



How Reading Changed My Life

Anna Quindlen

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A recurring theme throughout Anna Quindlen's *How Reading Changed My Life* is the comforting premise that readers are never alone. "There was waking, and there was sleeping. And then there were books," she writes, "a kind of parallel universe in which anything might happen and frequently did, a universe in which I might be a newcomer but never really a stranger. My real, true world." Later, she quotes editor Hazel Rochman: "Reading makes immigrants of us all. It takes us away from home, but, most important, it finds homes for us everywhere." Indeed, Quindlen's essays are full of the names of "friends," real or fictional-- Anne of Green Gables and Heidi; Anthony Trollope and Jane Austen, to name just a few--who have comforted, inspired, educated, and delighted her throughout her life. In four short essays Quindlen shares her thoughts on the act of reading itself ("It is like the rubbing of two sticks together to make a fire, the act of reading, an improbable pedestrian task that leads to heat and light"); analyzes the difference between how men and women read ("there are very few books in which male characters, much less boys, are portrayed as devoted readers"); and cheerfully defends middlebrow literature:

Most of those so-called middlebrow readers would have readily admitted that the *Iliad* set a standard that could not be matched by *What Makes Sammy Run?* or *Exodus*. But any reader with common sense would also understand intuitively, immediately, that such comparisons are false, that the uses of reading are vast and variegated and that some of them are not addressed by Homer.

The Canon, censorship, and the future of publishing, not to mention that of reading itself, are all subjects Quindlen addresses with intelligence and optimism in a book that may not change your life, but will no doubt remind you of other books that did. --Alix Wilber(less)

How Reading Changed My Life Details

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From Reader Review How Reading Changed My Life for online ebook

Erin *Proud Book Hoarder* says

3.5 stars

“Books are the plane, and the train, and the road. They are the destination, and the journey. They are home.”

I've been in such a mood to read books about books and love of reading. This short book has an author who always loved reading - the first part of the book was the best. After that it became a little flawed, but overall there are points in each chapter worth noting.

So far I'm in love with this author's writing style! It's interesting how she opens the book with not only her love of reading, but making points of being isolated from it, sharing others stories like Oprah Winfrey for the negative stigma, and how there is a cloud of literary snobbery over America for its duration. Fascinating thoughts that I kept nodding to and agreeing with while reading.

She focuses a lot on her childhood and how she preferred books over playing outside. She touches upon the isolation of a reader, something sometimes overlooked. It's not a straight rule all readers are strictly loner personality types, but it does sometimes go hand-in-hand. She focuses on this isolation and difference as a child and teenager growing up.

Did you experience any comments or negatives for being too much of a reader as a kid? I had a few run-ins with insensitive comments and misconceptions myself.

Her points about some people being driven to books and their isolated, soothing worlds could be because of troubles or pains they were experiencing. Needing to go outside themselves into safer worlds in between pages. I don't want to stereotype and say this is true for every child that is a heavy reader; I do know in my own case it is true.

Her next emphasis is on the dangers of literary criticism and the proper pedigrees of college, how so many get it wrong, not just to pretend to understand things they do not, but to shape their views according to the popular thoughts and beliefs of the institution. Ironically this is the opposite that should be done when considering literature, which dares to be different about controversial topics for its day and age.

"Not for nothing did the Nazis light up the night skies of their cities with the burning of books. Not for nothing were free white folks in America prohibited from teaching slaves to read, and slaves in South Carolina threatened with the loss of the first joint of their forefingers if they were caught looking at a book; books became the greatest purveyors of truth, and the truth shall make you free."

I didn't personally encounter any of this in college since I didn't live in campus or study literature, but I found it fascinating anyway. Her words about the dangers of professional critics and how so many get it bent was interesting and something I agree with. She's definitely against snobby.

The second half loses some cohesiveness - it strangely scatters random thoughts, which brought it down a

star.

She ends the book with some short top ten reading lists. I have high respect for her as a reader and want to check out some of her fiction as soon as I can. Not sure how much I'll like her work, but I know she is what I consider a "true reader to heart"

Overall I dug the parts that were biographical (find other readers experiences reading fascinating - yes, I'm a dork.) I also dug the reading and book history she put in that I wasn't aware of, as well as her unconventional notes on snobbery and isolation (very true stuff, loved those sections.)

