You Are What You Read

Published by Princeton University Press
41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TR

press.princeton.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: DiYanni, Robert, author.
Title: You are what you read : a practical guide to reading well / Robert DiYanni.
Description: Princeton : Princeton University Press, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020029863 (print) | LCCN 2020029864 (ebook) | ISBN 9780691206783 (hardback) | ISBN 9780691216607 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Reading. | Literature—Appreciation.
Classification: LCC PN83 .D59 2021 (print) | LCC PN83 (ebook) | DDC 418/.4—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020029863
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020029864

Version 1.0

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Editorial: Peter Dougherty and Alena Chekanov
Production Editorial: Lauren Lepow
Text Design: Pamela L. Schnitter
Jacket design: Matt Avery (Monograph LLC)

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Preface

The title of this book can be taken literally. We *are* what we read. While every individual is unique, all of us possess unlimited potential. Eat well and you will be healthier. Exercise well and you will be stronger. Read well and you will be ... what? Smarter? Maybe. More informed? Surely. But this book is not about those things. This book suggests that in reading well you will be more alive.

Reading well awakens and broadens the mind. It provides a vast realm of inner experience that extends far beyond everyday life. Reading well, you will still be you. But you will be a better and more interesting version of yourself.

My aim in this book is to present varied approaches to the deeply gratifying experience of reading, especially reading literature. These strategies can lead to thought-provoking and emotionally resonant textual encounters. *You Are What You Read* celebrates reading's value for learning and for living. It presents ways to enrich your reading practices and enhance your reading pleasure.

This is not a theoretical book, but a practical one, its aim to improve a reader's understanding and appreciation of literature. It's intended for anyone interested in getting more out of reading and more out of life. The brief discussions of theory in the book's later chapters illuminate the benefits of reading. I present just enough theory to enhance literary discernment, deepen literary understanding, and increase literary pleasure.

My major claim is that learning to read confidently and skillfully enhances our lives and helps us enjoy life more completely. This enjoyment stems from honing our powers of observation and enhancing our capacity for thinking well. I believe, in short, that we can attain better lives through reading.

We read with multiple goals—for information, enjoyment, self-gratification, self-advancement; to be instructed, entertained, moved, inspired. We read to understand and appreciate, to grow and develop. *You Are What You Read* attempts to help readers achieve these goals.

The rewards of reading are especially important today, a time of complex challenges we are all confronting. Economic turbulence has combined with frightening uncertainties and inexorable ambiguities. These disturbing realities are inflected across a spectrum of recent and ongoing catastrophes, from the Covid-19 pandemic to climate change, with extreme forms of weather cascading in ever-longer droughts along with wilder and more destructive fires and floods; from the global political and economic crises of mass migration and unemployment to individual and social problems—crippling addictions, surges in stress and anxiety, dramatic upheavals in education and social services—all exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis and the inescapable changes that accompany it.

Reading well—with skill and confidence, even expertise—matters now more than ever. Reading literature with understanding and pleasure can help us navigate the myriad disruptions we are living through. Reading won't solve life's increasingly intractable problems, but it can provide perspective on them and relief from them. Reading well can help us better understand the challenges we face together and help ameliorate the pain and suffering we endure. It can also take our minds off them for a while.

The value of learning to read well lies in the manifold pleasures it brings, the knowledge it affords, and the imaginative enlargement of life it yields. Learning to read well and to enjoy better reading is not as hard as most people think. Each of the book's chapters recommends ways to achieve this seemingly ambitious goal. Each illustrates how reading heightens our appreciation of living.

Taken together, the six chapters present a suite of interrelated, mutually reinforcing strategies for reading well.

- Chapter 1 focuses on listening. It argues that seeking textual meaning *first and foremost* yields far less value than what happens when we resist pouncing on "meaning" and, instead, begin by asking what texts *say* and *suggest*, what they *show* and *do*.
- Chapter 2 poses and answers two questions: "What truths do texts tell?" "How might we read for those textual truths"?
- Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate how we can engage works of nonfiction and fiction productively and pleasurably.
- Chapter 5 contextualizes practical applications of reading with a bit of theory. It considers reading's paradoxical pleasures via the dialectical energies that impel and enliven the reading of literature.
- Chapter 6 draws out the implications reading literature can have for living life more rewardingly. In tandem with chapter 5, it recapitulates the book's major themes and underscores the entwining of reading and living.

