“So Many Books, So Little Time”

Sara Dreyfuss

Do you give up on a book after a few dozen pages if you are not enjoying it? Or do you always finish what you start? Most avid readers fall into one of those two groups. Goodreads, an Amazon website that specializes in book reviews and recommendations, polled its users on that issue in 2013. About 44 percent of respondents admitted that they stopped reading before the 100-page mark if a book bored them. Another 38 percent said they always finish their books, no matter what.1

To Finish or Not to Finish?

To finish or not to finish? There are good arguments on both sides. The ancient Roman author Pliny the Younger wrote, “No book is so bad as to not have something of use in some part of it.”2 Juliet Lapidos, an opinion editor at the Los Angeles Times, declares, “Once you start a book, you should finish it.” She explains, “I can’t count how many novels have bored me for a hundred pages only to later amaze me with their brilliance . . . With the exception of Portrait of a Lady, every Henry James novel I’ve read has tested my patience. Yet in each case I’ve hit a transcendentally good scene that makes up for all the preceding irritation.”3 Alex Clark, a British writer and literary critic, agrees: “Seriously good books are immersive experiences, demanding of time and patience. Respect them.” He adds, “In a long and complex novel . . . there are bound to be longueurs and bafflements, moments when you think, can I? You know what? You can. And you should.”4

On the other side of the argument, many people think you should drop any book that fails to engage you, and the sooner the better. Katy Guest, the literary editor of the British newspaper The Independent, advises, “If you’re really not getting on with a book, please put it down before you really grow to resent it.”5 Iain Broome, a British novelist and editor, says, “It’s always okay to stop reading a book. For some reason, we often feel obliged to carry on, even when we’re not enjoying it, but there really is no obligation.”6

Unless you must read a book for a class or a job, you may be better off abandoning it. Set it aside and move on to something more rewarding.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to ditch a book you do not enjoy is that there are thousands of good books to read and a limited time in which to read them. Guest urges people “never to struggle on with a book that you hate. Life is too short for ironing
and bad books . . . the next book you read could be the one that changes your life.” This argument can be summarized as “So many books, so little time,” a slogan that appears on many T-shirts and other merchandise, often attributed to the rock musician Frank Zappa. A similar T-shirt saying, ascribed to the author Joy Daniels, is “Life is too short to read bad books or drink bad wine.”

People have many reasons for jumping ship on a book. The Booklist Reader, the official blog of the American Library Association magazine Booklist, took what it describes as a “random poll” of readers, editors, and librarians asking why they give up on a book. Kaite Stover, director of readers’ services at the Kansas City Public Library in Kansas City, Missouri, listed the top five offenses that make her stop reading:

One: cliches. Two: grammatical errors. Three: lazy descriptions. Four: unbelievable dialogue. And five: unrealistic situations and characters. Typically I’ll give a book about 50 to 100 pages to hook me and then I’ll toss it back.

Robin Bradford, collection development librarian at Timberland Regional Library in Tumwater, Washington, said:

I can’t handle badly done dialect. That will make me drop a book. If I’m constantly correcting the author’s grammar in my head, I will stop reading. That, and misspellings or using the wrong form of a word. (Their, there, they’re, etc.) I will drop your book like a fresh-out-of-the-microwave Hot Pocket, with cheese leaking out the side.

Nancy Pearl’s Rule of 50

Many people follow Nancy Pearl’s Rule of 50. Pearl is a retired librarian and author who is now a regular commentator on National Public Radio. She also has her own action figure, a 5-inch plastic librarian based on her likeness. A button at the back makes its arm move with “amazing shushing action!”

In an interview with the Toronto Globe and Mail, Pearl explained her Rule of 50. “I was raised,” she said, “in a family in which the dictum ‘Finish what you start’ was the 11th commandment.” The rule applied to cleaning one’s plate, sticking with music lessons, and many other life situations, including reading. Gradually, Pearl changed her mind:

It wasn’t until I became an adult, and a librarian, that I began to question my commitment to finishing each and every book that I began. Now that I really was living a major portion of my life in the library, I literally found myself surrounded by books, tempting me, calling to me from the shelves. How could I—in one lifetime—even get through everything I wanted to read if I had to finish those books that I discovered to be (at least to me) boring, badly written or just plain bad? It dawned on me that maybe, just maybe, I didn’t have to finish every book I started.

One day, a caller to Pearl’s radio show asked, “How many pages should I read before I can guiltlessly stop reading a book?” The question inspired Pearl to develop her “Rule of 50”:

Give a book 50 pages. When you get to the bottom of Page 50, ask yourself if you’re really liking the book. If you are, of course, then great, keep on reading. But if you’re not, then put it down and look for another . . .
This rule of 50 worked exceedingly well until I entered my own 50s. As I wended my way toward 60, and beyond, I could no longer avoid the realization that, while the reading time remaining in my life was growing shorter, the world of books that I wanted to read was, if anything, growing larger… I realized that my Rule of 50 was incomplete. It needed an addendum. And here it is: When you are 51 years of age or older, subtract your age from 100, and the resulting number (which, of course, gets smaller every year) is the number of pages you should read before you can guiltlessly give up on a book. As the saying goes, “Age has its privileges.” And the ultimate privilege of age, of course, is that when you turn 100, you are authorized (by the Rule of 50) to judge a book by its cover.