Carol says

If you have been a book lover since you were a child, this book is for you! I felt as though Quindlen was speaking directly to me, and expressing my same thoughts about reading. She talks of changes as she grew up (50s/60s) with books like Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and how today things are changing with technology. She writes "It's 30 years since man first walked on the moon, and when people sit down to a big old fashioned supper it is still a plate of roast beef and mashed potatoes, not a capsule and a glass of water. When they buy a creamsicle, it's 3dimensional, wet and cold and wonderful. That's because people like the thing itself. They don't eat mashed potatoes with gravy because they just need to be nourished, but because mashed potatoes and gravy are wonderful in so many ways: the heat, the texture, the silky slide of the gravy over your tongue. And that is the way it is with books. It is not simply that we need information, but that we want to savor it, carry it with us, feel the heft of it under our arm. We like the thing itself. It is not possible that the book is over. Too many people love it so." In 84 pages this book is packed with memories, intimacy, joy and tears, & everything we love about reading books. (She also includes her 11 reading lists.)

Beth Bonini says

I was first assigned this book as part of a Young Adult literature class I was taking for my Master's degree in reading education. I have a real soft spot for books about books and personal essays about the all-absorbing pleasure of reading. I could identify with Anna Quindlen: not only had we read and loved so many of the same books, and been formed by them, but at some fundamental level we are both people who would rather be reading than doing almost anything else. I suspect that 98% of the world judges us, but the other 2% (the truly book-obsessed) completely understand the compulsion.** Like Quindlen, I was fortunate to grow up in a happy home in a fairly idyllic, child-centred neighbourhood; and yet I was always want to 'escape' to somewhere else . . . and always wanting to live inside my books.

It was quite a surprise when this book - such a pleasurable reading experience for me - was panned by the majority of the class. This was quite a few years ago, but I seem to remember words like 'smug' and 'privileged' being lobbed at Quindlen. On rereading this book, I still like it very much; except for Quindlen's Catholic education, which I did not share, it rings absolutely true. If you are a fan of Quindlen's writing, and of books about book-love, I suspect you will enjoy it, too. The ten themed reading lists at the back are a definite bonus.

"Reading lists are arbitrary and capricious, but most people like them, and so do I. My most satisfying secondhand experiences as a reader have come through recommending books, especially to my children."
Anna Quindlen

** These statistics are entirely made up by me. I'm not sure if 2% is too high or too low, but my gut instinct is that it is not much more than that. When I was teaching, I did meet some other avid readers and book-lovers - but they were by no means the norm.

Tiffany Reisz says

A good little book but kind of bland. I guess she was preaching to the choir here. Yay books!

Carol Storm says

The thing that jumps out at you when you leaf through this bland, inoffensive, feature article sized little booklet is not so much that Anna Quindlen loves books, but that she has an infallible instinct for the second rate. To Kill A Mockingbird, not Huckleberry Finn. The Catcher In The Rye, not A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man. A Tree Grows In Brooklyn, not Call It Sleep. A Christmas Carol, not Moby Dick. This more than a matter of laziness or bad taste. Anna Quindlen is instinctively drawn to books that flatter her own smug, middlebrow complacency. To give you an idea of what I mean, here's a brief summary written in the voice of the lady herself.

How Reading Convinced Me That I Am Awesome!

by Anna Quindlen

The most important thing to remember about reading is that, just as there are a million authors and a million styles, there are a million ways to feel good about yourself. Any book that doesn't remind you of how awesome you are is a book you should avoid at all costs!

Now, as an incredibly gifted, successful, and well-educated woman, I don't say that all the characters in all the books I've ever read are all exactly like me. I mean, how could they be? But even when you are reading about people who are different from you, I mean even the very lowest sort of people, not smart, not rich, or not directed enough for college, well just remember that those people and those books were put on earth for just one reason -- to make you feel better about yourself.

My favorite book about poor people is definitely A CHRISTMAS CAROL by Charles Dickens. The thing I love the best about this book is that the poor people are helpless and can't do anything for themselves, so Scrooge has to help them out. And of course by helping them out he comes to realize just how wonderful he really is. Isn't it amazing how Tiny Tim never seems to do anything but talk about how grateful he is to God for making him a cripple, so he can sit in church all day and think about Jesus? I raised two sons of my own and they're just exactly like Tiny Tim. Well, okay, they're not. But I've always insisted they read A CHRISTMAS CAROL every Christmas just to remind themselves that poor people are helpless and weak

and need their help to feel good about themselves!

