown lives in this country, where systemic injustice and government neglect has meant predominantly poorer Black and Brown communities have borne the brunt of COVID-19’s destruction.

When I was working on this book in 2019, there were things I believed stridently about the politics of reading and writing. I know the twenty-first-century pose of literary personality in late capitalism is usually one of excoriating selfdoubt and anxiety, but I am a bossy Virgo bitch, and I have generally always been irritatingly sure of myself and my convictions, occasionally to my detriment, certainly to the chagrin of those who have chosen to love me. But I would be lying if I said that the events of 2020 and 2021 hadn’t profoundly affected me, and begun to permanently transform how I think about the world, and how to make art in it. I think most of all it’s become clear to me that when I named the book *How to Read Now*, I must have subconsciously meant the title both as a bossy Virgo directive and as an inquiry: a question, openended. I, too, want to know how to read now.

But what I thought then, and what I still think now, is this: the way we read now is, by and large, morally bankrupt and indefensible, and must change immediately, because we are indeed failing not just our writers and ourselves, but more pressingly our future—which will never look any different from our current daily feed of apocalypse if we don’t figure out a different way to read the world we live in. I’ll paraphrase the hackneyed quote by the equally hackneyed George

Santayana (who was often a pretty piss-poor reader of the world himself, and who believed, for example, that intermarriage between superior races—his own—and inferior races—hi—should be prevented): if we don't figure out a different way to read our world, we'll be doomed to keep living in it.

I don't know about you, but I find that prospect unbearable. Anyone who is perfectly comfortable with keeping the world just as it is now and reading it the way they've always read it—is, frankly, a fed, cannot be trusted, and is probably wiretapping your phone.

HOW TO READ NOW

White supremacy makes for terrible readers, I find. The thing is, often when people talk about racists, they talk in terms of ignorance. *They're just ignorant*, they say. *Such ignorant people. I'm sorry, my grandpa's really ignorant. That was an ignorant thing to say. What an ignorant comment.* We're besieged on all sides by the comforting logic and pathos of ignorance. It's a logic that excuses people—bad readers—from their actions; from the living effect of their bad reading.

Most people are not, in fact, all that ignorant, i.e., lacking knowledge, or simply unaware. Bad reading isn't a question of people undereducated in a more equitable and progressive understanding of what it means to be a person among other people. Most people are vastly *overeducated*: overeducated in white supremacy, in patriarchy, in heteronormativity. Most people are in fact highly advanced in their education in these economies, economies that say, very plainly, that cis straight white lives are inherently more valuable, interesting, and noble than the lives of everyone else; that they deserve to be set in stone, centered in every narrative. It's not a question of bringing people out of their ignorance—*if only someone had told me that Filipinos were human, I wouldn't have massacred all of them!*—but a question of bringing people out of their deliberately extensive education.

When I say that white supremacy makes for terrible readers, I mean that white supremacy is, among its myriad ills, a formative collection of fundamentally shitty reading techniques that impoverishes you as a reader, a thinker, and a feeling person; it's an education that promises that whole swaths of the world and their liveliness will be diminished in meaning to you. Illegible, intangible, forever unreal as cardboard figures in a diorama. *They don't know how to read us*, I've heard fellow writer friends of color complain, usually after a particularly frustrating Q&A in which a white person has either

taken offense to something in our books or in the discussion (usually the mention of whiteness at all will be enough to offend these particularly thin-skinned readers), or said something well-meaning but ultimately self-serving, usually about how their story made them *feel terrible about your country*.

White supremacy is a comprehensive cultural education whose primary function is to prevent people from reading—engaging with, understanding—the lives of people outside its scope. This is even more apparent in the kind of reading most enthusiastically trafficked by the white liberal literary community that has such an outsize influence, intellectually and economically, on the publishing industry today. The unfortunate influence of this style of reading has dictated that we go to writers of color for the gooey heart-porn of the ethnographic: to learn about forgotten history, harrowing tragedy, communitydestroying political upheaval, genocide, trauma; that we expect those writers to provide those intellectual commodities the way their ancestors once provided spices, minerals, precious stones, and unprecious bodies.

