EDITED BY
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WHY WE READ

70 Writers on Non-Fiction

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Seventy Writers on Non-Fiction

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Contents

Anthony Aguirre
author of *Cosmological Koans*

If we imagine a library of *all possible books*, like Borges' fabled Library of Babel, it feels at first like overwhelming plenitude: so much information! But a bit more thought leads to a profound disappointment: in fact, such a library contains no information at all.

In his world-shaping article 'A Mathematical Theory of Communication' (1948), Claude Shannon pointed to exactly why this is. A random sequence of characters contains zero information; information lies in the choosing of one sequence among all of the possibilities. Just so, Borges' library contains books, but only contains *information* if someone identifies some of the books as interesting. The information is precisely the pointing to.

We can follow this intuition further. In some pieces of text, you can imagine swapping out words or whole sentences and barely changing the overall meaning. In others, as carefully crafted as a mathematical equation, every symbol sits carefully in its place. Shannon instructs us here too: we are sensing, in this deliberation, the presence of real information.

Today, we're trying our hardest to build an internet – or even a world – of Babel. We imagine that more bits are better. More text, from more people. Images adorning text, when they add nothing, because they catch the eye; video because it attracts more viewers, who 'engage more'; dozens of news stories conveying one fact (or worse, none); academic careers judged by sheer number of papers; machine-learning language models with the facsimile of intelligence churning out almost-believable prose. We have many more bits than anyone could ever want.

We need more pointing – an information ecosystem that rewards careful selection, not quantity, of bits. One that recognizes that some well-crafted sentences about the right things are worth finding, and

elevating, and pointing to. Maybe we'll have that someday. In the meantime, we can activate that system in ourselves. The books surviving today from hundreds of years of writers have been selected by history and society. The books recommended by a trusted friend or well-curated list are special. Sentences and pages edited in a real process, paid for by their authors with years of their life to culminate in one work – these are a treasure. They are why we read.

Hilton Als

author of *White Girls*

Reading is writing's dearest companion. But I didn't become a serious reader until I was ten, by which time I had been writing for two years. That is, I became a writer – *knew* I was a writer – before I read many books. Writing, for me, was a way of expressing my private thoughts; I grew up in a large family where, it seems, everyone talked all the time. Writing was a way of getting a word in. My word. My mother and older sister were readers, so, it was inevitable that books would catch up with me, or I with them; and when I did, my world grew in ways I couldn't have imagined without them. I still feel the same way.

Abhijit Banerjee

co-author of *Good Economics for Hard Times*

Every author carefully sets up a game for us. I read to step inside the game and play: to spot the rhythms, the very special way the consonants knock into each other, to hear the echoes, internal and external, make connections and guess the ones the author wanted us to find. To follow the threads to where the author wants us to go, but to spot the red herrings before we get enmeshed with them; to listen to the music and lightness of the early words and try to guess how it will bring us to the darkness that is presaged by the title or a blurb. To spot where the rabbit gets put in the hat, where the moral dilemma starts to unfold, the exact point where there is the tiniest hint of the unlikely love that will eventually bloom. To cry when the weight becomes exactingly heavy, to smile when a play of words catches us by surprise, to laugh out loud when the anticipated contretemps ultimately arrives. Not all books manage to get me there, in part no doubt because I missed something critical, but I go into every book expecting some play. And even if the surprise does not arrive, even if the beautiful beginning descends into a shrill middle and a lame ending, even if the *Deus* has to emerge from the *machina* to help the story resolve itself, there is pleasure in wondering how it could have been different. I am a willing reader of all books as long as they come with an invitation to play and a twinkle in the author's eye.

Simon Baron-Cohen

author of *The Pattern Seekers*

Four thousand years ago, the earliest fictional story was written: the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Its twelve chapters were written on a clay tablet.

In this story, Gilgamesh, a tyrannical king, meets Enkidu, a wild man who lives with the animals. The two men fight, Gilgamesh wins, yet the two of them become friends. Together they go on an adventure in the Cedar Forest and slay monsters, but tragically Enkidu dies. Gilgamesh, suffering the pain of grief, embarks on a quest to escape death by achieving godly immortality.

Clearly, back 4,000 years ago and still today, we readers love to hear an author tell a good story about a character's thoughts and feelings. We read because we want to broaden our own experience of the world, to find out about someone else's experience, thoughts and feelings – the writer's. In short, we want to enter the mind of the author. And the author writes a book to communicate their thoughts and feelings to their readers. In short, the author wants to enter the mind of the reader.

So one reason we read is that we – both writer and reader – empathize. We just can't help it.

But another reason we read is that we – both writer and reader – systemize. A book is simply a *system* or set of rules, in this case for how particular marks (etched in a clay tablet or written on paper) refer to a particular object or idea. Humans have been inventing different systems to get ideas and information from an author's mind into a reader's mind. Today, we can think of books that are digital or bound, printed or audible. And the production of books at scale was only made possible by the invention of the printing press in 1440. Before that, for 2,000 years, books were hand-printed or copied by hand. And going back to 4,000 years ago, books took the

form of scrolls and sheets of papyrus, and, 5,000 years ago, clay tablets.