I've included a short coda that recommends nine reading practices that can enhance the experience of any reader. Appendixes A and B identify benefits and drawbacks of print and digital reading, and propose recommendations for what to read and why.

You Are What You Read participates in a long-standing conversation with writers and readers past and present. Reading literature gives us access to the multitude of voices that constitute that conversation. You can banter in the trenches under fire in a world war, fall in love for the first time again (and get it right this time), experience the brutality of slavery, voyage to the moon or the center of the earth, dive deep into the human mind and heart.

This life-affirming and life-enhancing conversation has been going on for millennia. I invite you, as a singular reader, to join in. Bring your thoughts and feelings, your ideas and personal values. Take your place in the conversation so that reading well can, indeed, help you attain a fuller and more rewarding life.

PART ONE Approaches

ONE Reading and Questioning

WHAT TEXTS SAY AND SUGGEST

WHAT THEY SHOW AND DO—AND HOW

> Reading sets our minds, our inquiring minds, in motion as we pursue a deeper understanding of our lives and the world we live in.
>
> —PAT C. HOY II

An important question readers consider when reading literature and other challenging texts is "What does the text mean?" It's a familiar question, and it no doubt stimulates thoughtful inquiry. I'm not ready to abandon it. However, I think we should consider its limitations for literary understanding, especially its interference with readers' enjoyment of literature. To think about the question of meaning productively, we need to postpone it and reframe it in the context of other textual considerations. Reading for meaning is important, but it shouldn't drive our reading practices and limit our reading intentions.

What other questions might we ask about what we read? What else can we consider about a text, while postponing the quest for meaning? Though grappling with textual meaning(s) may be our ultimate goal, it does not follow that we should *begin* with the question of meaning. Other questions can lead us into, around, and through texts, literary works especially, with enhanced pleasure and understanding.

The questions we ask about texts reflect fundamental assumptions about textual understanding, about interpretation. Our questions determine the directions our reading can take. Our questions determine what we are able to see and say about texts; they profoundly influence how we perceive texts and what we make of them. Changing our questions changes both our understanding of texts, literary works especially, and the value they hold for us.

Let's consider, to start, a brief essay by Yoshida Kenko, a fourteenth-century Japanese writer. Kenko was a Buddhist monk best known for his *Essays in Idleness*, among the most studied of Japanese literary works, a book that remains today a staple of the Japanese high school curriculum. The following essay, like all of Kenko's essays, carries a number as its title.

Essay 189

> You may intend to do something today, only for pressing business to come up unexpectedly and take up all of your attention the rest of the day. Or a person you have been expecting is prevented from coming, or someone you hadn't expected comes calling. The thing you have counted on goes amiss, and the thing you had no hopes for is the only one to succeed. A matter which promised to be a nuisance passes off smoothly, and a matter which should have been easy proves a great hardship. Our daily experiences bear no resemblance to what we had anticipated. This is true throughout the year, and equally true for our entire lives. But if we decide that everything is bound to go contrary to our anticipations, we discover that naturally there are also some things which do not contradict expectations. This makes it all the harder to be definite about anything. The one thing you can be certain of is the truth that all is uncertainty.

Refusing to say what his essay is about, Kenko leaves us to decide this for ourselves. He draws us into the essay's topic without naming it first. Instead, we dive right into the situation—ways our intentions get subverted. Eventually, by the end, Kenko states his claim: the one thing we can be certain of is uncertainty.

How does Kenko manage this topic? How does he carry us along his trail of thought? How does he engage us in thinking along with him? He does these things by making our reading experience inductive. Kenko provides examples, but he withholds the idea those examples illustrate.