The Hawking Index

Then there is what might be called “aspirational reading”: the books we choose because of vanity or good intentions, the weighty tomes that we think would be good for us to read or that we want people to think we have read. Mark Twain defines a “classic” as “a book which people praise and don’t read.” In 2014, Jordan Ellenberg, a professor of mathematics at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, developed what he calls the “Hawking index” to measure what people really read, not what they intend to read, hope to finish, or pretend to have read. The name refers to Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, a physics book that has sold more than 10 million copies. Ellenberg suspected that few of those 10 million purchasers had ever read the whole thing. He came up with an ingenious technique: he gathered data on passages in the book highlighted by Amazon Kindle readers. Ellenberg hypothesized that when people stopped highlighting, they had probably stopped reading.

Ellenberg would probably be the first to acknowledge that his methodology is unscientific, or, as he describes it, “quick and dirty.” For example, it fails to account for readers of print books, or for Kindle readers who do not use the highlighting feature. Nevertheless, it tells us something. On Ellenberg’s list of famous unread books, Hawking’s book ranks fifth: only 6.6 percent of readers finish it. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* tops the roster. If you have never managed to read Joyce’s magnum opus all the way through, you have plenty of company. Sean Latham, editor of the *James Joyce Quarterly*, describes *Ulysses* as probably “the most purchased and least read book in the world.” According to the Hawking index, few readers make it past the first few chapters, and just 1.7 percent read the whole thing. *Ulysses* barely edges out Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, which is read cover to cover by just 1.8 percent.

Goodreads also has compiled a list of the “top five abandoned classics.” Once again, *Ulysses* is uppermost. Rounding out the top five of highly regarded books that people start but never finish are Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*.

What Does It Mean for Libraries?

What does all this mean for libraries? Obviously, there are implications for collection development and management. Librarians know that they purchase, catalog, and shelve large numbers of books that are never read or even touched by the readers they intend to serve. Some libraries have too many books, too many copies of the same books, and
too many unused books to justify the space they occupy and the time spent caring for them. A few scholars have attempted to determine what librarians should do about it. Tony Greiner studied the circulation records for two community college libraries. He reports, “Two variables were found that are strong predictors of whether a book will be used or not: The number of titles in the library’s Library of Congress Classification range, and if the book came from an academic publisher.” He suggests that a library avoid adding books to a Library of Congress Classification (LCC) where it has few or no books—that is, a subject scantily represented in the library’s collection—despite a librarian’s natural inclination to fill gaps in the collection. Greiner also observes that books from academic publishers, such as scholarly monographs or contributed volumes, seldom leave the shelves. He concludes, “If selectors in community college libraries keep a wary eye on buying academic books, or books for small LCC ranges, they will better serve their students by wasting fewer resources, thereby having more titles students want, need, and use.”

The flaw in most studies of book use is obvious. They are based on checkout statistics or on log-ins to online materials, not on actual reading. The studies seldom account for books used in the library, for people who check out books but never read them, for readers who cast a book aside after a few dozen pages, or for those who skip most of a book or only skim it. In *How to Talk about Books You Haven’t Read*, Pierre Bayard, a professor of literature at the University of Paris, advocates a guilt-free attitude toward nonreading. There are worse things, he reminds us, than not reading a book. The list of abbreviations in Bayard’s book includes, in addition to such familiar short forms as *op. cit.*, the following:

- **UB** book unknown to me
- **SB** book I have skimmed
- **HB** book I have heard about
- **FB** book I have forgotten

Circulation data not only are incomplete but also can be falsified. In 2016, the East Lake County Library in Sorrento, Florida, suspended a library assistant and a branch supervisor after determining that they had invented fictional patrons to inflate their circulation numbers. The two librarians created imaginary borrowers to deceive book-weeding software that automatically discarded books not borrowed for a certain time. They said they wanted to save the volumes for patrons’ potential use. One of their bogus borrowers, named “Chuck Finley” for a former California Angels pitcher, appeared to have checked out 2,361 books over a nine-month period.

Despite the sophistication of computerized checkout and check-in technology at many libraries, no one can tell how much someone has read of the book he or she just returned. Bayard points out that no one knows what you have actually read. He says, “I know few areas of private life, with the exception of finance and sex, in which it’s as difficult to obtain accurate information.”

The technology to acquire reliable information about what people read may be on the way. Amazon already tracks how many pages are displayed on its Kindle e-readers long enough for people to have read them. In 2017, the company launched a best-seller list called Amazon Charts. Week by week, Charts tracks the top 20 fiction and nonfiction
books perused on Kindle e-readers or listened to on Audible audio books. Until similar data become available for all books, however, there may be little librarians can do except to bear in mind how little they really know about a book’s readers.

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Notes
2. Pliny the Younger, Pliny’s Letters, Book 3, Epistle 3, 5, 10. The Latin is Nullum esse librum tam malum ut non ex aliqua parte prodesset.
7. Guest, “Reading a Dull Book?”
8. Despite a diligent search, I found no credible sources for either attribution. “So many books, so little time” is particularly ubiquitous. Besides appearing on T-shirts, coffee mugs, and other merchandise, it is the name of at least one bookstore and the title of a book
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
16. Ellenberg, “The Summer’s Most Unread Book Is . . .”; Breen, “‘Hawking Index’ Charts Which Bestsellers Are the Ones People Never Read.”


19. Ibid.


22. Bayard, How to Talk about Books You Haven’t Read.
