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Book Reviews: On the Topic of Reading

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Keywords

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Jacobs, A., (2011). *The pleasures of reading in an age of distraction*: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0-19-974749-8. Hardcover. 162 pages.

Spacks, P. M. (2011). *On rereading*: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. ISBN 978-0-674-72589-8. Softcover. 282 pages.

Christina Belcher

It is unusual to review two books together, but since these were both published by Harvard Press in the same year, on the same topic, I felt drawn by curiosity to do so. I am so glad I did. This review marries the perspectives of two fine authors on the act of re-reading and reading texts: a topic dear to my soul, and essential for educators.

Spacks and Jacobs viewed reading from different perspectives, unearthing different ways of interaction with text. Both authors presented us with accolades and challenges within the life act of reading. Accolades include a deep passion and insight about the value of reading, both intellectually and “soul-ishly”, and both depict authors who passionately love reading, but do so within different contours of reading as a life act.

Spack’s writing was a love story spanning her favorite books from the 1950’s onward, stating how re-reading them has enhanced her depth and understanding. Her main point was that in re-reading a text at different times in life, new knowledge and wisdom emerges that interacts with our life views, enlarging our sense of self as a reader. Spacks delighted in the pleasure of re-reading texts of fiction at different points in life, and across different genres. She organized her work across themes, citing stories of conformity, rebellion, history, passion, the free woman, and morality to name a few. Implementing the “*Pleasure Principle*”, she stated, “I take particular pleasure in teasing out the ways that a piece of fiction works on me, how it creates its effects—not just superficial effects, but profound influences on me as a reader” (p. 161). She outlined the

differences between recreational reading and professional reading, noting their benefits and needed skills for enchantment and dissemination. She stated, “Just as we develop stories about our lives, ... we evoke private narratives about the books in our lives” (p. 279). Spacks reawakened the slumbering giant of need for re-reading a text; one I have always valued. After reading Spacks, I found myself ordering some books I had missed reading!

Jacob’s wrote in a more professional voice on a theme of reading between hard covers, or via other modes of text. Jacobs considered the pleasure of reading in an age of distraction. He identified the differences between reading with a book in hand and reading digitally on a technological device, and explored why knowing about these differences matter. He did not balance one mode of reading against the other, but issued a call to awareness when he stated, “The internet is basically a Skinner box engineered to tap right into our deepest mechanisms of addiction” (p. 83). Jacobs provoked a sense of wonder about reading “at whim”, and being captured by a book. He focused on the need for silence and listening, depending on why and how you read. Citing Alberto Manguel, (p.55) he provoked the wonder of reading as a silent act:

The existence of the text is a silent existence, silent until the moment in which a reader reads it. Only when the

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One of the most beautiful moments in Jacob's work is his differentiation between plastic attention, hyperattention, and deep attention, in the act of reading.

Describing the experience of the reader in "rapt" attention—"when one is completely absorbed, engrossed, fascinated, perhaps even 'carried away—that underlies life's deepest pleasures, from the scholar's study to the carpenter's craft to the lover's obsession" (p. 86)—serves as a magic revelation into the act of reading where life and the love of the written word combine within the reader into an unforgettable experience.

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I must say that I found it hard to appreciate Jacob's text until after the first 50 pages, and then loved it. I felt his introduction could be more purposeful and interactive, drawing the reader in to the flow and purpose of the text. While Jacobs is very instructional; Spacks loved the act of telling and interacting with story itself.

Jacobs ended with a caution for educators to combine hyperattention with deep attention to cultivate both in schooling pedagogy moving forward, a section I will say little about because I would rather you get the book and read it for yourselves. He also gave a guideline on forming a perfect book group, which was interesting.

Both of these books restored the child in me, and a sense of wonder into the marvelous act of reading, and its ability to massage the soul of the reader. I recommend reading these books in tandem with Maryanne Wolf's "Reader Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World", and Neil Postman's classic, "Conscientious Objections: Stirring up Trouble About Language, Technology and Education".

For Christian educators, who understand on many levels the power of the written word and its ability to transform the reader, reading these texts will be a lovely and enlightening experience.

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