



Why Read?

Sven Birkerts on the essential link between literacy and the imagination

THOUGH IT HAPPENED MORE THAN 50 YEARS AGO, I KEEP THE SENSATION OF THAT moment. It's every bit as vivid as the memory of pedaling my bike down the sidewalk and suddenly realizing I was alone, that my father was no longer there steady and guiding me. Or the feeling of counting backward under ether, "ten..., nine...."

I was in first grade, I know that, in Miss Carnahan's class, though I don't think I was in school when it happened. Most of the specifics of the event have fallen away. There's really just this high-magnification, slow-motion rendition, a single moment zoomed in on, and, all these years later, made mythological. I'm sitting somewhere with Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* in my lap, and it happens. Happens after who knows how many times of it *not* happening. Something has changed between the last time I looked at the book and now, a kind of ripening or opening out. That's how it feels. The look of letters turns into words with sounds. I feel my eyes and ears come together as I move, slowly, wobblingly, and the sense suddenly comes. In big rough jerks, but then faster, so that in a sentence or two I've moved from not riding to riding: *It was seven o'clock of a very warm evening...* I romanticize, I compress, I dramatize—I'm sure I do. But that's how it lives in me, the moment that changed my life forever, by breaking me out of what had been just my thoughts, my imagination, and opening the door on thoughts and imaginings that were, and remain, past counting. I had learned to read.

Learned to read: I had learned that *I* could do it. This was something very different than hearing stories from my mother at bedtime or from Miss Carnahan when we made a circle. This was suddenly power and control, and I knew, maybe for the first time, that I had something that couldn't be undone or taken away. It was as if I had all at once, in the space of a long breath, doubled what I was. I could read.

And I read. Not heroically or precociously. But once I started, I never stopped. I took out books on library day and brought them home—books about snakes, Indian chiefs, boys having adventures—and I checked off as many squares as I was allowed when the Scholastic Book Club's order forms were passed out. I could barely contain my excitement when the teacher brought in the big box and gave us our selections. A book was to me, then, as now, a token of possibility, of privacy and self-containment. My greatest joy, then, as now, was to find a place away from others, to be alone and have it happen again, the renewable miracle: to feel the world I live in start to slowly recede while at the same time another, different world builds itself more and more distinctly around me.

I say "builds itself," but what I should really say is the active: *I build*. Something in me combines with those shapes in their lines and out of that combining comes a feeling almost like life itself, a feeling that can't be gotten in any other way, not even

ILLUSTRATION BY OKSANA BADRAK

in the immediacy of the best films, and this is because I'm not an agent in the production on screen, and what I'm watching is not saturated with my own perceptions and recognitions the way that any book I read is.

This sense of agency, of awakening to a power partly outside myself, is what reading gave to me in childhood, and if I have idealized it, I hope that there is truth enough at the core. I can't speak for others' experiences, but I would like to think that there might be some shared recognition of the transformation that comes with the crossing of that threshold, the entry into an intimate symbolic system, one in which the reader feels connected as if by a root system to the awarenesses and imaginings of others.

Imaginings. That's the word I'm looking for—or else *imagination*. When I think of how childhood reading might be changing, it's this one human attribute that I worry about most. What is the impact of digital media, and the rapidly morphing culture surrounding it, on the child, on childhood, on the distinguishing feature of the child's mentality: imagination? This is why I think about reading. Because it's one of the main channels to imagination; and because it is, when practiced, a fostering practice, a safeguard.

Is the role of reading in childhood changing; is the way children read changing as well? Yes, no. Who can say? Reading happens in all kinds of ways, household to household, culture to culture. But one would have to be in a deep state of denial to pretend that enormous shifts are not taking place on various levels. We are fully immersed in an electronic system now, equipped with screened devices of every description—not just adults and teens, but children, too. Many—maybe most—come cell-phone equipped, and we all know that a cell phone is only called a phone for convenience sake—it is in fact a home for apps—for information, amusement, and social interactions, all of which, if the myriad feature articles are to be believed, now take up an even larger share of our children's discretionary time. To the point where sleep-disorders are increasingly common—so I read recently in the *Boston Globe*—because many children and teens cannot be parted from their cell phones to sleep, and will rouse themselves to give and send text messages regardless of the time.

Being thus equipped—wired—has its benefits, of course, but it also changes completely the structure of the child's attention. If childhood was once—as I believe it was—vast with undivided time, and prey on occasion to profound boredom, it is no longer. The question is only which distraction to pursue, which game, which person or people to contact. Time is subdivided as never before, and from that parsing comes surficiality. Simply: penetration of any subject, or elaboration of any thought or intuition, requires sustained attention. And sustained attention needs time.

I wouldn't worry so much, I would be more willing to tout the stimulus that comes from variety and transition, and to say that the wider net compensates for the loss of depth, if it were not that the imagination is being cut off at its source places. Imagination is a depth phenomenon, and it flourishes away from the clock face, where time is not marked up and one event isn't jostled or interrupted by another. Imagination is languorous and exploratory. It muses and mulls. It requires an atmosphere of freedom.

Imagination feeds reading, especially the reading of novels and poetry, and imagination is in turn fed by the life encoded on the page. It's an accumulative process, with cumulative benefits. Some reading is better than no reading, and more reading is better than some. The imagination is, in this sense, like a muscle. Or else, to take another metaphor, it's aerobic; it is a fitness that can be acquired, and that, once acquired, needs to be kept up.

Does it matter? What use is the imagination—as opposed to, say, the kind of mental agility, the quick-reflex thinking, that video games encourage? What is the argument we make for reading and daydreaming and cultivating inner resonances? I would say, to put it in the simplest terms, that imagination nourishes the primary self. As much as our skills and practical accomplishments bolster a sense of independent identity, imagination fills out the inner counterpart. It consolidates the "I" by making plausible the *other*. Imagination enables empathy, and imagination exercised through reading, through the work of inhabiting the language and sensibility of created characters—and of course the author herself—pushes continually against the solipsism fed to us by a marketing industry selling consumption as the index of our worth.

The reading imagination further opens onto history, the understanding that every culture is deeply layered and does not become relevant only with the latest app. Understanding the lives of others as embedded in time and place, however remote or recent, reinforces that awareness of our own situation. We aren't privileged beings suspended in the bubble of the now, and our experience is not unique. Even as it expands our mental and psychological and moral reach, reading also chastens.

This quality of attention can't be acquired on the run, and though it's available to anyone who would seek it, the conditions are far more propitious when we are young. Distraction presses, of course—ever more—but we are not yet hung about with responsibilities. What Wordsworth called the "shades of the prison-house" have not yet closed around us; there's still time available for letting the mind go investigating. But this investigation asks for the whole mind, the undivided infatuation. This does not *require* reading—simple curiosity will serve—but reading is its most natural employment. For reading enlists the concentration as well as the focus. It takes one kind of time, but it then repays us with another. Which is the time of the inside life, which we so easily forget is the axis on which everything else turns.

Sven Birkerts is the author of many books of essays and criticism, including The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age, Reading Life: Books for the Ages, and most recently The Other Walk: Essays.

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