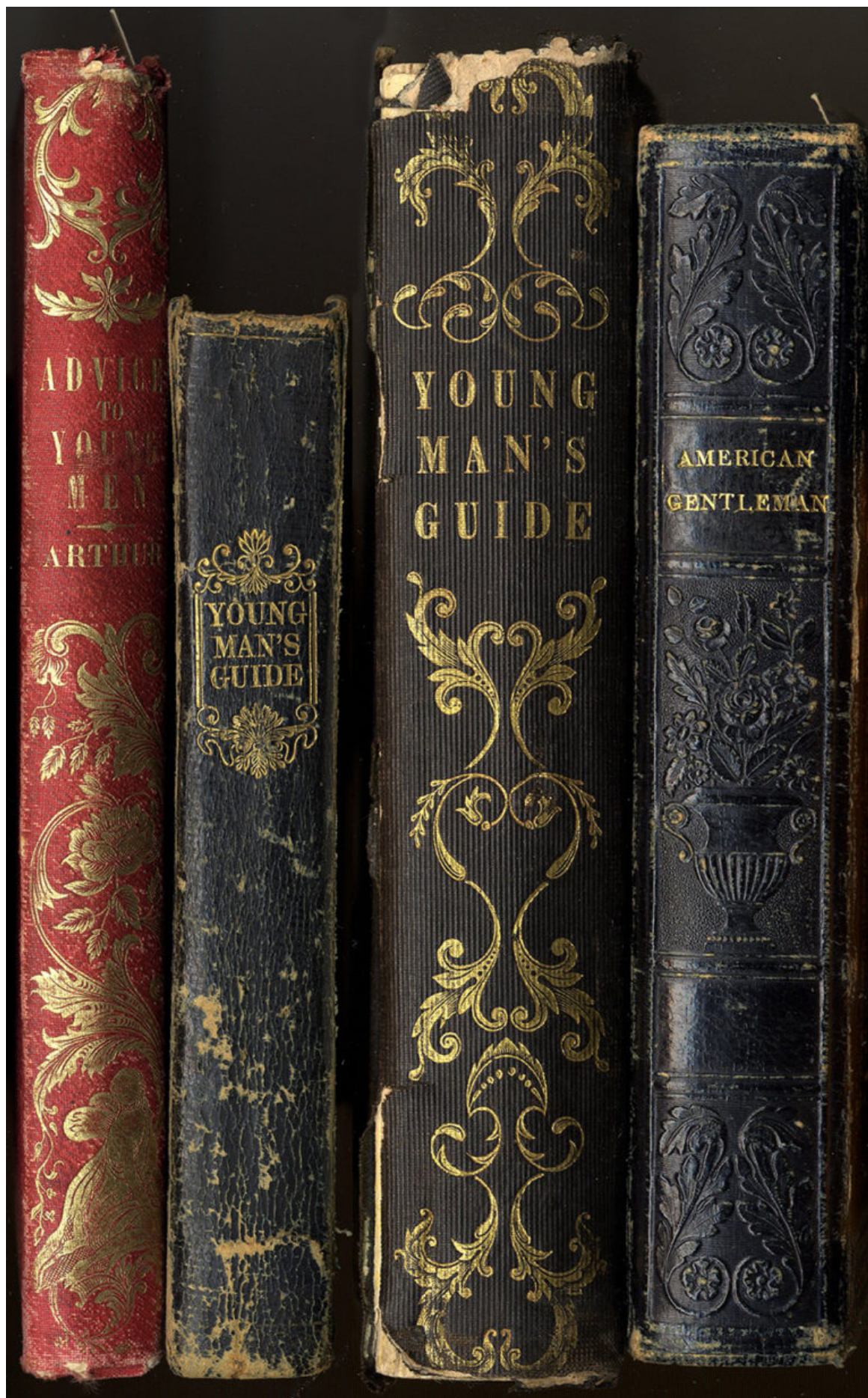


# Surfing and Navigating



ADVICE  
TO  
YOUNG  
MEN  
—  
ARTHUR

YOUNG  
MAN'S  
GUIDE

YOUNG  
MAN'S  
GUIDE

AMERICAN  
GENTLEMAN

Or, life with books

Some months back one of my favorite newspaper columnists, Leonard Pitts Jr., departed from his usual subjects to wax about the fate of reading. Pitts writes for the *Miami Herald*, and his column often appears in my local paper, *The Tallahassee Democrat*. Pitts has an ear for political B.S., especially when it cloaks racism. It turns out that when Pitts is not chiding the ignorant and reactive among us, he enjoys books, many of them very long.

