

Jacobs, Alan. *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 162 pp. ISBN: 9780199747498. \$19.95 Softcover.

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If I could snap my fingers and make it happen, I would create a mandatory seminar for all graduating college seniors. It would be called “How to Stop Being a College Student,” and the first lesson would be on how to read books that are not *required reading*. And in what might seem an ironic move, I would make Alan Jacobs’ new book, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*, required. Jacob’s focus is indeed the pleasure that can come from reading. An English professor at Wheaton College, Jacobs masterfully rekindles the love of reading that is typically bludgeoned out of many a college student no matter what the major, though I’d like to suspect that English majors are bludgeoned like no other.

In a recent *Codex* book review, Tony Fonseca described a reference work on women authors as “suspiciously thin.” Jacobs’ prose clocks in at a mere 150 pages—and presents the opposite situation; it is deceptively thin. Anyone expecting a “how to” book for people who set themselves the daunting task of reading the whole of *The Great Works of Western Civilization* will be disappointed. There are many such guides already on the market, and Jacobs takes more than a few shots at these regimented approaches to reading, or, as he refers to this mindset, “The Plan.” A steady diet of nothing but the canonical works of Literature is enough to sap the joy and energy out of anyone, and, truth be told, there is no shame whatsoever in not becoming the next Harold Bloom.

Rather, it is a tone of liberation, not a sense of obligation, which Jacobs strives to nurture throughout the course of the book. In that light, this might be best described as a “how to *want* to” book for people who used to enjoy reading in their youth but have discovered over the years that their desire to read—and their attentiveness while reading—just isn’t as sharp as it used to be.

The basis of Jacobs’ discussion is what he calls “reading at whim” and “reading at Whim” (41). The first use of “whim” refers, at best, to reading as the urge strikes and as time permits. At worst, “reading at whim” means reading under duress—reading because one is being made to do so. Capitalized, “Whim” refers to self-knowledge. Knowing what one enjoys or what one might enjoy allows a sense of direction, focus, and discovery that the first instance does not afford. In its capitalized state, “Whim” does not necessarily translate into the reading of canonical Literature, though that is certainly possible. Rather “Whim” also embraces the reading of popular fiction (cleansing the literary palate, so to speak) as well as works for which the reader has no formal training and might otherwise feel are off-limits. Put another way, “Whim” frees people from what might be considered the reversed (I’m too much the gentleman and will therefore refrain from saying “bass-ackward”) quality inherent in much of what passes for modern education, subtle as it is: that you have to *already* be an acknowledged expert before you can read, let alone enjoy reading, about any topic or field of study. Jacobs fleshes out these ideas through the course of the book and offers practical advice on how people can recapture both the ability, if not the joy, of reading like a college student.

The use of the word “practical” is key. Toward the conclusion of his discussion, uncharacteristic of proponents of “The Plan,” Jacobs readily acknowledges what any

student knows all too well: the world is full of distractions, electronic and otherwise. This, unfortunately, is not just a fact of life but a fact of History. Lest anyone think that things would be better if only the world could regain a literary “status quo ante-Internet,” Jacobs offers a brief history lesson on how challenging the act of reading can be. Before Youtube and Facebook, television offered children and adults tantalizing distractions from reading. Before and during World War II, radio was the culprit. Prior to the twentieth century, medieval abbots had to keep monks attentive to the task of copying manuscripts. The fact that an English professor is willing to compliment his readers’ intelligence in such a way and discuss the bane of many a teacher is enough to recommend this book.

That said, with an eye to criticism, one of Jacobs’ great strengths is the reader-friendly tone of voice he adopts. At no point does the reader get the sense, as is painfully obvious in most books stemming from a major university press, that this is a man on the hunt for tenure. However, the book is not without its drawbacks. Chief among them is the absence of an index. In order to find something at a later time, the reader will have to make careful notes while reading the book, or else quickly skim the text. Additionally, there are, per se, no chapters and no footnotes. Jacobs advances his ideas through headings that summarize his key points. Instead of footnotes, there are numerous “footer” sidebars sprinkled throughout the text, marked by an asterisk. On the whole, though, these are minor weaknesses. For teachers, librarians, and administrators, whether they are retired or active (and frankly, the more burnt-out, the better), the clarion call is loud and clear: You’re not in college anymore. You’re not writing a term paper or taking a test or trying to maintain a grade point average. You’re past all that. Read whatever you want to

read. Read whatever gives you joy and pleasure, but do so intelligently. If you think you have the moxie to give *Moby-Dick* or *War and Peace* a shot, go ahead, but do try to appreciate what you're potentially committing yourself to before cracking open the cover. For that matter, if you find you can't finish a book you've started and you want to try reading something else, that's fine too, but never let that discourage you from searching out those books that give you pleasure. And above all, always keep searching.