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Letter from Oklahoma-Learning to Read

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Letter from Oklahoma

Learning To Read

by **Tom Leonhardt** (University of Oklahoma) <tleonhardt@libsys2.lib.uoknor.edu>

As near as I can figure, I learned to read in 1950. It was a gradual process, I know that now, but at the time it was as if a magic spell had been cast on me and all of a sudden, I could read. I could sound out words that I had never seen or heard before. I once was blind, but now I see. The day before had not been spent in darkness but the letters on the pages would not be still, would not let me see how they were arranged and what those formations meant. Never have I been so proud of an achievement and nothing I have achieved means as much and would not have been possible, anyway, had I not learned to read.

Twelve years later, just a year out of high school, I began to keep a diary and I also began to keep a log of every book I read. At first I even noted the length of each book but soon gave that up. The diary and the booklog continue to this day but the steady, uninterrupted record is of my reading experiences. Had I been one of those British explorers at Cooper's Creek, for example, I am not sure if I would have been so conscientious but on the other hand, each day was different and important whereas once we finish school and get a job and settle down, there is little to differentiate one day from another and the sense of duty to record the day's events or thoughts gives way to whatever television show is on that night. Those entries could have been devoted to impressions of what I read but then the reading would have become a chore and a duty and not the pleasure that it should be. But I did record each title and author as I finished it and would note, at the end of the year, just how many books I had read from January to December.

It is not just a matter of keeping score. This annual list of books I have read is a chart of changing tastes, literary loves, momentary infatuations, intellectual growth, and emotional exhaustion. I wonder sometimes how I managed to read so few books or so many although I never read too many. That would be impossible.

It is also dismaying to find record of a book, sometimes by a famous author, and be unable to recall anything at all about the book, not even a sense of having enjoyed it or having been utterly bored by it. On the other hand, it is gratifying to see what I read during my three years in the Army. How did I know to read those books and those authors? Part of the credit goes to the Modern Library's backlist that appeared inside its dust jackets, and credit goes, too, to the backlists that are found at the end of each Signet Classic and Mentor book. My Army list shows, too, that I didn't spend all of my free time polishing boots or drinking beer. Thank God for Signet Classics and U.S. Army post libraries. I couldn't have done it without you.

I have read a lot of books and magazines since 1950 but not nearly as many as I wish I had, not nearly as many as appear on the reading lists I have compiled over the decades. In fact, adding up the numbers since 1962, I have averaged only 45 books a year, not even one a week. But even if I were to begin reading a book a day, it would be a losing game if all I am interested in is numbers. The ratio of books read to books published will continue to grow dramatically each month even if I don't count books in the German language (but I do).

Of course no one can read everything that is published and a few good books are better than lots of not-so-good books. But there are so many really good books. I know they are out there even though I haven't read them because friends and reviewers keep telling me about them and when I try them myself, I find that they are correct. When friends recommend a book or author, I make a note of it and eventually follow through. With reviewers, there is no personal obligation but my expectations are higher. A good reviewer can tell us enough about a book, its author, and the author's intent that even if we never get around to reading the book, we have some idea about its content. It is the next best thing to reading the book and that is not a bad thing. But some of the books reviewed also go onto lists that occasionally, if I remember, accompany me to the public library or my place of employment. Happily, the overlap between the two libraries is not significant

and that is as it should be.

But even my reading lists contain more titles than I can possibly read in the years remaining to me, even if I live to be a hundred and one read a hundred and one books a day. Actually, that might do it but it can't be done. So how do I read as many books as I can given all my other obligations as a human being in modern society? I give preference to slim volumes over thick tomes. Quality issues being equal, I would rather enter three 200 page books into my reading journal than one 600 page book. This confession to liking slim volumes doesn't mean that I don't read tomes (Joseph Epstein — "I myself think of a tome purely in terms of heft, and a book doesn't have to be scholarly to qualify. Tome-dom sets in, in my opinion, somewhere around five hundred and fifty pages." *The American Scholar*, Spring 1996, "A Real Page Turner," by Aristides, p. 168).

I have read lots of tomes and still read them but I have discovered that many tomes, especially nowadays, would have been better books had they been put on diets until they were slim volumes. Quantity, as we have been told in other contexts, does not necessarily equal quality.

One slim volume that I recently read was chosen for its size from among taller and longer companions on the University of Oklahoma Libraries new book shelf. I chose it for the obvious reason, its size. It weighs less than a pound (probably) and is only 186 pages long. The book is published by The Modern Library so that told me that it was a good book. I haven't read their whole list but it is a literary list that would provide you with a good education were you to read everything on it. And finally, the frontispiece is a picture of Joe Gould looking like Gabby Hayes in baggy clothes. How could I resist? The book is a prize. Even now that I know Joe Gould's secret, I will probably buy my own copy of this profile of a Greenwich Village eccentric who died on Sunday, August 18, 1957. The book is by **Joseph Mitchell**, a fellow Tar Heel and is really a collection of two profiles about Gould that Mitchell wrote for *The New Yorker* magazine in 1942 and 1964. The real story probably lies in those dates and has to do with Mitchell's effortless *New Yorker* prose style. His writing was admired by all who read it and he was respected by all who knew him and worked with him. I myself was taken by his writing and thought I should write him a fan letter. Noting that he was born in 1908, I realized that I needed to write him soon. I finished his book on May 25, 1996 and about a week later in the June 3, 1996 issue of *The New Yorker*, I was saddened and dismayed to read in a note on page 6 that "Joseph Mitchell ... a staff writer at this magazine since 1938, died on May 24th at the age of eighty-seven." He died the day before I read his book. He apparently enjoyed fan letters. Consider this that unwritten fan letter to Joseph Mitchell. I think he would have enjoyed the irony. See the June 10, 1996 issue of *The New Yorker* for several tributes to Joseph Mitchell the man and Joseph Mitchell the writer who never published another new piece after that 1964 profile, although he continued to come to work at the New Yorker and type and revise, looking for those perfect sentences leading to paragraphs that connect just so into a perfect whole. Much like the book that Joe Gould was writing.

While I will still prefer the slim volume to the tome, I have reconsidered the place of the tome in my future reading and, thanks to the Aristides essay in *The American Scholar*, have added Gibbon's *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* to my list of books to read. But I shall return again and again to those short classics, too, such as Joseph Conrad's *The Shadow Line*, Harry Brown's *A Walk in the Sun*, James Jones's *The Pistol*, and William Styron's *The Long March*. There are many more, of course, and many more to come. The book and the novel will not die until I do. Long live the book!