



Stop What You're Doing and Read This!

Carmen Callil, Nicholas Carr, Jane Davis, Mark Haddon,
Blake Morrison, Tim Parks, Michael Rosen, Zadie Smith,
Jeanette Winterson, Dr Maryanne Wolf & Dr Mirit Barzillai

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About the Book

In any 24 hours there might be sleeping, eating, kids, parents, friends, lovers, work, school, travel, deadlines, emails, phone calls, Facebook, Twitter, the news, the TV, Playstation, music, movies, sport, responsibilities, passions, desires, dreams.

Why should you stop what you're doing and read a book?

People have always needed stories. We need literature – novels, poetry – because we need to make sense of our lives, test our depths, understand our joys and discover what humans are capable of. Great books can provide companionship when we are lonely or peacefulness in the midst of an overcrowded daily life. Reading provides a unique kind of pleasure and no-one should live without it.

In the ten essays in this book some of our finest authors and passionate advocates from the worlds of science, publishing, technology and social enterprise tell us about the experience of reading, why access to books should never be taken for granted, how reading transforms our brains, and how literature can save lives. In any 24 hours there are so many demands on your time and attention – make books one of them.

About the Authors

Carmen Callil is Australian, and has lived in London since 1960. She founded Virago in 1972 and was publisher of Chatto & Windus from 1982-1994. She is the author of *Bad Faith* and (with Colm Tóibín) of *The Modern Library: The 200 Best Novels in English since 1950*. In 1996 she chaired the Booker Prize and in 2011 was a judge for the Man Booker International Prize.

Nicholas Carr writes about technology, culture and economics. His most recent book, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, is a 2011 Pulitzer Prize nominee and a *New York Times* bestseller. Nick is also the author of two other influential books, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google* (2008) and *Does IT Matter?* (2004). His books have been translated into more than twenty languages.

Dr Jane Davis MBE is the Founder/Director of The Reader Organisation, a national charity bringing about a reading revolution by making it possible for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to enjoy literature in a direct, personal way. Their read-aloud groups reach people from all parts of society, from rehabs to corporates to care homes, who might not otherwise read.
www.thereader.org.uk

Mark Haddon is a novelist, poet and playwright. He is the author of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. His latest novel, *The Red House*, will be published in 2012.

Blake Morrison is the author of two bestselling memoirs, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* and *Things My Mother Never Told Me*, three novels (most recently the acclaimed *South of the River* and *The Last Weekend*), and a study of the Bulger case, *As If*. He is also a poet, critic, journalist and librettist. He teaches Creative Writing at Goldsmiths College, and lives in south London.

Tim Parks was born in Manchester in 1954, and moved permanently to Italy in 1980. Author of novels, non-fiction and essays, he has won the Somerset Maugham, Betty Trask and Llewellyn Rhys awards, and been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His works include *Destiny*, *Europa*, *Dreams of Rivers and Seas*, *Italian Neighbours*, *An Italian Education*, *A Season with Verona* and *Teach Us to Sit Still*.

Michael Rosen was born in 1946 in North London. He is renowned for his work as a poet, performer, broadcaster and scriptwriter. He lectures and teaches in universities on children's literature, reading and writing. In 2007 he was appointed Children's Laureate, a role which he held until 2009.

Zadie Smith was born in north-west London in 1975, and continues to live in the area. Her first novel, *White Teeth*, was the winner of The Whitbread First Novel Award, The Guardian First Book Award, The James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction, and The Commonwealth Writers' First Book Award. *On Beauty* was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and won The Commonwealth Writers' Best Book Award and the Orange Prize for Fiction.

Jeanette Winterson OBE is the author of ten novels, including *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, *The Passion*, and *Sexing the Cherry*, a book of short stories, *The World and Other Places*, a collection of essays, *Art Objects*, as well as

many other works, including children's books, screenplays and journalism. Her latest book, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, was published by Jonathan Cape in 2011.

Dr Maryanne Wolf is the Director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University in the US, where she is an Associate Professor of Child Development. She is the author of *Proust and the Squid* and has published hundreds of articles on reading and learning disabilities.

Mirit Barzillai is a student of the written word. Her research includes investigations of the influence of semantic knowledge on fluent reading and comprehension. Her current work focuses on the implications of technological innovation on reading processes and interventions on both a local and global scale.

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CARMEN CALLIL · NICHOLAS CARR
JANE DAVIS · MARK HADDON
BLAKE MORRISON · TIM PARKS
MICHAEL ROSEN · ZADIE SMITH
JEANETTE WINTERSON
DR MARYANNE WOLF & DR MIRIT BARZILLAI

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

FOREWORD

WHY STOP WHAT you're doing to read this?

