

What is the Point of Reading Books?

Mark Dixon – January 2017

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Why take the time to read books when life is so hectic and one can get information so quickly from the internet?



Information is at our fingertips and that is fantastic in so many ways, but there is a risk of knowledge being superficial along with understanding and ability to make connections because of this speed.

I think it is becoming even more important to slow down and to make time and space to reflect, consider and re-create. I struggle to carve out time for reading books during our term time, and tend to do the reverse in the holiday time. It is, however, a struggle I want to be better at winning.

A good friend of mine reads a lot, but refuses to read fiction. His view is that life is too short and there is too much knowledge to be gained to waste time on fiction. Of course, that's his choice but I wouldn't be so limited. I think there's a place for the whole range of books out there. Histories, biographies, novels, fact or fiction.

I would like to tell you briefly about three books that I have got a lot from and why they mean something to me. This week I would like you to reflect on what books this is true of for you.

Momo – Michael Ende

The first book I want to tell you about is "Momo" by Michael Ende. It's a children's book – the author is almost certainly better known for the book "Never Ending Story" – another children's book.

I actually read the book for the first time in my late twenties. The reason it sticks out for me is because of one small but important thing it taught me, that from time to time I remember and am happier for remembering.

The book is about a world like ours but being run by a group of people called "The Men In Grey". This group are literally taking the colour out of the world and along with it the creativity, the enthusiasm and the fun out of it. The world itself is turning grey and along with it the population – the only group with colour are children, but one after another they are turning grey too.

The people become grey in this world because they get sold the ideas of efficiency and organisation. As they do this they spend less effort on distractions like relating to one another, spending time not working, spending time on hobbies or playing. As this happens colour leaves them and turns them shades of grey.

Momo, a small girl, fights against this and tries to convince people that a world running quickly and efficiently without colour is not a good place. In her fight she is helped by a tortoise called Cassiopeia.

There is one scene in the book that sticks in my mind most strongly and if I have the presence of mind to remember it, helps me greatly when I feel most rushed or busy. It is a scene towards the end of the book where Momo is being chased, systematically and with great speed, through the streets by the Grey Men. She manages to get away because Cassiopeia teaches her how to walk slowly. In this world the slower and more calmly she walks, the faster and more effectively she distances herself from the

Grey Men. It is counter-intuitive, at first, to Momo but she tries really hard, and learns the ability to walk very slowly and very calmly, and whenever she does, she can escape at speed.

I love this idea, and there are times when I'm most busy that I actually try to walk slowly to remind myself of that principal.

We need to talk about Kevin / American Pastoral

For my second book, I actually want to cheat somewhat and talk about two – “We need to talk about Kevin” by Lionel Shriver and “American Pastoral” by Philip Roth.

The German author and philosopher Franz Kafka commented that books should be like ice-picks and break open the frozen seas of emotions within us as we read them.

I did not really accept or actually appreciate this quote until I read these books several years ago, which happened to be in succession one summer holiday.

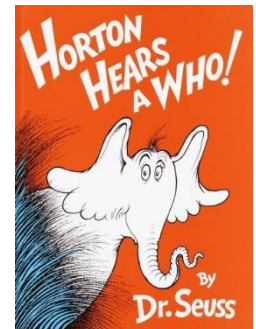
The books both contain the same theme, which is a family torn apart by grief because a child within it has committed a terrible crime. The crime itself in each case could easily be described as an evil act.

Both books, which are fiction, give accounts of the families trying to reconcile what could have led to the evil act. Were the parents or siblings responsible in some way? What could have been done to avoid such an event? How can they meaningfully move on from the event?

I found both books intensely moving and, certainly for me, Kafka's quote ran true when reading these. What they also did for me is to shift the way I think about perpetrators of crime. It clarified to me that there aren't simple answers or simple ways of looking at why people commit terrible acts or are driven to them. It also introduced to me strongly the notion that when people do commit awful acts, it is a tragedy for the perpetrators as well as for the victims.

Horton Hears A Who

The last book I want to talk about is “Horton Hears A Who” by Dr Seuss. It was absolutely my favourite book as a young child and recently I was happy to rediscover it and introduce it to my five year old. It is just a piece of nonsense that is wonderful to take time over and enjoy. I love the fact that I can spend half an hour reading its nonsense verse and get lost in the crazy place that is an elephant looking after a speck of dust that contains a complete and separate world.



Do take the time to read in 2017, and read a range of books.