Writers like me often do carry the weight of forgotten history, harrowing tragedy, community-destroying political upheaval, genocide, and trauma. But how then are we read? And equally as important, how then are we edited? How is our work circulated in a marketplace that struggles not just to see all of its writers as equals, but to pay them as equals? For if our stories primarily serve to educate, console, and productively scold a comfortable white readership, then those stories will have failed their readers, and those readers will have failed those stories. All the “representation matters” rhetoric in the world means nothing if we do not address the fundamentally fucked-up relationship between writers of color and white audiences that persists in our contemporary reading culture.

I have no desire to write yet another instruction manual for the sociocultural betterment of white readers. I don’t know any writer who, if asked what they wanted their work to do in the world, would reply: “Make better white people.” Equally, I don’t see a sustainable way to continue in my industry without reckoning with the rot at its core, which is that, by and large, the English-language publishing

industry centers the perspective and comfort of its overwhelmingly white employee base and audience, leaving writers of color to be positioned along that firmly established structure: as flavors of the month, as heroic saviors, as direly important educators, as necessary interventions (“classic American story / genre / historical episode, but now populated with brown people!” continues to be one of the most dominant and palatable gateways for white audiences to become accustomed to seeing Black and Brown bodies on their screens and in their pages), as vessels of sensational trauma—but rarely as artists due the same depth and breadth of critical engagement as their white colleagues; rarely as artists whose works are approached not just as sources of history or educational potential but specific and sublime sensual immersion: sites of wonder, laughter, opulence, precision; a place to sink into the particular weather of a particular town; a place to pang at the love of strangers, thwarted or salvaged.

At heart, my issue with how we read is as much an existential grievance as it is a labor dispute: the industry is simply not serving its employees equally. And it asks, repeatedly, for uncompensated overtime from writers of color who, often in lieu of engaging in detail about the actual book they’ve actually written, find themselves instead managing the limited critical capacity of mostly white readers, here offended by the appearance of a non-English word, there alienated by a conversation not translated for their benefit. Writers of color often find themselves doing the second, unspoken and unsalaried job of not just being a professional writer but a Professional Person of Color, in the most performative sense—handy to have on hand for panels or journal issues about race or power or revolution, so the festival or literary journal doesn’t appear *totally* racist; handy to praise publicly and singularly, so as to draw less attention to the white audience, rapt in the seats too expensive for local readers of color. Running the gauntlet of book promotion for my first novel, it became patently obvious that much of our literary industry functions as little more than a quaint pastime for its adherents, like Marie-Antoinette in the Petit Trianon’s Hameau de la Reine: a place to merely cosplay diversity, empathy, education. Not a place to truly be diverted from oneself; not

a place to be made humble in one's vulnerability; not a place to be laid bare in one's unknowing.

IT WAS MY FATHER WHO FIRST INTRODUCED ME TO BOOKS. I grew up in what was once a small town—the tech boom of the Bay Area ensures it will never be a small town again—in which I was never a visible, singled-out minority. Instead, I was part of an exceedingly invisible and thus banal majority: what's often called, usually with a faintly lurid dash of fearmongering, a “majority-minority town.”

I emphasize the demographic makeup of the community I came out of primarily because I've found that so much of our contemporary imaginings of minority lives, especially immigrant lives, always seem to posit the idea of the Only One: the only Asian, in the white town. The one minority, beset on all sides by white people. That narrative is often sold as the preeminent narrative of minority experience in America, and the people who sell this story often frame it as a story of typical American hardship: the difficulty of being the only Asian kid in a white class.

That this dominant narrative bears zero resemblance to my own experience doesn't make it untrue, of course; I know there are plenty of people who grew up as the only kid of color in a white town. But it's the way that narrative is deployed that matters here. It successfully centers whiteness in a minoritized person's story—making their narrative about adapting or not adapting to “America,” which is always a code for adapting to whiteness. It also mistakes difference for oppression, which is not the same thing: to be the only Asian person in an otherwise white town is just as much an indicator of privilege as it is of oppression, because most economically disadvantaged minorities do not live in majority-white towns. In a place like the Bay Area, they more typically live, as I did, in the satellite suburban towns that house a larger urbanized area's lower-income support workers—my town was made up mostly of Filipinx, Vietnamese, and Mexican working-class immigrant families (with pockets of wealthier immigrant families here and there) whose jobs as security guards, nurses, cooks, domestic workers, and subcontracted