

# Interview with Alan Jacobs on The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction

**PLT: What's the premise of the book? Can you give us a brief overview?**

**AJ:** I meet and talk to and hear from many readers: I regularly get emails and letters from readers of my previous books, and those readers seem to cover a remarkably broad spectrum of education and experience. These are usually limited sorts of conversations, of course, but when I get to talk more fully with readers I discover that for all their enthusiasm they often lack confidence: they wonder whether they are reading well, with focus and attentiveness, with discretion and discernment.

This uncertainty spans the generations but comes in different flavors. I find myself particularly intrigued by younger people who have heard their cohort called “The Dumbest Generation,” who are continually told that their addiction to multiple simultaneous stimuli renders them incapable of the seriously focused and single-minded attention that the reading of big thick books requires. Some of them are defiant in response to such charges, but most at least half-believe them. Told over and over again that they can't read, they begin to wonder why they should even try. It's not just teenagers and twentysomethings who sound such a note; I have heard talk like this from people up to forty and in a few cases older. Many of them say that they used to be able to read but, since becoming habituated to online reading and the short bursts of attention it encourages—or demands—simply can't sit down with a book anymore. They fidget; they check their iPhones for email and Twitter updates. And this discourages them. I wrote my book in order to try to convince such people that they needn't be so discouraged, that the habit of reading, the love of reading, is something that even in our distracted age can be cultivated and nourished.

**PLT: How did you arrive on the concept of reading as lived theology?**

**AJ:** Reading is a profoundly ethical activity, one in which we are deeply engaged with other persons to whom we are accountable. They might be real persons—the author, other readers, or, if we are teachers, our students—or virtual persons—characters in novels—but we should consider what it means to treat them all charitably. In fact, about a decade ago I wrote a book on just this subject: it's called *A Theology of Reading: the Hermeneutics of Love*. In that book the theology was explicit and direct; the challenge of this book I've just written—which is for a general, not a specifically Christian or religious audience—was to use my theological convictions, to draw on them as consistently as possible, without making them explicit. It's possible, I hope, to embody a charity that's founded in the practices of the Christian life even

on those occasions when it's probably not appropriate to proclaim it. To every thing there is a season.

**PLT: How did your participation in the Virginia Seminar help shape your ideas for this book?**

**AJ:** In many and vitally important ways. Charles Marsh has never done me a greater favor (and he has done me several) than to invite me to participate in ongoing conversation with this group of people. Without exception, they have been wise counselors, challenging me when I needed to be challenged and encouraging me when I needed to be encouraged. In ways that none of us will ever be able specify completely, they made me a better reader, a better writer, and, I hope, a better person. I am immensely grateful to them all.

**PLT: How do you understand the relation between reading well and acting compassionately for and with others, including the poor and oppressed?**

**AJ:** My earlier answers may give some hint of this. I didn't take up this question explicitly in my book, because, as I indicate in the sample chapter, I don't like it when people make reading seem like an onerous duty. It ought to be presented as a pure joy. And I think that when people just enjoy their reading in peace, that's enough of a reason to do it. But it's also true that attentive and charitable reading is an exercise in, or a kind of preparation for, attentiveness and charity towards others that we meet outside the world of reading.

One brief example: many years ago I spent a summer teaching in Nigeria, never having been to Africa before, and I can scarcely express how much my understanding of my students was enriched by the reading in African literature I had done in the preceding years. There was a pretty direct translation between the cultural and psychological sensitivities I had picked up through reading the best African writers and responding to the actual people I needed to address in the classroom. That's a testimony to literary reading in particular, but it's not just literature that does this for us. But we have to have ears to hear.

**PLT: Do you see reading as a component of the discipline or practice of a writer?**

**AJ:** Yes: a necessary one. I don't suppose anyone has ever written well without reading well — and, conversely, anyone who tries seriously to write will find his or her reading sharpened as a consequence. I remember reading, a few years ago, the wonderful memoir *The Florist's Daughter* by my fellow seminar participant Patricia Hampl and thinking, "How does she write such glorious sentences? One after another, all so beautifully formed!" But I was so impressed because I have spent so much time trying to make my own sentences, and noticing that while I can be proud of some of them it's awfully hard to make each of them all that it should be. The longer I live as a reader and writer, the more the two tasks intertwine for me. I think my sentences are at least a little better for having read Patricia's, and I have learned from her also about subtle ways of organizing discursive prose. Of course, this intertwining isn't always a good thing: when I read the remarkable narratives of another of my seminar colleagues, Carlos Eire, I find myself wanting to write like Carlos! — but trust me, Carlos's style as filtered through

Alan Jacobs's sensibility . . . it ain't pretty.

**PLT: Your chapter excerpt rails against a pretentious idea of reading books people “should read”. How do you view this in the context of a college professor, where syllabi and required reading are an integral part of the semester?**

**AJ:** My book is for people who are reading, or trying to read, on their own. Sometimes good school experiences can actually get in the way of independent reading, because people don't always adjust well to having no syllabus. Let me quote here a wise thought I cite in my book, from Erin O'Connor, who used to teach English literature at the University of Pennsylvania: “English teachers are mediators. They are not ends in themselves. That's how it should be, anyway. They are training wheels that young readers ought to be able to shed once they acquire the skills they need to read purposefully and profitably on their own. But, too often, this backfires. Kids get turned off, and reading just becomes a chore they have to do for school. Or — and this pattern is less discussed, but still troubling — they become dependent. They may really enjoy reading — but they think they need a class, and spoonfed lectures, and guided discussions, in order to get anything out of what they read. They are willing and eager — but have learned from their teachers exactly what they should not have learned. They have become passive where they should be active, and the teacher becomes a crutch for laziness, fear, uncertainty, and sometimes even a creeping snobbery about reading, about choosing what to read, deciding how to read, and figuring out what one thinks about what one has read. These folks grow up into the kind of adults who answer questions about their favorite books by listing works they think should be their favorites — but that they may never have even actually read.” Being a mediator of literary texts has been, for me, a wonderful calling; but I think we all should realize that a key element of that calling is to help people survive and thrive as readers without mediators. So one of the things I most want to do in this book is to encourage people who are done with school to write, and then live by, their own personal Declarations of Readerly Independence.