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# On reading

Some of my new friends – especially young ones – who visit me at home for the first time pose interesting questions about the modest collection of books that I have in my study spanning a couple of rooms. Questions begin with: Have you read all the books in your collection? How many books have you read?

Then they move on to more specific questions such as: Do you read books from cover to cover? When do you read? How much do you read daily? How fast do you read? Why do you read? And the most recurrent question about how much I remember from what I read. Since I find these questions interesting, I am trying to respond to some of them in this column as it may benefit our students and youth alike who are interested in reading but find it challenging.

When you see somebody’s large collection of books, it is not a good idea to ask that person if he or she has read all the books in the collection. If they are interested in books, you can fairly assume that they must have read most – if not all – the books they have collected. If a booklover buys a book, it is not necessary to read that book immediately. Sometimes there are other unfinished books that take precedence, and a newly bought book may end up lying in the collection for quite some time before being picked again.

This question may be offending to some booklovers as it indirectly raises doubts about the ability or willingness of that person to read books. In a way this question conveys the idea that ‘yeah, you may have collected these books, but I know you can’t read that much’. It may be outright humiliating and insulting to the booklover. When you ask, ‘Have you read all the books in your collection?’ you apparently expect to derive a certain pleasure by exposing the booklover to be a hoax or a showoff. If the answer is, ‘Yes I have’, you raise your eyebrows and nod in astonishment to show your hidden disbelief.

When the answer is an anticipated negative: ‘No, I haven’t’, again the visitor is happy as if saying ‘I knew it’. So, my first suggestion is that you refrain from asking such a question. How much that person has read will be clear when they speak or write. You need to see how erudite they are, or are not, by their speech or writing, not by asking how much they have read. Nobody can feign erudition for long. If they are fake, you will get to know it, without asking that question.

Then, it also depends on what kind of books they are reading, what kind of epistemology (idea of knowledge) they follow. If somebody has collected and read hundreds of books based on faulty epistemology, the collection of knowledge may not be of much use. Many so-called scholars have read hundreds of books based on sectarian epistemology, or promoting self-righteousness, and even hate speech. So, even if they have read all the books in their collection, will it impress you? I will hardly be convinced of any such person’s erudition irrespective of the number of books they boast about.

In any good collection, there are plenty of books that are for reference purposes: most of the books on history and international relations that I have in my collection, I refer to time and again. It is not necessary to read them from cover to cover in one go. In many of these books, I have read selected chapters multiple times, but others I have just skimmed and scanned. Some plays of Shakespeare you can read once, and others you enjoy going back to as a habit, just to savour the language of the Bard.

‘War and Peace’ by Tolstoy you force yourself to read once, and then you get back to some selected chapters just for the sheer brilliance of his narration. Qurratulain Hyder you can read in a trance and may never get out of it. Be it ‘Aag ka Darya’ or ‘Aakhir-e-Shab ke Humsafar’ or ‘Sita Haran’, you keep reading her and never get tired. The same applies to one of the best columnists, novelists, and story writers in Urdu, Zaheda Hina. Nearly all her books are worth reading multiple times with equal interest.

Regarding how many books one can possibly read, the calculation is not hard. If you make a habit of reading 100 pages a day, you can finish a 300-page book in three days, and two such books in a week. Even if you manage to read just one book per week, there are 52 books to read in a year. If you don’t read for two weeks for festivals and holidays, there are still 50 weeks in a year for 50 books to read. In ten years, you can read at least 500 books and in 40 years of reading you can manage at least 2,000 books.

In any discipline if you target the 100 best books to read, that task can be accomplished in just two years – provided you are a booklover and consistent in your reading. So, if you meet somebody who is proficient in multiple fields such as education, history, IR, literature, philosophy, political science, and even religion, don’t be surprised and shocked. Perhaps, they have utilized their time in a better way than others.

And this brings us to the next question, ‘when do you read?’ Booklovers read most of the time, unless they are doing something more pleasurable, or absolutely unavoidable. Booklovers have learnt to keep something to read in most cases. If they are going to a place where they are likely to wait, sitting in a lounge, or travelling, they will carry something to read. That is the key. So, don’t ask when one reads, or finds the time to read. Everybody has 24 hours, no one can claim to have 25 or 26 hours in a day. One has to manage within that time, and also fulfill other responsibilities such as earning a living, doing domestic chores, dealing with all the stupidities one invariably encounters in life, managing relationships, raising children, and of course sulking.

The speed of reading depends on the nature and purpose of the text you are reading. Some pages you just browse through, others you immerse yourself in. There is no universal formula of speedreading that can work wonders, as some books on speedreading claim. You have to fine tune yourself to fluctuations at your own pace. Sometimes you rush, and at others you linger; you may enjoy the foreplay in the opening pages of a novel, and you may also manage a quick short story.

How a person reads, horizontally or vertically, is a matter of choice and preferred posture. I prefer to read while standing or walking around in a room, as sedentary reading for long hours may cause health issues. But there is no harm in reading while you recline in your bed before sleep. Just don’t stay in one posture for long; keep shifting sides and don’t press hard against your elbow or arm or leg.

Finally, how do you remember what you read? One way to retain what you read is through revision. I find it useful to reread or jot down point about what I want to retain, it helps me, try it – and let me know.

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