He also engages us personally. From the opening word, "You," Kenko addresses us directly. He speaks to us, naturally, even informally, "you" and "your" appearing six times in the first three sentences. The fourth sentence, using no pronouns at all, serves as a hinge, a fulcrum. From there the passage pivots to the first-person plural: Kenko talks of "our" experiences, "our" lives, and "our anticipations"; he mentions things "we discover" about our everyday experience. The move is from the individual to the larger group, from the particular "you" to the more general "we."

The essay's brevity is also noteworthy: a single paragraph of nine sentences and fewer than 175 words. In that short space Kenko invites us to consider the ways our lives are replete with the incidental and accidental. He alludes to how plans become disrupted, intentions circumvented, the way things go awry. Not always, however, as he notes that some things do go the way we hope or expect. Kenko reminds us that we don't know and can't know which things will work out for us and which will not. Uncertainty sabotages that degree of confidence.

Kenko's essay operates on a fairly high level of generality, his examples notwithstanding. The essay's personal tone and informal style coexist with declarative sentences that remain general, nonspecific. Kenko offers us nothing about his personal experience. Instead, he gets us thinking more broadly about uncertainty, about the indefinite, and about our inability to control events. Implicitly, Kenko invites us to apply his general assertions to our own experience; we reflect on our own personal examples to substantiate, qualify, or perhaps challenge his claims.

Genre

One question we need to ask when encountering a text is what kind of text it seems to be. Just what are we looking at (and listening to)? Though brief, Kenko's text makes clear that it's an essay—a considered set of observations about human experience. And we respond to essays differently from the ways we respond to fictional works or to poems or plays. Essays make different demands on us than do works in other literary genres.

Here is another short prose text, considerably briefer than Kenko's mini-essay. What might we make of its mere two sentences?

> This is just to say I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast. Forgive me, they were delicious so sweet and so cold.

This text appears to be an explanatory note, a weak apology, one that might be attached to a refrigerator door. Its matter-of-fact tone, its seeking of forgiveness (playfully and teasingly), and its speaker's pleasure in eating the plums suggest as much. But what if these words were rearranged as their author, William Carlos Williams, published them?

> THIS IS JUST TO SAY
>
> I have eaten
> the plums
> that were in
> the icebox
>
> and which
> you were probably
> saving
> for breakfast
>
> Forgive me
> they were delicious

so sweet
and so cold

How does our experience of reading this version of the text, as verse, differ from our experience reading it as a prose note of apology? How does our response to the text change when aligned as the poem Williams wrote? Seeing those sentences spanning the margins of a page, we understand them one way—as an everyday note. Seeing them lineated as a poem, we approach and *experience* them differently—as literature. The change in genre alters our perspective and our *perception*—how we take what we are reading, what we make of it, and what we do with it. The shift of genre from note to poem changes all this and more.

Williams's poem slows down our reading, focusing our attention on plums swiped from the icebox that someone else was anticipating eating for breakfast—these facts, along with a description of their taste and the physical sensation of eating them. It's not that those details were unavailable in the prose apology—but rather that they were not accentuated and brought to our attention the way they are in Williams's poem.

Once we accept a text *as* a literary work, we know better how to look at it, what to do with it; we know what questions to ask of it and what kinds of analysis to subject it to. We know what rewards such attention can yield. Genre knowledge guides our reading of literary works; knowing a text's genre is crucial for understanding it.

Applying the conventions of literary analysis to bumper stickers, shopping lists, advertisements for shampoo, and other mundane texts is possible, of course, but the payoff is far less than when those conventions are applied to an epigram by Martial or Pope, or a lyric by Wordsworth or Dickinson—to say nothing of grander works, such as "Ode on a Grecian Urn," *The Tempest*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Fire Next Time*, or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Why? Because each of those literary works says much more; each shows more, does more, suggests more, signifies more, and does so with greater complexity and fecundity.

Contexts

Considerations of context beyond genre can open up a text in still other ways. We can ask about the relationship of the text to its author's other works. How, for example, does the speaker eating plums in "This Is Just to Say" compare with the speaker eating plums in another of Williams's poems, "To a Poor Old Woman"? How are those speaker's acts of plum eating different? Or, alternatively, how does Williams's emphasis in "To a Poor Old Woman" differ from his emphasis in "This Is Just to Say?" To what does "To a Poor Old Woman" direct our attention?

