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Develop your brain - read 15 minutes a day

Akshita Nanda

✉ (<mailto:akshitan@sph.com.sg>)

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Like an exercise regime for fitness, a reading habit can help develop mental fitness

In six years of reviewing books for The Straits Times, the question I have heard most often is not "Will you read my book?"

It is: "Do you read all the books you review?", followed by: "I don't read but I'd like to. How can I start?"

My answers: "Yes, I do" and "Pick up a book and open the covers" seem to stun those who shy away from anything in print longer than this column.

To my shock and horror, it turns out that fewer people are reading fewer books nowadays. Booksellers have long lamented a declining readership, but I used to think this was because their major competitors were the public libraries, offering free reads to economically savvy Singaporeans.

Then came the Singapore Cultural Statistics released last year by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth. It shows a significant decline in the number of people visiting public libraries, 1.5 million fewer in 2013 compared with 2012, and a corresponding decline of almost three million book loans from 2012 to 2013.

More people are logging on to National Library Board websites, 1.7 million more in 2013 than the year before, but they may be accessing periodicals or scholarly articles and not fiction or poetry.

The one bright spot for people is that library membership increased by 100,000 from 2012 to 2013. So perhaps people are keen to read, they just find it difficult to do so.

I most often hear the question about "How can I start reading?" alongside the annual announcement of major book prizes such as the Nobel Prize for literature or the recently announced shortlist for the Man Booker Prize.

The implication is that reading these literary novels must be good for one, along the lines of taking vitamins or exercising 150 minutes a week, but not necessarily enjoyable.

Studies have consistently shown that reading is good for you.

Two years ago, psychologists proved that reading novels heightens a reader's ability to empathise with and understand other people's emotions. Even reading potboilers can help. Last year, a study at Emory University in Atlanta showed that students who read the 300-page historical novel *Pompeii* by Robert Harris showed brain changes associated with increased mental capacity to learn language.

So if reading can help one develop mental fitness and social skills, why isn't a reading habit part of every life, just like doctors recommend 150 minutes a week of moderate exercise to stave off heart disease and diabetes?

The answer lies in the comparison. Like developing fitness, developing a reading habit takes time and effort.

Unlike a fitness habit, anyone who wants to become a bookworm needs to follow only four simple rules: read Regularly, Enjoy yourself, and Assess and Discuss your progress.

Apart from the demands of academics, work and family eating into leisure time, observers note that reading patterns have changed with people turning to reading on social media. Rather than settling down with a printed novel, people read articles that friends write or share, ranging from thoughtful political analyses to clickbait lists of fashion faux pas or laundry hacks for the time-strapped. I'm equally guilty of this: My laundry has never been cleaner, but there are weeks when I read only three books instead of my usual five or six.

The good news is that just 15 minutes a day is enough to change brain patterns according to the Emory University study. We can all make 15 minutes a day to read. Bathroom breaks. The commute to and from work. Queues for F1 tickets. See these as opportunities to make inroads into text.

Like an exercise habit, reading should be fun. There is no shame in beginning your reading journey with *The Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins, which is a wonderfully realised fantasy for all readers of double-digit age.

There is only a little shame in beginning with *Fifty Shades Of Grey*, and none at all if you go on to Assess and Discuss the book, paying particular attention to the author's gender stereotyping and the unhealthy power dynamic in the main relationship.

Reading is an interactive pleasure, unlike movies or TV shows where little is left to the imagination and the viewer only has to react to the sights and sounds shown. This is why reading is so good for mental health because it requires a reader to enter the author's world and make it real within his own brain. Words become triggers to set off emotions and reactions and that is why two people can read the same book very differently.

There are various book clubs in Singapore, some organised by the public libraries, others on social media sites such as Facebook, Meetup.com and, of course, review aggregator GoodReads.com. All are good places for readers to find discussions that will help them get more from reading a book.

A good way to look beyond the narrative is to start with considering the context and setting of the book. Rolf Bauerdick's *The Madonna In The Moon* is a zany story of village life set during the space race and a quick history refresher will add pathos to the antics of villagers struggling under a dictatorial regime.

Marlon James' Booker shortlisted novel *A Brief History Of Seven Killings* is probably better appreciated after listening to the songs of Jamaican legend Bob Marley, whose attempted killing is the lynchpin of the book.

James' novel is like many other Booker contenders - an actual, physical heavyweight over 700 pages long.

Which leads me to the other popular question people ask: "Must I read all of the book to qualify as a reader?"

My answer: "Only if you plan to review it." Otherwise you can always set a book aside and chase another read for starters. You are a reader the moment you open the covers of a book, but it is also the author's responsibility to ensure that you stay the course.

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