Unfortunately, Pitts tells us, he's been feeling less and less able to indulge this passion. The old days when he'd curl up with a long novel seem to have given way to rushed gulps of prose on those rare occasions when he can actually pick up a book. This personal change, Pitts suggests, reflects a much broader problem—one about which we've heard a great deal lately. Pitts wonders if the problem doesn't owe something to a change in the way we read—a change brought about by the Internet. In place of the ideal—sustained, engrossed investment in a single book—we've all come to exemplify the new reality: flitting about among bits of cyber-text like bees in a flower bed, we've become habituated to a frenetic and impatient kind of reading, one that makes sustained attention to a single text very difficult.

Much as I admire Leonard Pitts, I think he and legions of others who share his fear have gotten this one wrong. The idea that we've lost the capacity for sustained absorption in what's between the covers of a book is based on a conception of reading and of books that has never really held true. Let me illustrate my point in two ways, one, autobiographical and the other historical.

In terms of the autobiographical: although I edit an online journal and spend part of every day searching the Web for bits and pieces of information—information for columns such as this one, for undergraduate lectures, for scholarly papers, and for a brain that irresistibly craves such inevitably disappointing data as my latest Amazon.com ranking—I can't stop thinking about books. This obsession is constant, long-standing, and at times verges on mania. The Web has done nothing to temper my interest in books. In addition to thinking about books, I read books—many of them. But my experience as a reader does not exactly follow the pattern put forth by people like Nicholas Carr, who's recent *Atlantic Monthly* article, "[Is Google Making us Stupid?](#)" (which Pitts mentions), contains the following observation: "The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle ... 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."

What exactly is this "deep reading"? If my experience is any indication, it's a red herring. For me, reading printed books has always included a certain amount of drift, even a bit of Jet Skiing. Almost immediately upon starting a book I ask myself—usually while reading—what will I read next: should it be more



fiction? a history book? current events? pure escape? enrichment? This is not simply the stuff of daydreams. These are relational questions: what most naturally follows from what I'm reading now? What will add to the experience of the present book? Will it be something related by topic or by genre? The process is almost identical to what happens when I go hunting on the Internet for answers to a research question. But the cognitive parallels of reading and Web surfing don't begin to capture the depth and extent of my thinking about books.

I never leave home without a book—what if the car breaks down? what if I get to my kids' school early? what if I'm stuck in an elevator? This always involves a choice. Should I bring something half-read, or should it be something uncracked? When I go out of town I spend more time choosing my reading matter than packing my clothes. I can never pick just one book. If I'm on vacation, I may need something related to work—something grounding to counter whatever escape reading I've brought. If I'm taking a work trip, I have to balance work reading with escape—who doesn't need a little schlock, even after the most congenial conference? Then there's the ever-aching fear that I might've selected badly. What if I'm stuck on a plane with a bad book? To control for such catastrophes I always select several titles when I travel, even if I'm gone for just one night. You never know when you might be lying awake in some hotel room wishing you had a nice emotionally antiseptic book about the Reformation or a little historical fiction à la E. L. Doctorow.

