

## COMMENTARY

## Reading



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In my parent's kitchen, the inside of a pantry door carries a little message board, where my dad once made a to-do list:

- 8 a.m. — Run 26 miles.
- 10 a.m. — Bill C., brain surgery.
- Noon — Blow up FRB.
- 2 p.m. — Bowel movement (read "War and Peace," again).

That, at least, is what I remember of the list, scribbled out when he was alive, during the Clinton administration in the 1990s.

Daddy had run a couple of marathons in his 50s, and long before that he'd read Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace," and James Joyce's "Ulysses," which I waded through looking for sexually explicit scenes, when I was about 13.

I had more success with another volume I found stuffed into my parents' bookshelves, "A Thousand and One Arabian Nights." I hid that under my mattress until my mother discovered it, to my profound horror. She told me just to keep it on the bookshelf where books go, in case someone else wanted to read it.

Daddy also kept a copy of the other celebrated Joyce book, "Finnegan's Wake." Joyce's two novels, together, were often considered the most brilliant works of English fiction in the 20th century, and maybe ever. Or at least, they were considered the greatest challenges to readers. Serious readers owned those books — devoted, deter-

mined, devout readers, readers who had no computers and not much television, then.

I was chatting about such readers the other day with Jeff Cull, the editor of this newspaper. Jeff asked me suddenly if I'd ever read "Finnegan's Wake."

I wanted to say, yes, but couldn't (more than that, I wanted to ask Daddy if he had actually read the book, and now I can't). No, I've never read it, I told him.

Neither has Jeff. "And I've never met anybody who has," he added. "I'm still looking for one person who's read 'Finnegan's Wake' all the way through."

Good luck, Jeff. The novel is replete with sentences like this: "O here here how hoth sprowled met the duskt the father of fornicationists but, (O my shining stars and body!) how hath fanespanned most high heaven the skysign of soft advertisement!"

That sentence isn't mere nonsense, either, according to analysts, but it suggests something else about the book: you probably can't read it at all if you haven't read most of the rest of the opus of literature to that date (1939), in such subjects as mythology, theology, philosophy, history, sociology, astrology, alchemy, music, painting, biology, sexuality, and of course all other fiction, to name only some.

That kind of arduous reading always has value, and like any reading — say the reading of a Harry Potter novel, to name a fictional character by a storyteller (J.K. Rowling) who weighs in on the other end of the hierarchy of literary heavyweights — it forces you to stretch your mind.

In almost any reading, you have to engage a blizzard of notions, memories, possibilities and convictions you would otherwise never encounter in a single mental moment.

But reading "Finnegan's Wake" for most of us is probably like trying to climb Mt. Everest alone and poorly equipped, like George Mallory did in 1928, when he made

it to within a few hundred feet of the summit (probably), and died.

Why read at all, let alone a lot? That question arises frequently in my house, where two boys — one a 7th grader reading beyond the 12th grade level, and the other a kindergartner who has listened to hundreds of books and stories read to him — frequently want to play "educational" games on the computer, or watch DVD movies on the television.

That puts my wife, Amy, and me, in the position of explaining why reading is good (if it is good). And struggling to define how it's different than watching a well-written movie drama unfold on a television screen, or playing a game that asks questions about words and numbers on the computer.

It happened again this morning, when little Nash asked, "Daddy, what does television do to your mind?"

He wanted to watch a DVD while I worked on the computer. Nash wasn't through with just a question, though: he also delivered an opinion about my domination of the on-line services in this house.

"Daddy," he said quietly, looking me right in the eye, "I think Mindy (a cat in a computer game that has to be "fed") is more important than your work."

Of course it is, I told him. But work is more demanding than Mindy, and the squeaky wheel gets the oil.

Then came the inevitable discussion about reading a good book. It's an insufferable and smug-sounding prescription for activity when delivered by a parent to a restless kid — and ineffectual, too, as you've probably discovered.

Once again, I found myself inarticulate and uncertain when faced with this simplest of questions: Why read? Or similarly, Why not read on the computer, in a game?

But suddenly, the heavens cleared. A chorus of angels began to sing, and a long

shaft of golden light spilled into the room, illuminating this month's issue of Harper's Magazine (January, 2008), which lay on the table.

My eye seized upon an article by the novelist and poet Ursula K. Le Guin: "Staying Awake: Notes on the Alleged Decline of Reading."

Here's an excerpt, in case you ever find yourself defending reading, too, even to yourself:

"Besides, readers aren't viewers; they recognize their pleasure as different from that of being entertained. Once you've pressed the ON button, the TV goes on, and on, and on, and all you have to do is sit and stare. But reading is active, an act of attention, of absorbed alertness — not all that different from hunting, in fact, or from gathering. In its silence, a book is challenge: it can't lull you with surging music or deafen you with screeching laugh tracks or fire gunshots in your living room; you have to listen to it in your head. A book won't move your eyes for you the way images on a screen do. It won't move your mind unless you give it your mind, or your heart unless you put your heart in it. It won't do the work for you. To read a story well is to follow it, to act it, to become it — everything short of writing it, in fact. Reading is not "interactive" with a set of rules or options, as games are; reading is actual collaboration with the writer's mind. No wonder not everybody is up to it."

So there you have it. And while my boys are reading, I think I'll run out and get a copy of "Finnegan's Wake." I may not read it, but I'll keep it next to my bed, in the spirit of P.J. O'Rourke.

"Always read something that will make you look good if you die in the middle of it," he said.

George Mallory probably thought the same thing about climbing mountains. ■



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