Just as poor people were put on earth to make rich people feel good about themselves, I feel that teenagers were put on earth so grownups can feel smart and in control. The reason I love *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE* so much is that Holden Caulfield is always helpless and confused and vulnerable. That's how teenagers should be, especially boys, because when teenagers aren't confused and helpless they can be really rude and obnoxious. They do horrible things like talk back and have sex and let impure thoughts about their elders make them disrespectful. But Holden Caulfield never has sex, he's not a horrible dirty-minded rapist like all the other teenage boys in the world. He just thinks about how dirty and impure everyone is, which is exactly how teenagers should think about their bodies and the world around them. Every teenager will relate to Holden because all teenagers were taught by the Sisters and of course the Sisters never lie. And anyone who wasn't taught by the Sisters isn't really important anyway. Except to feel sorry for, because it's important to feel sorry for people who are different from you. Otherwise, how can you let them know that you're awesome?

Speaking of people I feel sorry for, how about that Anne Frank? I think her book, *DIARY OF A YOUNG GIRL*, is the best book ever written about the Nazis and the Jews. What I like is that there are no Nazis in the book, just Anne. And she only talks about herself and her family, and really they're just like me and my family! So many Holocaust books get bogged down in questions that don't really have easy answers, like why didn't more Christians speak out. But what's the point of asking those questions when most of the people in the world are Christians anyway? I'm a Christian, and Anne Frank is just like me. That's the kind of Jewish person I like, the kind that never points fingers and never asks any embarrassing questions. Because really, who needs that?

The whole point of reading books and the whole point of meeting people who are different from you is to remember that you're awesome!

bookczuk says

Yum. What reader isn't gonna give it 5 stars?

Diane says

I have a fondness for books about books. I love it when writers and fellow bibliophiles wax nostalgic about their favorite reading experiences. Reading is a way of exploring the world without leaving your living room, and reading about other readers reminds me that I am not alone in my love of curling up with a good book.

This is a thoughtful collection of essays by Anna Quindlen on various topics about books and reading. It is a

slim book, only 70 pages of prose and then a few lists of favorite titles at the back. But I went through this collection slowly, savoring the journey of another reader.

I nodded in agreement when Anna mentioned how many times other people made her feel weird for preferring to stay home and read. She praises a kind woman from her childhood who shared books with her when Anna had started to outgrow her school library. She discusses the folly of banning books, and remembers when her mother tossed aside a Philip Roth novel, calling it dirty, the first thing Anna did was pick it up and read it.

My favorite essay was about books that are considered part of The Canon, and how sad Anna was when she got to college and learned that one of her most beloved novels, John Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*, was not considered a Great Book by her professor.

The first book that ever seized me so completely by the throat that I read and reread it several times turned out to be one that epitomized both this utter falling into a book that is the hallmark of the way women often read, and the kind of intellectual snobbery that characterizes much of the discussion of books among those people who are considered experts in them...

Unlike most books I love, I do not press it upon other readers, even the ones I know best ...
This is my book.

These essays were first published in 1998, and part of their charm is that they come from a different era. The internet existed in '98, but it wasn't as overwhelming and all-powerful as it is now. She mentions how some books were available on the computer, with no conception of how widespread e-readers and smart phones and tablets and wifi will eventually be.

She also mentions that concerns over reading have been happening for centuries. Naysayers have been fearing the demise of reading whenever there is a new invention, such as radio, or movies, or television, or the Internet. The fear goes back to the Ancient Greeks, when they worried that poetry would die once people started writing things down, because poetry was an oral tradition.

If this book reminded me of anything, it reminded me of the power we readers have. Empires can crumble, the Internet can go down, but books will be treasured as long as there are readers.

Favorite Quotes

"Yet there was always in me, even when I was very small, the sense that I ought to be somewhere else. And wander I did, although, in my everyday life, I had nowhere to go and no imaginable reason on earth why I should want to leave. The buses took to the interstate without me; the trains sped by. So I wandered the world through books."

"Perhaps only a truly discontented child can become as seduced by books as I was. Perhaps restlessness is a necessary corollary of devoted literacy."

"While we pay lip service to the virtues of reading, the truth is that there is still in our culture something that suspects those who read too much, whatever reading too much means, of being lazy, aimless dreamers, people who need to grow up and come outside to where real life is, who think themselves superior in their

separateness. There is something in the American character that is even secretly hostile to the act of aimless reading, a certain hale and heartiness that is suspicious of reading as anything more than a tool for advancement."

Henry David Thoreau: "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book. The book exists for us perchance which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones."

