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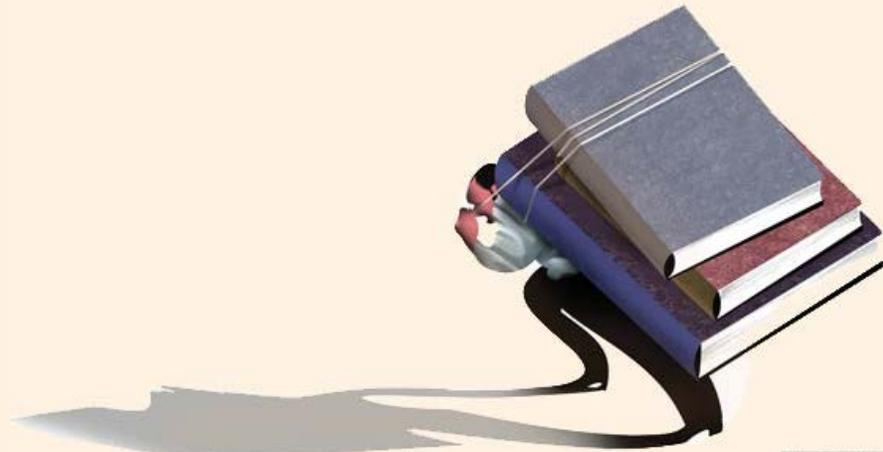
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How I lost my love of reading

By Simon Kuper

Feedback?

For children, reading is an uncomplicated pleasure, like eating chocolate. For adults, it's a workout



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“Charlie picked it up and tore off the wrapper...and suddenly...from underneath the wrapper...there came a brilliant flash of gold...“It’s a Golden Ticket!” screamed the shopkeeper, leaping about a foot in the air.”

Reading to my children has helped me understand why so many of us adults lose the joy of reading. When my five-year-old daughter listens to Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, I can see she knows better than I do how to appreciate a book.

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For the first few years, reading to kids is mostly a pain. The truth that adults and children enjoy almost none of the same activities applies here too. Many a long bedtime is spent droning out lines like, “And the elephant said to the bad baby...” The ending of Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust*, in which the hero is forced endlessly to re-read Dickens to an illiterate madman in a hut in the Amazon, looks suspiciously like Waugh’s satire of the parent’s experience. This year we got a more direct satire, the brilliant American fake-

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children's book *Go The F**k To Sleep*:

The cats nestle close to their kittens now.

The lambs have laid down with the sheep.

You're cozy and warm in your bed, my dear.

*Please go the f**k to sleep.*

Bedtimes improve when you get to Roald Dahl – so much so that I nearly considered contributing to the appeal by his multimillionaire granddaughter for funds to maintain his old writing shed.

My daughter, listening to me read, achieves the willing suspension of disbelief advocated by Coleridge. She loses herself in the story, the characters, the jokes. She may even like it as much as television.

It reminds me of being a child and swallowing books whole, first Dahl and later Sherlock Holmes and P.G. Wodehouse. The real world disappears. Occasionally a car passes on the road outside your bedroom window, but otherwise there is nothing outside your book. Reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* now, there are lines that I recall verbatim across a distance of 35 years.

Later, as a teenager, you continue to swallow books whole, but your motive changes: now you read to make sense of yourself. George Orwell describes this perfectly in his essay *Inside The Whale*. “When you read certain passages in Ulysses,” he writes, “you feel that Joyce’s mind and your own mind are one, that he knows all about you though he has never heard your name, that there exists some world outside time and space in which you and he are together.” It’s true of Henry Miller, too, says Orwell: “Read him for five pages, 10 pages, and you feel the peculiar relief that comes not so much from understanding as from being understood.” In my teens I felt that relief reading Orwell, Joseph Heller or Anne Frank (whose *Diary*, among many other things, is one of the only published teenage memoirs).

In my first week at university, Heller came to speak at the local bookshop. He reminisced about having stolen books there as a student, and at one point exclaimed, with a kind of wonder: “I wrote *Catch-22*.” I stood in the back row staring at him and thinking, “You don’t know me, but you changed my life.”

But by then I was already losing the joy of reading. This began the day at high school that a teacher introduced us to literature. Every novel, she explained, has exactly one theme. I remember going away and reading Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* and trying to guess its theme. For the first time, I was analysing a book instead of living it. It wasn’t as good.

Unfortunately, I then spent some of my time at university studying literature. This wasn’t all bad: there is worse work than spending a day in bed reading a novel. The problem was that I learnt to read like a literary critic. I learnt not to lose myself in a book. Reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* now, I get distracted musing on Dahl’s socialism (rich kids bad, poor boy good), and his colonialism or anti-colonialism (the Oompa Loompas). My daughter simply lives the book.

Better, she doesn’t know yet that books are both status symbols and good for you. For children, reading is an uncomplicated pleasure, like eating chocolate.

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For adults, it's a workout, like a six-mile run. We know that reading raises your standing. It's more prestigious to cite Waugh and Heller than the football websites to which I am addicted.

Perhaps there comes an age when you can read books like a child again. I used to know a nonagenarian who, when he couldn't sleep at four in the morning, liked to read the New Testament "to see which bits they stole from the Old Testament". But for now I envy my daughter.

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As a current English major I can sympathize with your struggles to enjoy reading again. I am often in the same boat, wanting to enjoy a novel but spending too much time over analyzing it. One form of reading I still enjoy is comic books. I went back to reading them a year or two ago and find that it approaches the child-like wonder I had then. You can still find literary elements in some comic books if you look deep enough, but typically you're just enjoying the man or woman in tights trying to solve a mystery.