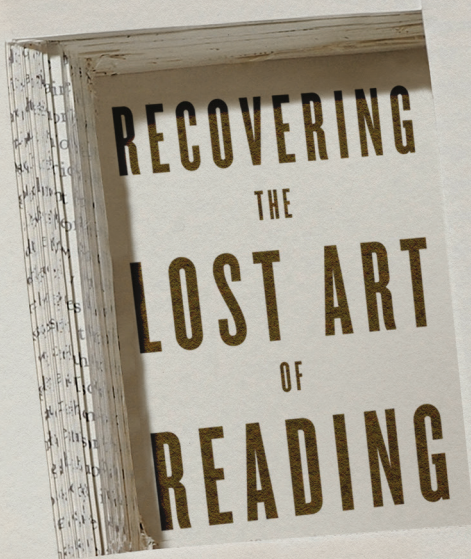


Leland Ryken  
&  
Glenda Faye Mathes



A Quest for the True,  
the Good, and the Beautiful

“No one more than Christians should appreciate and cultivate the reading of well-written words. Yet, with so much else vying for our attention, many today have forgotten—or perhaps never really learned—how to read with care and skill the words that have shaped human history for thousands of years. Whether you are a student, teacher, parent, or pastor, *Recovering the Lost Art of Reading* will instruct and delight you in God’s wonderful gift of language and literature.”

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“Both practical and inspirational, *Recovering the Lost Art of Reading* deserves a wide audience. May it spur us, as ‘people of the book,’ to slow down and savor the riches of literature and the great gift of literacy.”

**Janie Cheaney**, Senior Writer, *WORLD* magazine

“Thoughtful, challenging, and even harrowing, *Recovering the Lost Art of Reading* persuasively exhorts us to recover the serenity, joy, and wonder of serious reading. Those who seriously engage this book will find themselves blessedly refreshed, educated, and motivated to pursue the good, the true, and the beautiful.”

**David V. Urban**, Professor of English, Calvin University; author, *Milton and the Parables of Jesus*



*Recovering the Lost Art of Reading*



# Recovering the Lost Art of Reading

*A Quest for the True, the Good, and the Beautiful*

Leland Ryken and Glenda Faye Mathes

 **CROSSWAY**<sup>®</sup>  
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*Recovering the Lost Art of Reading: A Quest for the True, the Good, and the Beautiful*

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To our respective spouses, Mary Ryken and David Mathes,  
whose partnership in the gospel enlivens our earthly pilgrimages.





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# Introduction

## *Welcome to the Conversation*

PERHAPS YOU'RE WONDERING about this book's title. Does reading need to be recovered? What makes it an art? And is it really lost? After all, here you are—reading a book.

These are fair questions, which *Recovering the Lost Art of Reading* seeks to answer. Its three progressive parts address first the concept of reading as a lost art, then distinctive features of various types of literature and tips for reading them, and finally, ideas for ways to recover reading.

While this book shares aspects of literary theory, it is far from an academic tome. Although it teems with practical suggestions, it isn't a how-to book with numbered steps to reading success. It's a guidebook by two seasoned and enthusiastic reading travelers, who show all readers—from those who rarely pick up a book to English majors and everyone between—how to discover more delight in the reading journey.

Perhaps you're reading more than ever, on Facebook or Twitter or blog posts or websites, primarily on your smartphone. But the plethora of cyber information is not generating genuine joy in your soul. Kitten videos may be endearing but not enduring.

## INTRODUCTION

Society does little to help shape timeless values. Manufactured and manipulated news reports convey inaccuracies. Politicians and celebrities promote immorality. Bleak architecture and tawdry images surround us.

In today's technology-driven and value-bereft culture, reading has become a lost art. But it's an art that can be recovered and enjoyed by anyone, no matter what the individual's educational level or literary experience. Join us on a journey that will open your eyes and hearts to reading that delights your soul with the true, the good, and the beautiful.

PART 1

---

# READING IS A LOST ART



## Is Reading Lost?

“READ ANY GOOD BOOKS LATELY?”

This question once functioned as a common conversation-starter, but now we’re more likely to hear, “What are your plans for the weekend?” or “Did you catch the game last night?” There’s nothing wrong with spending time with family and friends on weekends or cheering on favorite sports teams. But could the prevalence of such questions indicate that these activities are eclipsing thoughtful conversations about reading?

The question about reading good books may seem blasé or even a cliché. But it’s still used to launch literary discussions, and it effectively reflects this chapter’s focus.

