

ON READING HISTORY BOOKS

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Q: Do you think the explicit nature of today's movies stifles the imagination of the audience?

A: I think the nature of film does that. When you think about radio -- you sat there and listened and imagined. But radio can't compare to a book. And television can't compare to radio. Each one of them takes you further and further away from the muscle that imagines. But that's where we are now. Most people are not going to pick up a book.

Jill Nelson, interview with Denzel Washington on the film "Malcolm X," in USA Weekend, 27-29 nov 1992

"Those of us who are print people -- writers and readers --are losing ground to the visual people -- producers and viewers. The younger generation gets its information and infotainment from television and movies. Less information. More infotainment. The franchise over reality is passing hands."

Ellen Goodman, commenting on the film "JFK" in SC Sentinel, 3 jan 1992

"Infotainment" is a big part of everybody's life today, even if we are deeply committed to learning by reading, have "killed our TVs," have no VCR and can seldom afford to go to the movies. It is probably even sufficient for some purposes -- say, for following the Lakers or the 49ers, being aware of current developments in rock music, or keeping up on the public discourse of politicians. But as a way of learning about this world and how one is supposed to fit into it, infotainment has some very serious drawbacks. It is therefore a good idea for college students, who sometimes miss the familiar old infotainment as you sit here struggling valiantly to read enormous numbers of books in the search for information, to be very clear about what these drawbacks are. Infotainment is indeed compelling, but the problem is that it flashes across your mind too quickly to be thought about carefully; and the result is that it leaves you with vivid impressions and sometimes even opinions which are not the work of your own mind, but of the skilled media specialists who have produced the infotainment. Information, on the other hand, enters your mind more slowly -- especially when you read, pause to think about what you are reading, and take the time to discuss your reading with others.

Writers, of course, try as hard as media specialists do to influence the way you are going to understand what you read; but as readers (as distinct from viewers) we have the time to process what we are getting, to apply our own critical intelligence to it, to compare different

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versions, to see how it squares with our own prior experience, and to fight our way towards some semblance of an understanding of the subject at hand. This process is always challenging and it is sometimes exhausting; but it is also empowering. Over the long run it helps make us into independent-minded people who can defend ourselves against disinformation (or disinfotainment!), and who will over the long haul be able to exercise our responsibilities as adult citizens of a democracy. The infotainment process is seductive and sometimes succeeds in distracting us for a while from boredom or anxiety; but it is also debilitating to the mind. It helps make us into herdable sheep. A good example of what it is able to do with us is our national experience of the 1991 war in the Persian Gulf, when real information about Iraq and Kuwait played almost no part at all in the American public's awareness of the massive intervention our soldiers were undertaking in the histories of those countries, and critical thinking about what was going on was almost impossible.

Serious students of history have made a personal decision for information as against infotainment (though all of us dearly love to watch a well-made film or TV special about a historical subject, and sometimes we even learn a little bit of history from doing so!). This is true, because almost everything about past human experience that is so far knowable is accessible only by going to the library, armed with patience, and reading about it in a books and journal articles. You can learn a little about history from media images; and you can learn a little bit more from professors' lectures, assuming that they are more or less well put together. (Always remembering as you do this that most professors think more like writers than like media specialists when we prepare to give lectures, even though most students in lecture-halls are probably feeling more like TV viewers than like readers while you sit there and listen to what we have to say!). But if you want to really learn something about history, and make past human experience a part of your own experience, you are going to have to put a lot of time into reading -- and hopefully also into talking with other people about what you have read. So it is worth while for history students to stop and think a bit about just what history books are and what they are not, what they are good for, and how one goes about reading them effectively.

History books for our present purposes are books of any kind about past human experience, which is to say most books that have ever been written, including books that are called history and a great many novels and works in the social sciences as well. The purpose of reading history books is to broaden your familiarity with human experience, and by so doing to get a handle on some information and ideas which can be of use to you -- in your life, in your work, in your relationships with other people and in your own public participation or politics. Well-educated and thoughtful people are generally those who have read a lot of history books of one kind or another, and who have also learned a lot from the reading done by the other people -- the people with whom we talk about what they have been learning.

It is a good idea to read history books when you are wide awake, and when you are full of an awareness that knowledge about any phase of human experience lived anywhere, and in any period of history, is "relevant" to your own process of learning how to live here and now. What this means is that no matter how far away in time and space the experiences that history books describe may be from your own, they are every bit as much a part of the whole

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of human experience as that of the late 20th-century Californians is, and just as likely to be of interest and to contain useful ideas and information.

