

C.S. Lewis

THE
**READING
LIFE**

*The Joy of Seeing New Worlds
Through Others' Eyes*

Edited by David C. Downing and Michael G. Maudlin



WILLIAM
COLLINS

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

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About This Book

Preface by David C. Downing and Michael G. Maudlin

PART ONE: ON THE ART AND JOY OF READING

Why We Read

How to Know If You Are a True Reader

Why Children's Stories Are Not Just for Children

Literature as Time Travel

Why Fairy Tales Are Often Less Deceptive Than 'Realistic' Stories

The Case for Reading Old Books

On the Role of the Marvellous

Growing Up Amidst a Sea of Books

On Encountering a Favorite Author for the First Time

Why Movies Sometimes Ruin Books

How to Murder Words

Saving Words from the Eulogistic Abyss

The Achievements of J. R. R. Tolkien

On the Dangers of Confusing Saga with History

On Two Ways of Traveling and Two Ways of Reading

PART TWO: SHORT READINGS ON READING

Word Combinations

Sincerity and Talent

Prose Style

Not in but Through
Pleasure
Originality
The Up-to-Date Myth
Keeping Up
Wide Tastes
Real Enjoyment
Literary Snobs
Re-reading Favorites Each Decade
Reading and Experience
Free to Skip
Free to Read
Huck
The Glories of Childhood—Versus Adolescence
Jane Austen
Art and Literature
Art Appreciation
Look. Listen. Receive.
Talking About Books
The Blessing of Correspondence
In Praise of Dante
On Alexandre Dumas
The Delight of Fairy Tales
Language as Comment
Communicating the Essence of Our Lives
Mapping My Books
On Plato and Aristotle
Imagination
If Only
On Shakespeare
On Hamlet
On Leo Tolstoy
Advice for Writing

Good Reading

Appendix: Journal Exercises for Reflecting on Your Reading Life

Footnotes

About the Author

Also by C. S. Lewis

Also Available From Harpercollins

About the Publisher

PREFACE

THE NOTED CRITIC WILLIAM EMPSON ONCE DESCRIBED C. S. Lewis as “the best-read man of his generation, one who read everything and remembered everything he read.”[1] This sounds like pardonable exaggeration, but it comes close to being true in the realms of literature, philosophy, and classics. At the age of ten, Lewis started reading Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. By age eleven, he began his lifelong habit of seasoning his letters with quotations from the Bible and Shakespeare. In his mid-teens, Lewis was reading classic and contemporary works in Greek, Latin, French, German, and Italian.

And Lewis did indeed seem to remember most of what he read. One of his students recalled that someone could quote any line from the book-length *Paradise Lost*, and Lewis would continue the passage from memory. Another student said that he could take a book off Lewis’s shelf, open a page at random and begin reading, and Lewis could summarize the rest of the page, often word for word.[2] With that kind of memory, Lewis had little difficulty reaching for just the right quotation or reference to illustrate his point. Since it seems he was able to carry an entire library in his head, it should come as no surprise that his major scholarly books average about one thousand citations apiece. His three volumes of letters contain another twelve thousand quotations or references. Even *The Chronicles of Narnia* for children contain nearly one hundred echoes or allusions to myth, history, or literature.

But as Mortimer Adler once remarked, “In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through to you.” Lewis