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Oregon Trails — Zen and the Art of Proper Reading

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With each clean bill of health, following my semi-annual eye exams to monitor my glaucoma in particular and other diseases of the eye in general, I am quietly grateful for the healthy eyesight that allows me to enjoy the many varied treasures that occupy the six crowded bookcases in my tiny office. Reading has been such an important part of my life and my very identity for almost seventy years that I cannot bear the thought of losing that capability through blindness even if there are viable alternatives with recordings and Braille texts. I want to see those words printed on those pages encased in those covers. I want to read what I want, when I want, and I want to see those books on their shelves in their bookcases and sometimes stacked on the floor or on tables and chairs. I take neither books nor reading for granted and never will. But even so, I have never thought of reading as a proper art or an art at all, and have never considered any kind of reading to be improper although I hold certain reading matter in higher esteem than others while abhorring censorship of any kind including shaming or even mildly disapproving of someone's choices of reading material.

Is there an art to reading is a better question, one that I'll discuss later, but more to the point, what is the art of proper reading?

In **Volker Ulrich's** *Hitler's Ascent: 1889-1939*, the author quotes **Hitler's** Vienna roommate: "I can't imagine **Adolf** without books. Books were his whole world." It sounds like a parody of **Thomas Jefferson's** "I can't live without books," written in a letter to **John Adams**, June 10, 1815.

Ulrich follows up with another insight about **Hitler** and books: "In *Mein Kampf*, he [**Hitler**] would devote a long section to the 'Art of Proper Reading' which he claimed to have mastered at an early age. This consisted of 'separating what is valuable from what's worthless so as to retain the former in your head for ever while not seeing the latter, if possible, and definitely not carrying around senseless ballast.'"

The notion of the art of proper reading, even if attributed to **Thomas Jefferson** ("Without books I cannot live") instead **Adolph Hitler**, seems far-fetched. Or does it? Is there a "Zen and the Art of Proper Reading?"

My first thought about an art of proper reading is of reading aloud. The Germans have a word for reading aloud, *vorlesen*, and one can hear entire novels, as long as *Anna Karenina*, read aloud on German public radio. **Dick Estell** used to read entire books, *ad seriatim*, on **NPR** stations. Reading aloud with proper stress, pitch, intonation, and emotion is an art, whether on the radio or at bedtime when settling one's children to sleep.

The art of reading aloud can apply to voice overs for movies, cartoons, radio and television commercials, and so on, regardless of whether

the content has any intrinsic value. Dissimulations and outright lies can be vocalized in convincing fashion if the right spokesperson can be found.

So no, even if the *Vorleser* restricts content to recognized literary fare, I would not consider it proper reading even if it qualifies as artful.

The notion of proper reading suggests there is such a thing and that if there is, there must be a category called "Improper Reading" which suggests academic approaches to literature that try to define good and proper reading while seemingly denying individual readers the opportunity to decide and define for themselves.

Proper reading sounds prescriptive and pedantic and it suggests that if there is proper reading, there must be, *ipso facto*, improper reading. I am reminded of earlier times when librarians appointed themselves guardians of morality and censored their stock appropriately prudishly.

When **Charles Lummis** was appointed Los Angeles City Librarian in 1905, one of his first actions during his short tenure was to provide the works of **H. Rider Haggard** to his readers, even if *King Solomon's Mines* and other such novels might offend female sensibilities, the very reason **Haggard's** works were banned in the first place.

But back to **Hitler** and books, a juxtaposition that conjures images of bonfires fueled by books. Almost as pernicious, and probably leading to actual book burning, was the **Vatican's** now abolished *Librorum Prohibitorium*, vastly more far-reaching than being banned in Boston but probably just as effective in attracting readers as any Madison Avenue ad campaign. There remains, of course, a *Vatican Censor Librorum* but that office must be content to damn with faint praise by issuing *Nihil Obstat* certifying that a book, so honored, "contains nothing contrary to faith or morals."

There are many other censors and would-be censors out there, those who would proscribe what they deem not fit to read or even have on library shelves or in bookstore displays. These self-appointed guardians of public morality have their own list of books to be burned, either literally or figuratively, as attested to each year by the **American Library Association's** Banned Books Week.

Happily, we have not only the **ALA**, but also a court system that has sided with intellectual freedom, so I read anything I want to and own books like *Ulysses* and *Tropic of Cancer* without fear of punishment. But what do I choose to read and why? I don't go to a bookshop or a library with my eyes closed,

relying on my sense of touch (and perhaps smell) to make my selections. Is there an art to reading, an art that encompasses selection and purchasing? I believe that there is such an art, a Zen-art that is unique to an individual and is at times, ineffable and may even evoke an aura of mysticism at times when my choice of books seemed to have a logic of its own.

There is a simple way to express the highly personal art of reading and that is by borrowing from **S. R. Ranganathan's** 1931 *Five Laws of Library Science*. He is, of course, thinking of libraries but the second and third laws: "Every reader has his/her book; and Every book its reader," apply to individuals as well.

When I was still working in libraries, I used to roam the stacks to get a feel for the entire collection. Occasionally I would stop and pluck a book from its shelf, drawn by its looks.

Then I would open the book, explore the preliminary materials, and then read the first page. If the book felt good in my hands, an invitation to read, and if the author began the book in such a way that I wanted to know more, I would take it to the circulation desk and borrow it to read later at my leisure. I still do the same thing in bookshops.

I don't remember how I chose books when, after learning to read, but I did browse the stacks of well-stocked elementary school, high school, and Army post libraries, finding books that looked interesting and then finding similar books or books by the same author. **Hans Christian Andersen** and the brothers **Grimm** led me to the *Arabian Nights*, all three in attractive **Illustrated Junior Library** editions.

Later, I discovered **Howard Pyle** and **Howard Pease** whose tramp steamer adventure mysteries led to **C.S. Forester's** *Hornblower* novels that led to **W.W. Jacobs**, **Richard Henry Dana, Jr.**, **Joseph Conrad**, and **William McFee**, to cite but a few examples.

I've also used reading lists and sought books by authors I had heard of or read about. But my book, as a reader, had to appeal to me in many ways to keep me interested and as I read more and matured, the criteria grew and matured. My favorite books and authors have always been truth tellers. Even the most fantastic tales can have this quality that makes it a particular book for a particular reader.

There is no proper reading, just as there is no improper reading. Every reader, his or her own book. 🐻