This year we learnt that there are many thousands of children across Britain who cannot read competently, that there are thousands who leave primary school unable to put together basic sentences. One in three teenagers reads only two books a year, or fewer, and one in six children rarely reads books outside of the classroom. Many parents do not read stories to their children, and many homes do not have books in them. Stories and poems, for these thousands of children, are not a source of enchantment or excitement. Books are associated with school, or worse – they are associated with acute feelings of shame and frustration.

The ten people who have contributed to this book are from very different backgrounds. Some grew up with a multitude and variety of wonderful books within their reach; some had parents who imparted to them a fierce desire for books and for learning; for others, books were hard to come by, or even illicit. But all ten are united here in a passionate belief in the distinctive and irreplaceable pleasures and powers of reading. They describe a poem as a lifeline, a compass, or literature as the holding place of human value. They each contend that books are not just for the classroom, but must be made easily available beyond it, because great books are essential to a richer quality of life. These writers know that learning to read transformed their very brains, and that literature has helped them to express their questions and ideals, and moulded their imagination and sense of self.

This book is a manifesto. In a year of rude awakenings to low levels of literacy and a widespread apathy towards books and reading, this book demands an interruption. *Stop What You're Doing and Read*. Read these essays, because they aim to convince you to make reading part of your daily life. Read a novel because it will enable you to travel in time and space, or else quicken your sense of ordinary existence – family tensions, falling in or out of love, growing up or growing old. Read a poem, because it won't be as difficult as you think, and it might help you uncover and articulate a thought or a feeling previously buried deep. Read a story, if you're short on time, because it imposes a unique period of peace and concentration into your busy life. Read out loud, to your children, to a partner, because reading together casts a potent and intimate spell.

This book aims to start a conversation about the future. As the ways people read, what they read, where they buy their books and in what format are all changing rapidly, this book argues unapologetically for the paramount importance of books and reading in a fast-moving, dislocated, technology-obsessed world.

This book, like every book, is for you. Read on.

Vintage Books, 2011

Zadie Smith

Library Life



SOMETIMES PEOPLE ASK me if I am from a bookish family. I find it a difficult question to answer. One answer would be no, not in the traditional sense. My father left school at thirteen and my mother at sixteen. But another answer is: Christ, yes, they really were. Like a lot of working-class English people, in the Fifties and Sixties my father found his cultural life transformed by Allen Lane's Penguin paperback revolution. Now anyone could read Camus or D. H. Lawrence or Maupassant, for no more than the price of a pack of fags. So he bought these books and read them, and then spent the rest of his life boasting about all those books he'd read back in the Fifties and Sixties. I think he read to prove that his class had not succeeded in wholly defining him, and when he'd proved that, he stopped reading. My mother is a different story. When my father met my mother, his mildly aspirational reading met with the force of her determined autodidacticism. Pretty much the only place my parents' marriage could be considered a match made in heaven was on their bookshelves.

I grew up in a council estate off Willesden Lane, a small flat decorated with books. Hundreds of them on my father's makeshift shelves, procured almost entirely by my mother. I never stopped to wonder where she got them from, given the tightness of money generally - I just read them. A decade later we moved to a maisonette on Brondesbury Park and my mother filled the extra space with yet more books. Books everywhere, arranged in a certain pattern. Second-hand Penguin paperbacks together: green for crime, orange for posh, blue for difficult. Women's-press books together, Virago books together. Then several shelves of Open University books on social work,

psychotherapy, feminist theory. Busy with my own studies, and oblivious in the way children are, I didn't notice that the three younger Smiths were not the only students in that flat. By the time I did, my mother had a degree. We were reading because our parents and teachers told us to. My mother was reading for her life.

About two-thirds of those books had a printed stamp on the inside cover, explaining their provenance: PROPERTY OF WILLESDEN LIBRARY. I hope I am not incriminating my family by saying that during the mid-Eighties it seemed as if the Smiths were trying to covertly move the entire contents of Willesden Green Library into their living room. We were chronic library users. I can remember playing a dull game with my brother called 'Libraries', in which we forced a crowd of soft toys to take out books from the 'library' that was our bedroom. Ben pretended to stamp them (they were of course already stamped) while I lectured some poor panda about late fees. In real life, when it came to fees, I was the worst offender. It was a happy day in our household when my mother spotted a sign pinned to a tree in the high road: WILLESDEN GREEN BOOK AMNESTY. The next day we filled two black bin-bags with books and dragged them down the road. Just in time: I was about to start my GCSEs.

I've spent a lot of time in libraries since then, but I remember the spring of 1990 as the most intense study period of my life, probably because it was the first. To go somewhere to study, because you have chosen to, with no adult looking over your shoulder and only other students for support and company – this was a new experience for me. I think it was a new experience for a lot of the kids in there. Until that now-or-never spring we had come to the library primarily for the café or the cinema, or to meet various love prospects of whom our immigrant parents would not approve, under the cover of that all-purpose, immigrant-parent-silencing sentence: I'M GOING TO THE