My bedside table looks like a Joseph Cornell box for the book obsessed. *The New York Review of Books* and *The New York Times Book Review* are piled next to disorderly stacks of novels, history books, and miscellany. I rarely get more than fifty pages into something without adding something else to the piles. At the moment, I'm halfway through Roberto Bolano's *Savage Detectives*, but because I like to bring unread books on vacation, I left Bolano a few weeks ago when we went to the beach. Now joining Bolano next to the bed are David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green* (I'm on page 63), and in the adjoining pile sits Arthur Herman's *To Rule the Waves: How the British Navy Shaped the Modern World*, Emma Rothschild's *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*, and an old paperback copy of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. In a third stack are Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* and a copy of the second volume of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin series. I haven't cracked O'Brian yet—I'm holding off like a kid saving that last piece of Halloween candy.

The bed-side detritus can create its own microclimate of anxiety. (Don't add more to the pile until you've actually finished something; but what to finish? Do I care enough about the British Navy to read Herman's 569 pages on the subject? I loved what I read of Bolano, but is this really the time for surrealist satire? How likely is Rothschild to answer my question about Adam Smith's views on money?) So, I occasionally move unread or partially read books from the bed-side table to one of four specially designated shelves in my book case.

I should confess that long books have a prominent place on these shelves of partially read or unread books, and I could rehearse the tired claim that modern life means no time for an eight-hundred-pager. But I read at least two hundred pages a week. Surely within the month I could manage something as gripping as *Anna Karenina* or Tony Judt's *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, both of which have been sitting unread for at least two years.

I think the real reason for my aversion to very long books has to do with another aspect of my book fetish: a need to display what I've read. I could place on the shelf a well-worn copy of Thomas Pynchon's 1085-page *Against the Day*, but in the same six weeks of reading, I could add to my "books I've read" shelves (as I've done over the past few months) Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism*, Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History*, Simon Schama's *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves, and the American Revolution*, Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, Frank Norris's *The Pit*, and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. But the array on the shelf—the Ishiguro, a mass-market paperback bought at Gatwick airport, and the Norris and Dreiser with their cool green Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics covers—gives me vast pleasure. It reminds me of what I was thinking when I decided to follow Norris with Dreiser and why I got interested in Strauss after reading Popper, whom I came to after reading books by Mark Lilla and John Gray (the John Gray who did not write *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*).

It is partly this sense that my books constitute a sort of map of my mind that explains a secondary but closely related obsession. There is nothing that gives me more pleasure than book shopping. I would have to acknowledge that I find this more pleasurable than actual reading, the latter involving that ever-present fear that I'm reading one thing when I should be reading something else, something better, more entertaining, or more informative. I spend entire days browsing bookstore shelves. I troll Amazon.com endlessly, dumping things in my shopping cart in preparation for a strange act of ritual self-flagellation where I purge what I don't really "need," a virtual reenactment of a ritual I've performed in every decent bookshop between here and London.

In order to manage my book-buying habit, I've been developing a twelve-step plan that involves as the first step (I haven't figured out what the other eleven will be) creating lists. I find that if I write down titles I crave, there's a chance I'll eventually lose interest and save myself some money. The consequence of this is that I have book lists everywhere—on my computer desktop is a .doc file entitled "Book List," which includes such titles as *Inner Hygiene: Constipation and the Pursuit of Health in Modern Society* and a novel called *I, Roger Williams*. There are also paper lists and my Amazon.com lists, which include my "Shopping Cart," my "Saved for Later" list, and my "Wish List."

All of these somewhat compulsive behaviors require thought—substantial, sometimes even deep thought. When I'm browsing in a book shop, I'm thinking about what I've read and what I will read, what I happen to be writing about

and what I might want to write about in the future. The titles I stack in my arms are likely to have some relation to these things, although that relation can be distant and obscure, which is precisely why the books become important. The day I bought Frank Norris's *The Pit*, a book about money and greed that arises around the Chicago futures market at the turn of the twentieth century, I was thinking about the history of money. Norris led me to Dreiser, which I thought might tell me something about where Darwin (an intellectual inspiration for these "Naturalist" novelists) might fit in contemporary views of money.