The negative connotations surrounding this question could be rooted in the phrase’s history. It began initiating conversations almost a century ago, during the Roaring Twenties. BBC radio personality Richard Murdoch popularized it with a humorous twist in the 1940s, when he interjected it into dialogue as a comic attempt to change an unwelcome subject. Amusing variations came into play during ensuing years, and the catch phrase lost validity as a serious conversation starter.<sup>1</sup> Despite existing negative perceptions, it continues to enjoy a measure of popularity. Bloggers sometimes ask the question to head



posts about books they recommend. Prominent Christians Stephen Nichols and Sinclair Ferguson have employed it respectively for a church history podcast and as a book title.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe “Read any good books lately?” is making a serious comeback. It could be a legitimate way of jumpstarting more conversations. We’re using it here because it encompasses much of this chapter’s scope. Each word packs a specific punch.

Read = This chapter reflects this book’s focus on reading.

Any = Research shows that many people don’t read any books or can’t name a single author.

Good = This chapter’s discussion touches on the concepts of literary quality and reading competency.

Books = Reading on screens differs from reading physical books.

Lately = We’re addressing the current situation by providing recent information and statistics.

You may recognize these elements as we explore this chapter’s primary question: Is reading lost?

## THE CURRENT STATE OF READING

Most adults have 24-hour access to a constant stream of information. You may peruse a physical newspaper while sipping your morning cup of coffee, but you’re more likely to respond to emails, scroll your Facebook feed, or skim top news stories on your phone. The screen-reader could be scanning more words than the person reading the paper. With the incredible volume and easy accessibility of information today, aren’t people reading more than ever?

Yes and no. Many people are reading a great deal of material, especially online. But they are not necessarily reading quality material or reading well.

Surveys consistently show that most people believe reading is a worthwhile use of time and they should do more of it. But some people don't read any books. Gene Edward Veith Jr. writes: "A growing problem is illiteracy—many people do not know how to read. A more severe problem, though, is 'aliteracy'—a vast number of people know how to read but never do it."<sup>3</sup> Most of us could (and suspect we should) read more and read better.

Our worm of suspicion may even evolve into a dragon of guilt. Or we may think of reading as a duty we're neglecting, while feeling overwhelmed at the very idea of crowding one more thing into our busy lives. In this book, we aim to alleviate any reading guilt or anxiety. We want you, whether you read a little or a lot, to experience more joy in reading (and therefore in life). We want to dispel the notion of reading as duty and instill the concept of reading as delight.

Perhaps reading had declined in recent decades, but isn't it increasing now? The 2009 report by the National Endowment for the Arts, *Reading on the Rise*, celebrated (according to its subtitle) "a new chapter in American literacy." The NEA might well rejoice in any increase over the statistics reflected in its pessimistic 2004 report, *Reading at Risk*, which bemoaned previous decades of decline.<sup>4</sup> While Americans can join in the NEA's joy, we should pause for further consideration before patting ourselves on the back.

The Pew Charitable Foundation reported in 2018 that nearly a quarter of American adults had not read a book in any form within the past year.<sup>5</sup> This figure painted a slightly brighter picture than the high of 27 percent non-book readers in 2015. Still, it's a sobering statistic. Think of the people walking our city streets. Out of every four adults, one has not cracked open a physical book, downloaded a digital copy onto a device, or even listened to an audiobook.

British research expands our understanding of current reading culture. A recent statistic from the Royal Society of Literature sounds

similar to the Pew report's finding. The 2017 RSL report showed that one out of five people could not name an author—any author.

On the positive side, the report showed people have a keen desire to read more literature. Nearly all respondents believed everyone should read literature, which they viewed as *not* limited to classics or academics. Over a third of those who already read want to read more in the future, while over half of those who currently do not read literature expressed a desire to do so. But many of those surveyed find literature—even material not considered classic or academic—difficult to read.<sup>6</sup>

The amount of time Americans spend reading each day increases with age, with retirees reading the most. But even those in the seventy-five and above age bracket read only 50 minutes per day. Not a single age group averages as much as an hour of daily reading.<sup>7</sup>

Compare that with the time people spend on digital media, which according to one study averages a whopping 5.9 hours per day. This nearly six hours per day may not be so surprising when you consider it includes smartphones, computers, game consoles, and other devices for streaming information.<sup>8</sup> Pew Research indicates about three-fourths of Americans go online daily. More than a quarter of US residents admit to being online “almost constantly.”<sup>9</sup> No wonder many people express concern about society's burgeoning information technology and its possible relation to recent reading trends.

## FINDING PEACE IN A READING WAR

Research on reading reveals a fascinating recurrence of references to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Why are so many people writing about a Russian novel published more than a hundred and fifty years ago? Probably because *War and Peace* is often regarded as a litmus test for reading ability and perseverance.