Even earlier, the precursors of the book were other systems of communication, such as cave paintings that are 40,000 years old or engravings that are 75,000 years old. These changing formats all speak to the human capacity for the invention of *systems*. Humans systemize – again, we just can't help it.

There are many other reasons for why we read. For example, we find pleasure in imagining a fictional reality, in being transported into another world, in learning from a writer by downloading their knowledge, in learning information about the world that is outside our first-hand experience, in discovering and organizing facts, in sitting with a child to entertain them with stories, or in playing with language itself.

But all of these other reasons ultimately boil down to our uniquely human abilities: to empathize or systemize.

Alison Bashford
author of *An Intimate History of Evolution*

TRAVELLING THROUGH NON-FICTION

I read non-fiction in exchange for a historian's salary, a secret that in the telling might shatter my luck. It's my job to read the same books that my historical subjects did, taking me to the foreign country that is our past, their present. Often enough, it's an unlikely pleasure. This summer, I'm reading books from the library of the classical political economist Thomas Robert Malthus. Given his dour reputation this might seem to warrant payment. But no: it's a delight. He would certainly have a view on the 'value' in my secret exchange of reading-for-money, since of course I'd also read it all for nothing.

His own books are sequestered behind heavy oak doors at the back of the Old Library of Jesus College, Cambridge: a modest gentleman's library *circa* 1800, all within an arm's reach. Adam Smith is first up. Malthus spent his entire adult life teaching fifteen-year-old man-boys at the East India Company College how to read and understand *The Wealth of Nations*. I can scribble happily away in my Penguin Classics edition, even as I carefully turn the pages of Malthus's 1776 copy. Marginalia upon marginalia. As a researcher, reading and writing is often one act.

For every economic treatise in this library there is a fiction title, and, perhaps surprisingly, far more Regency plays than novels or Romantic poetry. A lover of the theatre, the apparently stern but in fact much-liked Malthus purchased printed editions of the plays he routinely enjoyed at Covent Garden. James Boaden's '*Fontainville Forest*, a play in 5 acts', for example, founded on the *Romance of the Forest* by the gothic novelist of the 1790s Ann Radcliffe. Comedies too, like Richard Cumberland's *The Fashionable Lover*: 'Act

1, Scene 1: A hall in Lord Abberville's house, with a stair-case seen through an arch. Several domestics waiting in rich liveries. Flourish of French-horns.' Who wouldn't want to be transported to the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane? But do we still want to *read* such things? Probably not. That era has long gone.

Looking over Malthus's shelves, I suddenly see a non-fiction genre that has stuck like bookbinder's glue: travel writing. His library is overflowing with voyage and travel and expedition accounts. That reading experience is effortlessly shared between his century and ours, as familiar and popular as play scripts have become foreign and strange. Malthus sat in his chair and read Henry Bradshaw Fearon's *Sketches of America: A Narrative of a Journey of Five Thousand Miles Through the Eastern and Western States of America* (1818), much as I read Paul Theroux's *Deep South: Four Seasons on Back Roads* (2016). Malthus read Henry Fielding's *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (1755) and Henry Swinburne's *Travels in the Two Sicilies* (1790), just as I read Jordan Salama's *Every Day the River Changes: Four Weeks Down the Magdalena* (2021) and Jonathan Raban's *Coasting: A Private Voyage* (2003). Malthus even read James Cook, *Voyage Towards the South Pole, and Round the World* (1777), while I read Mark Adams's *Meet me in Atlantis: Across Three Continents in Search of the Legendary Sunken City* (2016).

The conventions and pleasures and indulgence of travel writing have barely changed: first person; past tense; cross-cultural; observational and inspirational; informative and sensory. Voyages and journeys, discovery and rediscovery without moving anything except our page-turning hands.

Milo Beckman

author of *Math Without Numbers*

When I was a child I found a home in non-fiction reading. Thirsty to learn whatever I could about the world, I read science, biography, world history and politics. From my bedroom I felt that I could travel the globe and see from the eyes of people who had died long before I was born. For whatever reason, fiction didn't captivate me in the same way – it felt untrustworthy. (Macbeth did *what*? No, he didn't.) But non-fiction allowed me to live several decades of vicarious experience in a matter of weeks. It tied together ideas I'd always seen as separate, giving me new lenses with which to view the world around me. When I did look up from the books, I'd experience my actual life as if I were a traveller in my own hometown.

I especially want to give a shoutout to the sometimes overlooked genre of abstract, non-narrative non-fiction. Yes, it may not be for everyone, but I absolutely love to sit down with a dense academic tome and just pore. Talk about escape! If you think Narnia is a distant reality, try homotopy groups! I don't care if it's on morphology or fluid mechanics; I can lose hours to a good text. Reading and rereading, underlining and highlighting and translating as best I can out of the particular jargon spoken by this subculture of specialists. There's an element of sport to it: can I break into this abstruse crypt of a book and hold its rare knowledge in my hands? Or will it slip away? It's a great way to completely detach from the world around me.

There's also a certain beauty to this sort of information-dense non-fiction, in my view. It may not have the traditional aesthetic markings of a great book, but Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* is one of the more surprising and rewarding books I've had the pleasure to engage with. While reading this book, on and off for nine months, I felt I was running my fingers blindly through a thousand twisted threads, loosely tied together, presented to me in situ. I was not being