Some history books explore a relatively narrow range of human experiences (such as the public or private lives of powerful men, or the conduct of wars by generals, or the profit-seeking endeavors of a business firm, or the history of a single idea or country or event). Some paint their pictures of human experience with such broad brushes, with so much analysis and so little story, that it is hard to make any sense of them, or to find any information or ideas in them that are specific or revealing enough to remember. Some have a hard time distinguishing between the truly significant and the trivial. Some history books, unfortunately, are so boringly written that it is hard to stay awake in them or to take them seriously at all.

A few of them, of course, are real treasure-troves. They talk in detail about important matters affecting lots of people; and they do it so well that they even when they are "factual" they are as fun to read as novels, and seem like an education all in themselves. History books are very different from one another. There are a great many of them in the library, more than anybody could ever hope to read; and it is tempting for the uncommitted reader (especially one who has been bored to tears by history classes before) to pay no attention at all to any of them.

But the truth is that practically every history book has some useful information and ideas in it, material that you can use for your own purposes if you are persistent, and if you are skilled enough to get at it without wasting time. This is true even when what they have to offer is no more than things you disagree with strongly enough to remember. It is as true of history books as it is of the hundreds of individual people you have met along your own way through life -- from each of whom you have learned something (and from some of whom a whole lot), if you have taken the time to observe these people closely, and to ask them questions and listen to the answers.

Nobody can remember all or even most of the information that is presented in any history book. What you are able to get from any book today is very different from what you would have gotten from the same book a year ago, or will get from it if you go back to it a year from now. So the question is not how you can read the whole book word for word and be "responsible" for everything in it this quarter, but how you can get from it quickly what you are able to make use of now -- and then how to hold on to a clear enough picture of the book, so that you'll know how and where to find it when you have occasion to use it again later on. It is a good idea to keep track of all the books you have read or attempted to read (if not on a personal library shelf, then in a bibliographical card or computer file with authors' names, complete titles, library call numbers and main contents clearly indicated), so as to be able to go and find them again when you need them.

Some history books have so much in them for your own present purposes at the moment when you first read them, that you want nothing more than to be able to linger over them for a long time (usually a longer time than is available right then). You can immediately see the value of those books, really savor the reading of them, and learn a lot from them right away. Most

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of the books you attempt to read do not of course "grab" you that way the first time you put your hands on them, though the same books might very well do that for you on another occasion later on.

A serious student of history has, however, to read both of these kinds of book. So to do well in your studies in this field, and to avoid wasting time as you study, you need to develop the skill of working through both wonderful and ordinary books in a disciplined and concentrated way -- so as to find out efficiently what you can use from them right now, and also get a sense of what they have to offer to readers in general -- before putting them behind you and getting on to something else. Most students are unfortunately not very good at this. Most waste a lot of time with their books, reading but not engaging them (not to mention wasting a lot of time simply avoiding them!); and the result is that most students feel altogether alienated by their relationship with most of the books they are expected to read, and can't remember much about them once they have put them down. There is no need for it to be this way.

Nobody (not even a good teacher or a friend) can know, of course, whether a particular history book is going to be a powerful experience for you at this or any other moment in your life, or is going to be a tiresome chore. Nobody else can tell just what information and ideas in a given book are going to seem useful to you right now. When professors select books for reading in history courses, we choose books that in our practiced judgement have a lot of potential for broadening students' familiarity with particular phases of human experience, because we hope that these books will be exceptionally useful to you, and because the books in question are commercially available in paperback at the moment when we are drawing up the syllabus! Then we talk the books up in an effort to encourage you to read them with interest; we try to design discussion sections in which you can put what you have learned from them into action; and we may prod you to read by brandishing the threat of a final exam to be taken a few weeks hence. But that is about all professors can do.

It is up to you to make as much use of each of the good books you are being encouraged to read as you can at the present time. It is up to you to devise ways of retaining now and being able to make use later on of what you have read; and it is also up to you to take advantage of the course you are taking presently (and of the library, and your professor's knowledge of the field), to find out as much as you can about this course's particular subject, and make note of other potentially useful reading on that subject to which you can return when you have the time and inclination for it later on. This course will last for ten weeks; your hastily completed work for it will soon be evaluated for posterity. But you and the subject matter will endure together, long after the course is all but forgotten. That is a relationship that should be taken more seriously than the helter-skelter taking of most courses by most students allows.