To a Poor Old Woman

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her

We notice first how the title is part of the poem's opening description: it provides a point

of view—how things taste to the poor old woman. We likely notice the sheer joy and sensuous pleasure the woman takes in eating those plums; we see how they comfort her; we feel the solace they bring her. We also notice how Williams plays with line endings to shift the emphasis at the end of lines from the woman ("her") eating the plums, to their "good" taste, and her particular pleasure in eating them. The repetition of the full line at the end of the poem closes it up and reemphasizes just how good those plums tasted, calling up, perhaps, the "sweet" taste and "cold" touch of the plums in "This Is Just to Say."

We notice as well, especially when we read the poem aloud, how Williams directs our attention to the way the poor old woman eats the plums, sucking out half at a time. The poem pushes toward two key words that complement these concrete details—"Comforted" and "solace"—abstract words that convey what her eating of the plums gives her.

Similarity and difference; similarity but difference. Connections and distinctions. We read poems and other literary works in relation to one another. We read everything in context.

We now slow down a bit to consider Williams's famous poem about a red wheelbarrow:

THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

What, we might ask ourselves, does this poem have in common with the others? Though there are no plums in the wheelbarrow, "The Red Wheelbarrow" shares characteristics with Williams's poems about plums: everyday subjects, simple language, short lines, a lack of end rhyme. The poems' appearance on the page, their visual form, directs us how to read them; their form influences how we see, hear, and take them, and what we make of them.

Describing "The Red Wheelbarrow" without worrying, initially, about its meaning frees us to notice patterns of sound and structure (as for example the assonance of lines 5 and 7 (gl*a*zed with r*ai*n; bes*i*de the *whi*te), and the use of two-line stanzas, with the first line containing three words and the second line a single word of two-syllables). We can notice those things upon a second look and hearing. We can detect patterns, make connections, ask questions, consider values the work embodies, and arrive at a provisional sense of the poem's significance. In looking carefully at its stanzas, for example, we might see each as a miniature wheelbarrow.

Another striking feature of the poem is the way Williams breaks its lines, where he turns each. By splitting "upon" from "what depends," Williams provokes us to wonder "What depends?" And, perhaps, "Why does it depend?" The word "depends" means literally "to hang from." And that is just what the word "upon" does in the poem: it hangs from the first line: "so much depends." It hangs there for us to see; and it hangs there, too, for us to think about.

In the second and third stanzas, Williams breaks lines over the words "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater." Why might he have done that and with what effect(s)? One possibility for "wheel" / "barrow" is that Williams reminds us (and helps us see) that a wheelbarrow is an object made of two parts—a "barrow" on "wheel"(s). Similarly, Williams emphasizes the fact that "rainwater" is indeed "water" that "rain(s)" down from the sky. He accomplishes this by visually dividing the words across lines on the page. In making those divisions, he gets us looking at words and noticing the things those words refer to. In the process, we see both the words and the things they describe anew.

Seeing one poem in the context of others aids what we can see and say about each. In addition to contextualizing poems and other literary works in relationship to one another,

we can also consider them in the contexts of an author's life and milieu.

Contexts: Life and World

A signal fact about William Carlos Williams is that he embedded his writing life in his work as a busy pediatrician practicing in Rutherford, New Jersey. Lacking much time to write, he often jotted notes and lines of poems between his appointments with patients. And though Williams did write one long epic poem, *Paterson*, his oeuvre leans heavily toward short stories, essays, and lyric poems. Given his circumstances, this isn't surprising.

Beyond the context of an author's life per se, we might consider how a writer's works reflect, embody, or otherwise relate to the larger world in which that life was lived. We might consider, that is, any particular text in light of the cultural milieu in which it was created. Contexts of work, life, and world allow us to expand our relationship with any particular text, enlarging our understanding of its implications and increasing our appreciation of its value. We might imagine these three contextual relationships as concentric circles: the individual text radiating into the larger contexts of a writer's oeuvre, the writer's life, and the writer's milieu.