Professor Margaret Anne Doody explains: “*War and Peace* is one of those few texts . . . too often read as some kind of endurance test or rite of passage, only to be either abandoned halfway or displayed as a shelf-bound trophy, never to be touched again. It is indeed very long, but it is a novel that abundantly repays close attention and re-reading.”<sup>10</sup>

Careful attention appears to be a vanishing reading skill in our busy, technology-glutted lives. Writer Nicholas Carr famously asked, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?” While he noted the benefits of online research and accessible information, Carr found that he and many others struggle to read as well as they formerly did. One of his friends can no longer read *War and Peace* because scanning short online texts has given him a “staccato” thinking quality.<sup>11</sup>

In response to Carr’s article, writer and speaker Clay Shirky celebrated the demise of literary reading and its culture. He wrote, “But here’s the thing: it’s not just Carr’s friend, and it’s not just because of the web—no one reads *War and Peace*. It’s too long, and not so interesting.”<sup>12</sup> Quite the blanket statement, but is it valid?

Professor Alan Jacobs sarcastically assessed Shirky’s statement by noting how the “reading public has chosen to pronounce this devastating verdict against Tolstoy’s masterpiece by purchasing over one hundred thousand copies” of *War and Peace* in the past four years, which he observes is “an odd way of making its disparagement known.”<sup>13</sup> Any modern writer with that many copies sold in four years would be making the talk show rounds and juggling offers from major publishers.

At 560,000 words, there’s no denying *War and Peace* is a hefty read. But several other novels—including Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* with 1.5 million words—are significantly longer.<sup>14</sup> Penguin’s Vintage Classic edition of *War and Peace* runs 1296 pages and

still sells well enough for Amazon to flag it as a “#1 Best Seller” in Russian literature.

Literary critic James Wood recommends this translation for its accuracy in reflecting Tolstoy’s style as well as the original language. Wood finds it feels “alive, and very much so” (quoting from Tolstoy’s diary) “to be caught up in the bright sweep” of *War and Peace*. “It is to succumb to the contagion of vitality. As his characters infect each other with the high temperature of their existence, so they infect us.”<sup>15</sup> Stirring words, which almost make one want to be numbered among the one hundred thousand purchasers.

Author and critic Philip Hensher calls *War and Peace* “the best novel ever written,” although he admits it has “the worst opening sentence of any major novel, ever” and the “very worst closing sentence by a country mile.” Between the two is a novel he views not only as the best ever written but also “the warmest, the roundest, the best story and the most interesting.”<sup>16</sup>

These facts fail to support Shirky’s claim. A great many people still read *War and Peace*, some find it neither too long nor uninteresting. But it can certainly be intimidating, especially keeping track of characters with multiple Russian names.

After author Michael Harris had read the first fifty pages five times, he returned to *War and Peace*, determined to finish it. As he withdrew from external influences and the pull of connectivity, he was able to focus on the story. He became immersed in the characters and their lives. His reading improved and he did more than finally complete the novel; he enjoyed it.<sup>17</sup>

Although *War and Peace* seems an accepted measure of reading competency, we don’t endorse any particular novel as a standard. We want everyone to discover the delight of reading literature in any genre or format.

When considering other formats, one has to admire the rare feat of Clive Thompson, who read *War and Peace* on his iPhone. Thompson is someone who views “Tolstoy’s phone-book-sized epic” as a reading test. “Make it to the end, and you get your Deep Literary Concentration Prize! You’re a cultured individual!” Although distractions initially threatened to derail his phone-reading effort, he became captivated. “The phone’s extreme portability allowed me to fit Tolstoy’s book into my life, and thus to get swept up in it,” he writes. “And it was *being* swept up that, ironically, made the phone’s distractions melt away.”<sup>18</sup>

Thompson makes positive observations about reading on a screen, and Alan Jacobs credits his Kindle as the device that rescued his reading habits.<sup>19</sup> But many others view screen reading and online activity as less than helpful, even harmful.

## BRAIN CHANGES

In *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr provides numerous anecdotes and statistics to support his belief that the Internet is changing our brains in profound and negative ways. He writes, “Dozens of studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, educators, and Web designers point to the same conclusion: when we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning.” He sees the internet itself as harmful.

One thing is very clear: if, knowing what we know today about the brain’s plasticity, you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks and works a lot like the Internet.<sup>20</sup>

Particularly disturbing is how technology intentionally targets young people at their most vulnerable moments. Psychologist Richard Freed warns about “The Tech Industry’s War on Kids”:

Persuasive technology’s use of digital media to target children, deploying the weapon of psychological manipulation at just the right moment, is what makes it so powerful. These design techniques provide tech corporations a window into kids’ hearts and minds to measure their particular vulnerabilities, which can then be used to control their behavior as consumers.<sup>21</sup>

Freed’s article is packed with alarming facts and concerning quotations, some from tech professionals. It seems a few people within the industry are beginning to realize the harmful ways technology changes young brains.