Further Reading

Here are some of my other favorite books about books:

Used and Rare by Lawrence Goldstone

Ex Libris by Anne Fadiman

Tolstoy and the Purple Chair by Nina Sankovitch

The End of Your Life Book Club by Will Schwalbe

84 Charing Cross Road by Helene Hanff

The Little Bookstore of Big Stone Gap by Wendy Welch

The Uncommon Reader by Alan Bennett

Julie Suzanne says

Before sending this to an interested fellow bookcrossover, I flipped through the pages as a way of saying goodbye. I ended up reading the whole book again! Initially, this book was required reading for a college seminar course about "how we read." It was the best course of my life for many reasons, but this book was one of probably 20 books I was reading in a 3-month period. So I'm sure I got more out of it this second time.

It's wonderful! Inspiring! Quindlen is an outstanding writer who makes any topic enjoyable to read about. In this book, she discusses the politics of books, the stupidity of labeling some books "low-brow" as if they're not worthy of reading, and makes a good case for the value of such books. This book is about how reading (especially lowbrow books) can inspire students to become writers and how reading can, as the title states, change your life! Any reader will relate to the truthful musings of this established writer and you will have a deeper appreciation for your books and yourself as a reader after reading this. :)

Victoria Evangelina Allen says

~TIME OUT OF TIME~

I love being on planes, love being in airports; sometimes I truly feel that I like journey more than the destination: it is a time out of time, a moment in life to fully relax and take all the responsibility off my shoulders, and, as Anna Quindlen helped me to fully realize, a time to read:

"This is what I like about traveling: the time on airplanes spent reading, solitary, happy. It turns out that when my younger self thought of taking wing, she wanted only to let her spirit soar. Books are the plane, and the train, and the road. They are the destination and the journey. They are home." (88%)

Bookworms escaping the real life and hallucinating in the imaginary world: this is how many people perceive us, avid readers. How to explain to them that for us reading is the miracle of bringing other worlds to life with the power of this miraculous process of turning the little black ants of letters in flowing rivers of strong feelings that move the soul and make us laugh and cry and ultimately become better people? But why to even try to explain it? Because every reader wants to share the joy of reading like parents who leave books open on catchy pages; like librarians who take kids down into the basements filled with the marvels of Renaissance novels. God bless their hearts; if not for them, would there be such a page-turners army that stays strong and even growing despite the constant distraction of TV, social life and money-making pressure?

This slim volume tells a story every reader and writer can relate to: reading changes our lives in ways we never fully realize; it makes us who we are; it trains the muscles of our soul and the joints of our brain. For Anna Quindlen, reading became re-reading, and ultimately, a glorious writing career. After reading the masterpieces of world's literature, she decided that *"I know that I will never, ever write as well as this, but that if anything even dimly like this power, to enthrall, to move, to light in the darkness of daily life, lies hidden like a wartime cryptogram within the Royal manual typewriter on my dorm room desk, I must try to make a go of it."* (73%) It is a joy for us that she gave it a try: check out the raving Amazon.com reviews on her books, both fiction and non-fiction.

We, readers, are never alone: as long as we can read, we have a company of myriads of other people, the authors, the fictional characters and the other readers who have read same books as we. *How Reading Changed My Life* warmed my heart and reminded me of that. And several reading lists Mrs. Quindlen shares at the end of the book added a good 40+ jewels to explore to my TO READ SOON list.

Victoria Evangelina Belyavskaya

Laurie says

As a fellow voracious reader, Quindlen's reasons for reading pretty much mirror mine. She says "Reading has always been my home, my sustenance, my great invincible companion....I did not read from a sense of superiority, or advancement, or even learning. I read because I loved it more than any other activity on earth." Yep, I completely understand and relate to that feeling . We bookworms were made to feel weird and nerdy and possibly freakish as a child. I wasn't made to feel that way at home because I come from a family of big readers. But some people were. Quindlen relates that Oprah Winfrey was. But at school, no one could understand my obsession.

So I spent much of this very short book thinking, Me, yes me again, and again me, me, me. Of course , I haven't spent my life translating my love of reading into a career of writing as the author has. But her love of reading and the need to escape into the world of other lives and places is mine as well. She states "Perhaps it is true that at base we readers are dissatisfied people, yearning to be elsewhere, to live vicariously through words in a way we cannot live directly through life...Books are the plane, and the train, and the road. They are the destination, and the journey. They are home." Yes, ma'am I agree.

Rowena says

I enjoyed this book for the most part. It's quite biographical, as the title implies, but it also has a lot of information about the history of books, reading etc. Great quotes about reading by famous writers are also included.

I could definitely relate to many of Quindlen's experiences as a reader. For example, the hostility and suspicion that some look upon readers. I did find that she made some assumptions though. For example, not all children who were readers were solitary and preferred their own company, at least not in my case. She also made a point about how scarcely anyone reads the *Catcher in the Rye* after the age of 21. Well, I was in my mid-twenties when I first read it but I guess because she is American, the books she included were popular American literature and were part of the American school system. As I grew up in the UK, I read most of the books she mentioned at a later age than Americans did.

