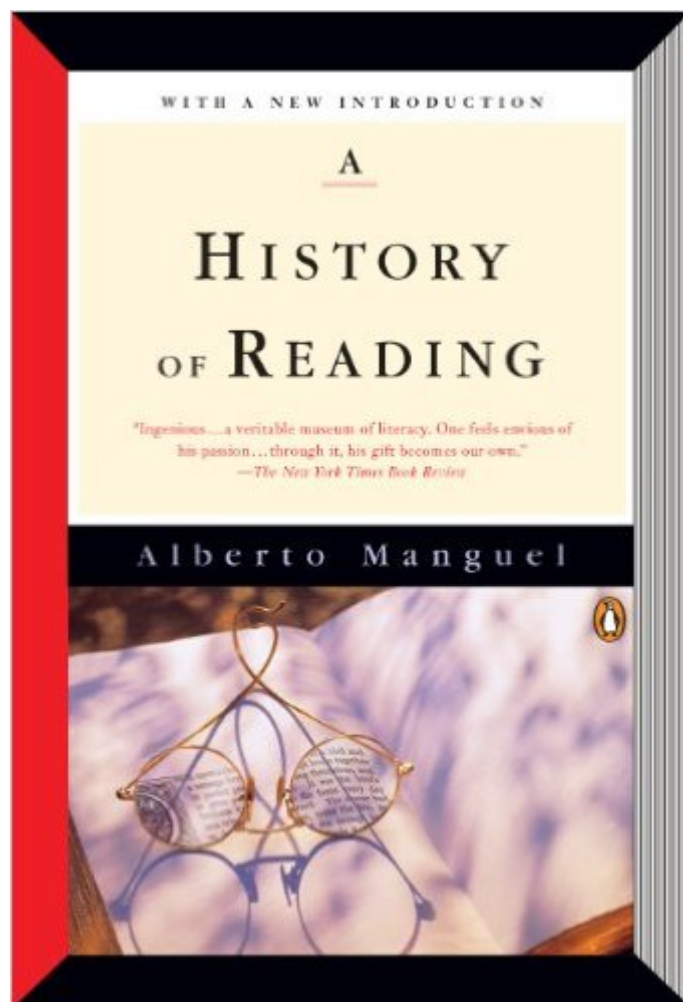


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A History Of Reading



Synopsis

At one magical instant in your early childhood, the page of a book "that string of confused, alien ciphers" shivered into meaning, and at that moment, whole universes opened. You became, irrevocably, a reader. Noted essayist and editor Alberto Manguel moves from this essential moment to explore the six-thousand-year-old conversation between words and that hero without whom the book would be a lifeless object: the reader. Manguel brilliantly covers reading as seduction, as rebellion, and as obsession and goes on to trace the quirky and fascinating history of the reader's progress from clay tablet to scroll, codex to CD-ROM.

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Customer Reviews

"A History of Reading" is an eclectic collection of essays on books, bibliophiles, bibliophobes, bibliokleptomanes, printing, translation, censorship, reading glasses and the Heian period in Japan. A browser's delight, it can also be devoured in a single sitting (guilty). From reading aloud to reading silently and from the physical pleasures of a book's shape, binding and smell to the less corporeal qualities of books that prompted Pinochet's Chile to ban "Don Quixote" as subversive, Alberto Manguel's bibliomaniac panorama is a thoroughly enjoyable celebration of one of life's greatest pleasures. In it, the reader will encounter Callimachus of Cyrene, who worked in the "vanished library" of Alexandria and laid the foundations for what we know today as the library catalogue; compare and contrast the differing approaches to public readings of Charles Dickens and Pliny the Younger; and decide once and for all whether it is preferable to read lying down or at a desk. Tolle, lege!

Any lover of books and reading will love the time spent here in these pages. "Time" is often the reason many people give for NOT reading. Others often feel guilty about the actual amount of time that they gladly devote to reading. I admit that I am of this latter group. Reading Manguel's book puts it all in perspective... makes me fall in love with the printed word all over again, and helps me to realize that I am part of a long line of splendour... that there is indeed, a wonderful history of those who have loved reading and/or writing books. His book is an excellent thematic study; the erudite gleanings of seven years of research, and chockfull of the personal touch of a lifetime of being profoundly bookish. Along with vignettes of his personal acquaintance with Argentine poet Jorge Luis Borges, there are very insightful passages on Franz Kafka, Walt Whitman, Rainer Maria Rilke and many other greats. I remember being surprised that Manguel (a Canadian resident since 1982) was not even shortlisted for the Governor General's award for this book... but then later on it won one of the world's most prestigious of awards, France's Prix Medicis... and all was well with the world. It's a beautifully written book. It fortifies my conviction that if I'm ever too busy to be a READER... then I'm definitely too busy, and something's gotta go!

When I first saw Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading*, two thoughts ran through my mind. First, what a wonderful topic for a work of non-fiction. Second, how can one possibly write such a book? I am thrilled to report that Manguel has succeeded beyond all expectations. Both a personal essay telling of Manguel's own learning to read and encounters with books and a highly eclectic survey of books and reading through the ages, *History* provides both erudition and levity, scholarship and wit. In broad outline, Manguel groups his books in two sections. In the first, "Acts of Reading", he tells how reading itself took different shapes during the ages, including being read to, picture reading (books made up of pictures for the non-reader), reading silently to oneself, and other matters. The second part is captioned "Powers of the Reader and deals with the forbidden reader (e.g., pre-emancipation slaves in the American south); translation; prophesy; and other matters. Manguel quickly becomes an old friend and companion. I hated to see this book end!

It is wonderful to read about a subject that you value so much written by someone who feels the same way. The value for me, however, was the prism Manguel offers through which reading is separated into a variety of dazzling colors. I enjoyed the history, the anecdotes, his personal experiences, and his ability to carry a thread from our earliest ancestors' desire to understand the written word to the present. His references caused me to visit the library and bookstores once again

and enjoy authors that I had either forgotten or with whom I was not yet familiar. It is a book I will recommend frequently to anyone I know who loves reading.

A strange thing, reading. It doesn't immediately strike one as THE easiest subject on which to write a history, but Alberto Manguel does a wonderful job tracing reading from Sumerian stone tablets to contemporary computers. The guy seems to know as much as any ten people. He's taken a very private act and made it public, in the process creating not only a history of reading but a history of thinking as well. This is a great book to read late at night. One slips into it like a warm bath. Anyone who doesn't smile at the section in which the young Manguel reads to the blind Borges doesn't deserve to own books

There are many thought provoking nuggets buried in this book, but I had a hard time digging them out. Manguel tells lots of stories about readers, readers who have to hide (slaves), writers who are readers (reading aloud), and many others. What I liked most though was when he discussed how reading is contextualized by who the reader is, what point in their life the reader is in, and what the world is within which the reader lives. He also discussed how the nature of reading (reading to memorize to reading for knowledge to reading to generate something new) mirrors and contributes to social mores. Socrates believed that reading should be saved for those who could understand what they read and everyone else should be illiterate. Others have argued that democracy is best served if everyone reads (but what happens if they don't understand or they don't read and we assume they do?). I just wish there was an abbreviated version of the book.

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