When reading history books, it is a good idea to keep track of the really useful information and ideas you encounter as you go along. Nobody can remember these, or make use of them later, without consciously making accurate notes someplace (even if it's in a computer-like mind attached to a photographic memory) -- and then taking those notes out soon after you've made them, to see that you've gotten them straight and to begin thinking about what can be done with the ideas and information that seemed at first glance to be important to you. This

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means to practice making use of your notes in discussions with your fellow students and friends, to use them in writing about one thing or another, or to work with them alone in your personal reflections. There is no point at all in writing down notes about anything which is not positively interesting to you; and on the other hand it is a mistake and a waste to read things that are of real interest without making brief notes that will help you remember. In order to get in the habit of doing this, rather than simply stashing away unintelligible notes like a pack rat, you've got to read with a purpose; you've got to make brief notes as you go; and then you've got to take a little time when you've finished reading, to begin to "digest" what you have read and to write down the additional and connecting thoughts the notes now provoke in you.

Rather than trying to take a "complete set of notes" on what you read, try something like this. Work your way all the way through each book you are attempting to read as quickly as is appropriate to the amount of time you have available for the task (so as not to get bogged down and fogged over, and so as to finish in the time allotted). Make sure that you get all the way through it, however quickly this means you have to read or skim. Do this as alertly as you can, with a hawk's eye for the useful bit of information and the interesting idea. When you see something that seems like you might like to know it and be able to make use of it later on, pounce upon it and write it down in as few words as possible -- using your own words rather than in the author's (except in the very rare event that the information is itself a new bit of language that you think you can use because it is exceptionally apt or beautiful, in which case copy the brief passage verbatim, with a clear indication of where you got it and from whom).

Then, after you finish reading and before putting your papers away, take out the notes you have made and see if you understand them. Go back to the book to check anything that seems like it will be confusing later on, and while doing this allow yourself to write down the odd additional thought and to begin salting the new ideas and bits of information away in your head as well as in your notebook. Once that process is begun, you'll find that you are well on the way to learning what you are able to learn from that reading; and you will be looking for opportunities to try it out on friends, or in papers for this course or others, or in your own doodles and daydreams. You'll have all you will need in order to participate actively with the new information and ideas in any discussion that comes along. That way the process of your reading and learning will get to be more cumulative than it otherwise is, with one experience building upon another.

Even when you have only a very limited amount of time available for this project of Purposeful Reading, and are reduced to merely skimming the week's assignment (always a depressing situation to be in, a reminder of one's bad planning and inadequacies that anybody can do without!), you can make the process of learning a systematic and cumulative one. To do this you need to be especially alert and be sure to look, however quickly, at every page in the assignment. You need to take the time to read the subject headings and lead sentences and the occasional especially interesting paragraph, and to pay special attention to any conclusions the author is drawing. And here too you need to write down your general impressions of what is being said, however summarily, and check back to see that they make some kind of sense.

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The drawback to this super-efficient way of reading a book (the kind of thing people learned to do in the "speed reading" courses that were fashionable a few years ago) is of course that the author's conclusions represent the author's sense of the main information and ideas that are to be found in the book you are reading -- whereas that sense is likely to be very different from your own. The author has her own agenda, and her own blinders and hangups and principles for selecting what she thinks is worth writing about. She may even be running a trip on you! In order to defend yourself against that, and find what there is in the book that you can use for your own purposes -- in order, in other words, to be empowered and not enslaved by the process of reading any author's book, you have to take a little more time and do the work of ferreting out for yourself what are for you the really useful information and ideas. Often these are things that are only mentioned in passing, or in footnotes, and they may well not be the things that the author intended for you to focus on at all.

With these notions in mind, and with a bit of discipline about scheduling some "alert time" for your reading assignments, you should be able to do all the required reading for this course, and do it like a person who has a greater purpose than merely getting a good evaluation. You should be able to gather a lot of information to supplement the infotainment with which you have probably been swamped during most of your life up until quite recently. You should be able to be a lively participant in discussions, and you should have some fun learning history while you are at it. Most important, you should be able to make use of your reading-time to take charge of your own education, and to become at least vaguely familiar with a whole lot of human experience while you are still going to school. To do this is to make the best possible preparation for your own effective participation in society. Which, if you think about it, is the only really persuasive reason anybody has come up with yet for anybody's doing the hundreds of hours of sometimes lonely and exhausting work that students do, instead of partying or playing or staying stoned all the time!