This sense that one's books are a map of one's mind is something I acquired from my older brother Steven who, at the age of fourteen, decided not to spend the summer at the country club (where I, aged ten, was eating Francheesies—a healthful all-beef kosher dog wrapped in bacon and topped with melted American cheese—and tumbling off the high dive, until swim cramps sent me to the basketball court to play bean-ball with two obese twin brothers who's names I can't recall). Instead, he spent the entire summer on my parents' sofa reading the fifty-two volumes of Britannica's *Great Books*, which my father had received in 1952 as a college graduation gift. I don't think anybody was under any illusions that the full set was ever actually read. But its presence on my brother's shelf, displacing the Dungeons and Dragons figures and a Frank Frazetta coffee-table book, suggested what one person could know.

Once in college, Steven started coming home with all sorts of interesting looking things—I remember most the *Marx-Engels Reader* and A. O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*. Eventually, I began to do more than simply marvel at the ever-swelling shelves in his bedroom. I began to buy my own books, many of which I actually read. The habit really took off in my third year of college, the point at which books supplanted records as the media of addiction. Books yielded longer-term pleasure (who wouldn't tire of the most depressing rock band of all time, Joy Division, who's single "Love Will Tear us Apart Again" was among those featured on the first mix tape I made for my Sony Walkman, purchased in the summer of 1982 at one of those electronics shops that's perpetually going out of business, à la Zohan), they were cheaper than records, and nobody seemed too bothered by a college kid spending his money on books. Two stamped steel bookends that had previously embraced some of my parents' books (Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*, Charles A. Reich's *The Greening of America*, and *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William L. Shirer among them) had migrated to my desk where they became the cornerstones of my first library.

In those days there were literally dozens of used bookshops. That was Chicago. And we were Chicagoans, an apparently book-happy people. Fifty-seventh street between the Illinois Central tracks and University Avenue on the South Side; Lincoln Avenue between Fullerton and Addison; Clark Street all the way to Evanston. In the summer I'd ride the book circuit on my bicycle. It would start on the Southside, at Powell's, then up the lakefront to Fullerton or Diversey, then over to Clark and Lincoln, and then up Clark to Evanston. I'd come home with a knapsack filled with used books: a pocket paperback edition of

Bellow's *Herzog*; another of Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition*; a *Kierkegaard Reader*; a first edition of *The American Hegelians*, edited by William Goetzman, which I'd snatched from the "Recent Arrivals" table of O'Gara and Wilson Booksellers. All of these books would be read, carefully annotated, and proudly displayed in book cases that had evolved into that undergraduate apartment fixture: 1 x 10 pine boards stacked between gray cinder blocks.

The need to buy and display my books has meant that I have a very strange relationship with lending libraries. I don't think I've ever read a novel borrowed from a library. The very idea is anathema to me. Half the pleasure in reading a book comes from the ritual closure involved in placing the read tome in the correct place on the correct shelf. This is a carefully weighed decision, sometimes based on when a book was read, sometimes based on its subject matter, and sometimes according to its cover design. (I try to keep most of my now out-of-print green-covered Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics in one place.) In terms of the utility of book ownership, other than Saul Bellow's novels and a few history titles, I rarely reread my books. But I do like to mark my books with pencils (never, never, a pen!) or by folding the corner of a page—usually to mark a choice quote. Hence, I note in Barry Unsworth's *Losing Nelson*, the corner of page 55 is folded over. It contains a passage I thought I might read in a class I teach on Captain Cook.

*Sea battles in those days so peculiarly designed for mutilations and maimings. A hail of missiles. Shrapnel from the cannon-shot, razor-edged projectiles from sliced and splintered timbers, whizzed through the crowded decks. Selective, however—death not a reaper but a sort of crazed sniper, here a face shorn off, there a leg carried away. Men rarely died in swaths. Sometimes, of course, when a ship was raked fore and aft—this was the fire Horatio had to suffer at Trafalgar, when he drove into the French line at right angles. But death in daily dress was the gouger, the slicer, the lord of eviscerations and lopped limbs. And he, my Horatio, pacing back and forth on the quarterdeck, pausing to observe the progress of the battle, stars and ribbons prominent on his breast, showing no haste, showing no fear, as if he were out on a Sunday morning stroll, looking at birds or clouds through his telescope.*