So although the book isn't great, it's interesting, hence the 4-stars. There are also some good booklists towards the end. I would really love to read a similar book written by a British author, I feel I could relate more to the book choices (I'm sure Enid Blyton, Roald Dahl and E. Nesbit would make an appearance). However, I did enjoy this book because as a reader I'm always curious about other people's personal journeys into the world of books.

Barbara says

This very short book praises the act of reading. Quindlen who was educated in Catholic parochial schools (as I was for 6 of my K-12 education) described an educational experience that was very familiar. My family also had a set of encyclopedias, and Reader's Digest condensed books. We got the daily newspaper, the weekly Catholic Transcript newspaper, and Reader's Digest. But from a young age, I had a library card. Libraries were essential. Books were expensive and Quindlen discusses the fact that few families bought books. We were a military family and due to frequent moves books were something we couldn't accumulate. This may explain why as an adult I live in a house jammed with books, and as an academic, I have the biggest library in my department.

This book was published in the late 1990's when many book lovers were concerned that digital texts would lead to the decline of physical books. However in 2016, physical books are outselling e-books. This article :[WHY I'M PUTTING EBOOKS ON THE SHELF FOR 2016](https://michaelhyatt.com/ebooks-2016...)

<https://michaelhyatt.com/ebooks-2016...>

includes the primary reason I read physical books much more often: out of sight, out of mind. I forget I have the e-books AND it is much less satisfying to finish an e-book.

Quindlen provides best of lists at the end which I enjoyed, but some might see as filler. Overall this is another book about the joy of reading that was a joy to read for me.

Kevin says

I love to read books about books. When surrounded by many who have no desire to read I sometimes find myself losing some faith in humanity's future. I truly do not understand the lack of desire. I can't imagine going anywhere without a book and guess what, because of that I'm NEVER bored.

By the way, why is it socially unacceptable to read a book instead of stare at your phone?

At a young age I was taken by my father to our local library. He truly read everything. He would pick out a large stack of books and I believe initially to emulate him I would do the same. He taught me that ideas on becoming a better person and learning came from books. To understand others circumstances, we read. To lose prejudices we read. Reading is a pathway to the world where there are no boundaries.

Anna Quindlen echoes many of my feelings about reading. She talks about being told by her mother to go outside and play and would invariably sneak a book and read it outside. She also gives us hope that new technologies will grow our abilities to read and learn more effectively.

I find myself thankful that with you, my book recommenders on goodreads, I feel a kinship... "A world in which people read, read constantly, avidly, faithfully, in a way in which I imagined only I did." Thanks!

Brina says

Anna Quindlen is a veteran novelist and New York Times columnist who has won the Pulitzer Prize for her journalism. In this short book of essays that packs a punch, she takes us down her memory lane to tell us why she reads, citing her favorite books along the way. For this lovely reflection on the reading and writing life, I rate *How Reading Changed My Life* 4 stars.

People have been reading for various reasons since the first printed word appeared on cuneiform thousands of years ago. Books have changed in many ways, shapes, and forms since then, but the object has remained the same- to inform people about the world. Whether the person is a heavy worked business person or inquisitive school girls, books remain their window to the world.

Quindlen attended catholic school as a girl and had her love of reading fostered by her school library and a neighbor. She spent gorgeous days inside reading classics while her friends jumped in leaves or threw snowballs. Even today she would rather snuggle up with *Anna Karenina* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* than engage in outside activities. Her rereading of these classics lead her to the writing life as she points out that books remain timeless.

She ends with an essay describing how books may be on the decline in this digital age, yet she does not fear books ever going out of style because there will always be someone looking to escape, to learn, to see the world. As someone who loves to read, I enjoyed this refreshing book of essays. *How Reading Changed My Life* reminded me why I enjoy Anna Quindlen's writing, and I look forward to reengaging myself with her books.

Kelly says

The part of this book that I liked talked about what it means to be a lover of books. Her voracious reading of books as a girl mirrors my childhood as an avid reader. I would brush my teeth reading a book! I would hide under the covers with a flashlight reading books so my dad wouldn't know I was still awake! I liked that she challenged the perception "non-lovers of books" have about book lovers being lazy because they read so much. She also reinforces my belief that we don't always have to read books considered "literature", but that there is a purpose in reading for pleasure's sake alone. There are many purposes for reading and times for different kinds of books.

