

## “If I Don’t Have a Book, I’m Bare!”

### What Avid Readers Tell Us about Reading for Pleasure

by Catherine Sheldrick Ross

A recent book by Michael Sheringham entitled *Everyday Life* addresses a paradox noted by Hegel: “Was ist bekannt ist nicht erkannt” (translation: What is familiar is not known). This idea that what is all around us is also hardest to see is a central concept in an interdisciplinary research field that studies the everyday. The aspect of everyday life that interests me is reading for pleasure – what people do all the time when they read for the sheer fun of it. As performed by practiced readers, the act of pleasure-reading is transparent. Reading is like breathing, many avid readers say. Avid readers talk about being “lost in a book,” entranced, or transported. In effect, when reading is most successful, the reading process disappears from awareness. For this reason, it can be hard to study. However, researchers have used all sorts of research techniques to study reading, from brain scans that measure brain activity during reading to questionnaires and checklists that measure the demographics of reading to intensive interviews with readers that explore the experience of reading.

During my own research on pleasure-reading, I have focused on the readers’ experience, amassing some 220 open-ended interviews

with avid readers, conducted either by me or by students in my MLIS course, Genres of Fiction and Reading, offered at the University of Western Ontario. These interviews invite readers to talk about their experience with pleasure-reading, starting in childhood, and include such questions as the following:

- “Was there anything in your childhood experience that you would say fostered reading? discouraged reading?”*
- “What would it be like for you if for one reason or other you couldn’t read?”*
- “How do you choose a book to read?”*
- “Has there ever been a book that has made a big difference to your life in one way or another? How did it help you?”*
- “If you could get an author to write the ‘perfect book,’ what would it be like? What elements would it include?”*

Readers’ talk provided rich material for the exploration of themes reported at more length in *Reading Matters* (Ross, McKechnie, and Rothbauer, 2006) and elsewhere. But here are a few of the puzzles and discoveries that have emerged.

- We think of the reader as solitary and engaged in a private activity, but reading turns out to be a deeply social activity right from the beginning. Avid readers

commonly spoke of coming from “a reading household” and reported that their first memory of reading was the bedtime story, associated with the comfort of a snack, a snuggle, and a parent’s voice.

- We hear that reading is dying out, but when the readers were asked what it would be like not to be able to read, they said: “Blindness probably scares me more than anything.” “I wouldn’t be the person I am if I didn’t read.” “If I don’t have a book, I’m bare.”
- The choice of what book to read is a very individual thing. When asked how they go about choosing a book for pleasure, readers talked first about their own mood at the time of reading and went on to talk about the importance of trusted authors, the genre of the book, and “quick identifiers” on the book itself, and sometimes described reading a random paragraph as “an audition.”
- Children’s librarians have waged a century-long campaign against series books as “mediocre,” advocating nothing but “the best” for children. However, 60 per cent of avid readers in my study talked about series books such as Nancy Drew, Tom Swift, and Sweet Valley High as providing their first experience of the pleasure of reading and of success as independent readers.
- The notion of “best books” suggests that there is a hierarchy of books from the poorest (e.g., series books, romances) to the best, existing in itself, apart from any reader. Readers, however, emphasized that it is not the text but their experience with the text that matters. What is best for one reader is not best for another or for the same reader at a different time.
- Pleasure readers are poachers. They take liberties with texts, rewriting them to

suit themselves. They opportunistically take up whatever speaks to their immediate lives, they forget or simply skip over the parts they don’t find meaningful, and they rewrite unsatisfying endings. This readerly agency makes it difficult to predict on the basis of the text itself what significance a particular reader will take from a text.

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