

LITERATURE *and* GOOD BOOKS

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COMMERCE II

WHY DO PEOPLE READ BOOKS?

Why do libraries teem with volumes which thousands and thousands of people annually take home to read? Why do schools and colleges offer courses in the study of the masters of literature? Why do publishers vie with one another in issuing new books year after year? The answer lies in the heart and mind of man. We go to the printed page for amusement and pleasure in our leisure hours, for answers to perplexing problems, for solace to the spirit. Music, art, the theater make their contributions to the quest for uplift and enlightenment, but books still remain our chief heritage, the main support of our intellectual and spiritual life. A man who goes through life without the wide and deep culture which reading affords leaves it poorer than when he entered it.

No two persons are alike. Some prefer one type of literature, some another; and even in the same type, choices vary. One reader likes the fiction of romance and adventure; another is enthusiastic about history or biography; another finds greatest enjoyment and satisfaction in poetry. However, all of us love good stories. From the days when primitive man thrilled over some warrior's account of his prowess in battle to present-day gatherings in which the latest books are discussed, we see an eagerness to be carried away by the power of the word to other lands, other scenes, and an insatiable curiosity to know what man has thought, felt, and experienced in other times, in other lands. If we are seeking for information, we

will turn to books which give us true accounts of actual happenings. And other books can offer us a medium of escape into a land of beauty and heights of living which we are ever searching for out of the humdrum of daily existence. Then, too, apart from the subject matter, there is the enjoyment of the craftsmanship employed by the masters of style. A well chosen word, an expressive figure of speech, the rhythm of well-turned sentences, and the steady flow of paragraphs, loaded with stimulating ideas and charged with an emotional force that keeps one spellbound — these are some of the rewards of well selected reading. Most of all, literature recreates for each of us our best selves. Through the reading of books we find self-expression.

However, there is good literature and bad literature. How can one choose? In a vague way we all know that some books are uninteresting, unimportant, and even objectionable. Our personal taste and interest are a guide. We know, also, that certain books are regarded to be of permanent value by the critics, and are spoken of as classics. However, the word "Classics" should not be applied to all the books of the past written by geniuses and stored in libraries. Though many of them have eternal freshness and vie in sales with modern "best sellers". The plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Dickens, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the poetry of Tennyson, the prose of Carlyle and Macaulay — these works, and many others, are of present and

permanent reading value. It is their continued aliveness and fascination which make them classics. By the same token, any work of a modern author which has delved into the very heart of life and the soul of man, and has helped man understand something of the puzzle of life, as it pertains to his problems, reserves the name classic. Such books — new or old — will always be in demand. Emerson once said that one should wait a year before reading a new book to see if it still merited the approval which first readers gave it. That approval is likely to come if the author conveys a real understanding of life, brought forth from a thoughtful mind and soul, and out of rich human experiences.

There is another standard by which we may measure the permanent quality of a book, and that is, its style. Many writers may have something of value to say, but are cramped by an inexpressive style. On the other hand, some writers may be fluent, clear and even interesting, but have nothing of value to say.

A good book must therefore show artistry — expressive use of words, fluency, clarity and power, and must be able to sustain interest.

Even keeping the above criteria in mind, the choice of reading material rests with the individual. We each have our own tastes and needs, our own standards. We will gain much by knowing what books are generally admired, yet we will always find that we have our own preferences. ‡