In *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, Maryanne Wolf wonders, “What would be lost to us if we replaced the skills honed by the reading brain with those now being formed in our new generation of ‘digital natives,’ who sit and read transfixed before a screen?” She believes they

are not illiterate, but they may never become true expert readers. During the phase in their reading development when critical skills are guided, modeled, practiced, and honed, they may have not been challenged to exploit the acme of the fully developed, reading brain: time to think for themselves.<sup>22</sup>

Most online reading does not allow time for analytical thought. Hyperlinks are designed to lead readers to other sites, further fracturing their focus. Author Sven Birkerts suggests the problem may be twofold. “More and more we hear the complaint, even from practiced readers, that it is hard to maintain attentive focus. The works have presumably not changed. What has changed are either

the conditions of reading or something in the cognitive reflexes of the reader. Or both.”<sup>23</sup>

## THE DEATH OF ARTFUL READING

These brain changes may be more important than most people realize. While reading a book and reading a screen both require the same eye movement and decoding of symbols, there is a huge difference in how people process and internalize the words. Screen reading is primarily scanning through short articles designed for distraction. Reading a book immerses oneself into an extensive work. When this is done receptively and thoughtfully, it becomes artful reading. Some people call it “deep reading” and believe it is in deep trouble.

Writer Annie Murphy Paul views such reading as “an endangered practice” that we should “take steps to preserve as we would a historic building or a significant work of art.” She believes, “its disappearance would imperil the intellectual and emotional development of generations growing up online, as well as the perpetuation of a critical part of our culture: the novels, poems and other kinds of literature that can be appreciated only by readers whose brains, quite literally, have been trained to apprehend them.”<sup>24</sup>

Nicholas Carr grieves the loss of his own ability to read. “The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle,” he writes. “My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.”<sup>25</sup>

Author Michael Harris goes even farther to confess, “I have forgotten how to read.” He found many friends shared his problem. “This doesn’t mean we’re reading less” in our “text-gorged society,” he writes. “What’s at stake is not whether we read. It’s how we read.” He makes



this thought-provoking statement: “In a very real way, to lose old styles of reading is to lose a part of ourselves.”<sup>26</sup>

What we’ve lost goes far beyond a simple behavior. Birkerts sees a loss of depth and wisdom, which he defines as “the knowing not of facts but of truths about human nature and the processes of life.” He believes “we no longer think in these larger and necessarily more imprecise terms” because we are “swamped by data, and in thrall to the technologies that manipulate it.” He adds, “In our lateral age, living in the bureaucracies of information, we don’t venture a claim to that kind of understanding. Indeed, we tend to act embarrassed around those once-freighted terms—*truth, meaning, soul, destiny*.”<sup>27</sup>

Such concepts are important for everyone but particularly Christians. Who should care more about reading timeless truths than children of the Book? If we—like Michael Harris—have forgotten how to read, we’ve lost more than delight in literary treasures. We’ve lost the ability to read the Bible consistently and attentively. What then happens to our relationship with God? We have, indeed, lost part of ourselves in ways infinitely worse than Harris imagines.

Author Philip Yancey conveys the extent of this risk in the title of his article, “The Death of Reading Is Threatening the Soul.” He concludes that a commitment to reading is a continuing battle similar to the struggle against the “seduction of Internet pornography.” What does he recommend? “We have to build a fortress with walls strong enough to withstand the temptations of that powerful dopamine rush while also providing shelter for an environment that allows deep reading to flourish. Christians especially need that sheltering space, for quiet meditation is one of the most important spiritual disciplines.”<sup>28</sup>

Some Christians tend to dismiss the concept of meditation as being too mystic, but God commands us: “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). Elijah didn’t hear God speak in the wind,

the earthquake, or the fire. He heard God in the still small voice (1 Kings 19:12). We are called to quiet our souls and commune with God through an open Bible. If digital media continually fractures our focus, can we meditate on God and his word, receptively and thoughtfully? Artfully reading the Good Book and other good books is a treasure we dare not lose.

**READING HAS BECOME A LOST ART.** With smartphones offering us endless information with the tap of a finger, it's hard to view reading as anything less than a tedious and outdated endeavor. This is particularly problematic for Christians, as many find it difficult to read even the Bible consistently and attentively. Reading is in desperate need of recovery.

*Recovering the Lost Art of Reading* addresses these issues by exploring the importance of reading in general as well as studying the Bible as literature, offering practical suggestions along the way. Leland Ryken and Glenda Faye Mathes inspire a new generation to overcome the notion that reading is a duty and instead discover it as a delight.

“Whether you are a student, teacher, parent, or pastor, this book will instruct and delight you in God’s wonderful gift of language and literature.”

**KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR**, Research Professor of English and Christianity and Culture, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *On Reading Well*

“Both practical and inspirational, *Recovering the Lost Art of Reading* deserves a wide audience. May it spur us, as ‘people of the book,’ to slow down and savor the riches of literature and the great gift of literacy.”

**JANIE CHEANEY**, Senior Writer, *WORLD* magazine

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LITERATURE / READING