We can illustrate with Flannery O'Connor, whose works, mostly short stories, embody an ironic vision, one embedded in the genre, temper, and spirit of Southern Gothic. O'Connor's identity as a southerner provided her with many of the raw materials she used to construct the nuanced settings of her stories and invent their richly imagined characters. Born in Savannah, Georgia, and living most of her adult life in Milledgeville, Georgia, the state's capital before the Civil War, O'Connor found her métier in portraying the South in all its complexity. Her stories, with their grotesque characters, frequent violence, savage satire, and colloquial dialogue, often point to the comic in calamity, while exploring moral issues in imaginative and provocative ways.

Complementing O'Connor's sense of herself as a southerner was her Roman Catholic faith. Her religious beliefs provide a way in to her fiction, though we need not share her beliefs to enjoy her stories. Belief is not required for appreciation.

We can see its centrality in her best-known story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," in which an escaped convict comes into contact with a family traveling on vacation. Here is its opening paragraph:

> The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the *Journal*. "Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did." (137)

The story is set in the American Southeast. That the narrator refers to the grandmother's relatives as "connections" indicates the character's sense of status, suggesting her imagined gentility. In referring to her son as "her only boy" and as "the son she lived with," the narrator reveals their domestic arrangement and her babying of him. The word "boy" for this adult male will echo later in the story for the grandmother when she calls out "Bailey Boy," after she hears a sharp pistol shot emanating from the woods, where the family, in a car accident, encounters the grandmother's nemesis, "The Misfit." O'Connor hints at, but does not identify exactly, what "he [the Misfit] did to these people" about whom the grandmother was reading as she was "rattling" the newspaper at her son's bald head. (Notice how each of these details suggests an aspect of the son's or the grandmother's character, efficiently yet humorously, while also creating, ominously, the first hint of the danger they will later confront.)

"meaning."

So, then, what does the text "show" and what does it avoid showing, even refuse to show? How much and what does it reveal, and what might it conceal? Asking these related questions invites us to analyze a text's implications—what it does not state outright, what it does not say directly. Considering what a text "shows" can highlight a text's visual qualities, its images, its scenes, its way of describing. The classic advice given writers—"Show, don't tell"—directs readers to see what the text shows rather than what it says, what it depicts rather than what it explains. Many texts both show and tell. What they tell may be in conflict with what they show. Critics adept at deconstructive readings provide skillful examples of how texts are conflicted, at odds with themselves, how they undermine and sabotage themselves through gaps and contradictions, through forms of showing something other than what they tell. More traditional critics, formalist critics, for example, look carefully to see what texts show and acknowledge what they don't, whether or not what those texts reveal conflicts with what they tell—if they tell anything overtly at all.

Literary works, by their nature, suggest rather than explain; they imply rather than state their claims boldly and directly. This broad generalization, however, does not mean that works of literature do not include direct statements. Depending on when they were written and by whom, literary works may contain large amounts of direct telling and lesser amounts of suggestion and implication, as in omniscient narration, for example. But whatever the proportion of a work's showing to telling, there is always something for readers to interpret. Thus we ask the question "What does the text suggest?" as a way to approach literary interpretation, as a way to begin thinking about a text's implications. What a text implies is often of great interest to us. And our work of ferreting out a text's implications tests our analytical powers. In considering what a text suggests, we gain practice in making sense of texts. And the primary way we do that is by looking closely at a text's language and details.

Let's listen to the opening of a perennially popular novel: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. What do we notice about the beginning: to what does Austen direct our attention? What does Austen *say* and *do*, *show* and *suggest*, in this famous opening?

> It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.
>
> However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.
>
> "My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"
>
> Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.
>
> "But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."
>
> Mr. Bennet made no answer.
>
> "Do not you want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.
>
> "You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."
>
> This was invitation enough.
>
> "Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."
>
> "What is his name?"
>
> "Bingley."
>
> "Is he married or single?"
>
> "Oh! Single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!"
>
> "How so? How can it affect them?"
>
> "My dear Mr. Bennet," replied his wife, "how can you be so tiresome! You must