Given my line of work, I do of course make heavy use of libraries. But this rarely has anything to do with true reading and doesn't even begin to sate my addiction. The books I borrow are almost an entirely different species of thing from the ones I purchase. I feel no compulsion to actually read them or otherwise render them monuments to my personal learning. I don't even know that I look at them as things to be read. They are more properly things to be pillaged, a lot like a Website or a catalog. They contain small bits of information to be mined; one roots around in them and picks at them like an intellectual vulture. But almost never are they accorded the level of intimacy granted the books I've purchased for my own library.

My point in all this is simply that for me reading is about much more than one

person and one book. It is a broadly relational exercise, facilitating kinds of networks of knowledge not unlike those described long ago by that philosophical progenitor of the Internet, Marshall McLuhan. When I read, I think about other books, I think about acquiring books, about the relationships among books read and not-yet read, and I codify all those relationships in my personal library.

This omnivorous and omnidirectional relationship to books is, of course, not unique to me (there are plenty of bibliophiles out there who could teach me a thing or two about book worship). Nor is it unique in the history of the book. Since its invention in the fifteenth century, the printed book has given rise to all sorts of variations on the one-reader-one-book mode of reading. From the Renaissance through the nineteenth century, readers, from Erasmus to Thomas Jefferson to Mark Twain, assembled *apercus*, *bon mots*, and notable passages into commonplace books. Virtually everybody who was anybody in the Western world kept one of these *reader's digests*. Before the mechanization of printing and papermaking made books widely affordable, these books could function as a virtual library, charting one's path through the material of reading.

In the late nineteenth century, commonplacing gave way to scrapbooking, a craft that allowed readers to recombine fragments from books, magazines, and newspapers, with cheap prints, photographs, and other illustrative matter. Again, these scrapbooks could function in lieu of personal libraries, or they could—as commonplace books often did as well—supplement personal libraries as a roadmap of one's learning.

Even the nineteenth-century novel, the thing that most epitomizes the one-reader-one-book ideal, often appeared in serial form. Readers of Dickens, Stowe, Trollope, Melville, Twain, and many others got their fixes from installments that appeared in newspapers, magazines, or cheap, paperbound installments. If a reader intended to settle in for an intimate and engrossing week with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she would have to await the appearance of the full text; if she wished to have that text assembled into a single convenient package called a book, she might have to pay a book binder or sew the binding herself—all of which made the book an even more personalized object and something likely to be displayed as a source of self-knowledge and an artifact of familial gentility.

These habits of book ownership and reading are often related to technological change. Obviously the printing press changed the way people read, but it seems to me that since then, changes in information technology have done more to change *what* people read than *how* they read. Gutenberg's moveable type and the linotype machine may have made all sorts of texts available to all sorts of people, but as the universe of print expanded and as people found themselves having to navigate an ever-expanding textual realm, the basic habits of reading that Leonard Pitts and so many others associate with the Internet have long been in place. As long as there have been books, there have been readers surfing and navigating.



Perhaps, then, I can leave Leonard Pitts with one final suggestion. Rather than seek calm solitude in what's on the book's pages, build yourself a library and marvel at its calming effects. You will immediately grasp what Borges meant when he wrote, "I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library."

## Further Reading:

For further reflections on the historical foundations of present-day reading habits, see Matthew P. Brown, "[Undisciplined Reading: Finding surprise in how we read](#)," *Common-place* 8:1 (Oct., 2007). On the history of scrapbooking, see Ellen Gruber Garvey's immensely illuminating "[Imitation is the Sincerest Form of Appropriation: Scrapbooks and extra-illustration](#)," *Common-place* 7:3 (April, 2007). A handy introduction to Marshall McLuhan's thought is Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., *Essential McLuhan* (New York, 1995). I read Leonard Pitts's column, "Relearning a Lost Art: Reading," in the *Tallahassee Democrat*, Monday, June 16, 2008.

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