

Why Read?
by
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We Americans don't read much. On average we read about five books a year. A pretty sad state of affairs. And as a writer, this lack of interest in reading does trouble me more than most. So why read when there are TV shows, movies, video games, and all sorts of ways to noodle around on the computer? Because reading offers a way of seeing and understanding the world that no other medium can offer?

I'm going to suggest just three ways reading does what it can do better than any of those other things. First (and this seems pretty simple, so pay attention), a reader can stop reading any time she wants to. Maybe I should have indicated we're not talking about just plain reading, the kind of reading you probably do when you skim the newspaper, but thoughtful reading, reading we can assume will ask something of you that requires you stop reading and simply think about what you've just read.

TV, movies, don't do that. They can't do that. They thunder along, and you hang on. I'll admit I hear TV is better than it used to be. I don't own a TV, have been TV-less since 1976. I don't have a TV because if I did I would watch it even though I know I would be wasting my time. I don't have a TV for the same reason alcoholics don't keep booze around the house. But my objection to TV and movies remains the same. They run you, you don't run them.

I may have missed something interesting on TV in the last 39 years, and probably I should be sorry. But I make things—ideas, worlds—out of words, and I believe in the power of images made of words to work their wonders—to be more powerful than the pre-made, pre-imagined images readers might get from other media.

So when words bring you to a pause, after you have weighed thoughtfully all that has been offered you, you can begin again. Or not. The Greeks had a word for this next idea: Analepsis. In its most literal sense, analepsis is flashback, when the on-going narrative is interrupted for the inclusion of a previous event. But there's a kind of do-it-yourself analepsis available to readers, too. A reader stops, considers, and in order to get at the writer's intent fully, goes back into the story and rereads or reconsider earlier actions.

One of my favorite novels to read in light of type two analepsis is Manuel Puig's [Kiss of the Spiderwoman](#). There's a pretty good movie based on this book, I admit that, but it has that movie liability of all forward momentum, so that the only chance for an audience to reflect would be to shout at the projectionist to stop the film.

Why would this matter? Because of the two characters sharing a prison cell in [Kiss of the Spiderwoman](#), one is a stoolie. We learn this fact roughly two-thirds of the way through the novel. He's been telling everything he hears from his cellmate to the warden. Suddenly, every conversation between the two men must be

reevaluated, judged anew. Full stop, readers. Think for a while. Maybe lots of rereading of scenes. And once this bond of trust has been broken (not just between characters, but between a character and the reader), it can't be remade. A thoughtful reader begins to consider that perhaps both men might be manipulating the other.

Here's another element of the written story: A narrator. That figure whether a third person or first person narrator is running our story. He or she may be reliable or not so much. He may be helpful at critical junctures by explaining things more fully, or he may absent himself completely for a time and leave us to our own devices. Sometimes movies do come with voiceover (though one of my old professors pronounced any movie with voiceover a failure in the execution of its plot). But no movie yet has provided a narrator as fully present and important as the narrator in any Jane Austen novel, as befuddled as the narrator in Samuel Beckett's Molloy. Such narrators are not mere membrane the reader passes through, they are the forming sensibility of all we read. And they require that we factor their attitudes and prejudices into every event we encounter.

Which brings me back to Kiss of the Spiderwoman one last time. It has no narrator; it's a novel written entirely in dialogue. Well, not entirely in dialogue because Puig begins to interrupt the story with a series of footnotes. Sometimes the footnotes, written in starchy academic prose, begin to take over the page, limiting the narrative to just a couple of lines at the top. What is a reader to do? Well, one thing is to do something that can only be done on the page: read the competing words side-by-side, one section after another, or read one all the way through and come back and pick up the other. Or, as one of my students suggested, just skip those silly footnotes. I'm sure Puig considered that last would be an option, too.

So why read? Is there any other way to get at the complexity of the world we live in, of the lives we lead? I can't think of one, but then again, I am prejudiced. Pick up a book that honors your intelligence and read it with care, then pick up a bunch more. Writers will thank you. And you'll find yourself thanking yourself, too.