

# 10 REASONS TO READ

GETTING LOST IN A BOOK RANKS AS ONE OF THE TOP WAYS TO RELIEVE STRESS—AND THAT'S JUST ONE OF THE BENEFITS

By Stephanie Stephens

## READ A GOOD BOOK LATELY?

With so many devices competing for our attention these days—binge-watching our favorite shows on Netflix or Hulu, keeping up with Facebook and Instagram, playing games on our smartphones—taking the time to devour an actual novel or biography during our down time seems downright anachronistic.

All is not lost, however. According to the Pew Research Center, in 2013, the “typical” American adult read five books, counting both print editions and e-books. (That’s a median number, meaning half the population read more than five books and half read less. Because a passionate few go through books like Kleenex, an average would be much higher.)

And in June 2014, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that reading was the second most popular leisure activity among American adults—although watching TV came in first by a huge margin.

Would it help to know that reading can reduce stress levels and boost mood? According to a University of Sussex study, diving into a book is a more powerful stress-buster than walking, listening to music, or relaxing with a cup of tea.

So before summer slips away, settle down with a volume that appeals to you—and don’t feel guilty for a minute. Instead, consider these 10 compelling reasons to crack a book during these lazy, crazy, hazy days.



## 1 INSTANT ESCAPE

For Barbara G. Meyer of Chicago, reading has long been a way of getting away from whatever troubles her. As a child, she says, “reading filled the hours and allowed me to escape the boredom and loneliness I felt.”

A librarian for 20 years, Meyer reads up to three books a week, typically fiction.

“I read one and then grab the next one,” says Meyer, whose current gig is psychic entertainer. “I read whenever I’m idle for a while, and every night before bed. It helps me relax enough to sleep.”

## 2 THE PAUSE THAT REFRESHES

Reading is an important part of Sharon Mailloux’s “me time.” A therapist in the Alberta community of Peace River, Mailloux is a self-confessed bathtub reader.

“My husband may be reading in the living room so I run a hot bath when I need to be somewhere else for a while,” she says. “It’s ‘tub time,’ and it’s mine. Everybody needs to refresh and recharge, to have peace and solitude. Reading is all those things I need it to be.”

One downside: She admits to drifting off now and then, which leads to reimbursing the library for a few water-logged volumes.

## 3 BRAIN FOOD

The way our brains engage while reading is different—more complex, more involved—than when we watch TV or play computer games. Brain structure can actually change: A daily reading program conducted at Carnegie Mellon University found that over six

months, the volume of white matter in the brain’s language area increased.

Sam’n Iqbal of McLean, Virginia, prefers the printed page over the boob tube as a way to de-stress.

“I have so many responsibilities, places I need to be and things I need to do. I am always rushing and racing,” the author and illustrator says. “At the end of a typical day, if I have to choose

Clinical psychologist Eva Stubits, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Houston, specializes in stress management and anxiety. She says reading “can relax people who are frazzled” because it allows them to focus on something other than their day-to-day problems.

“Plus, finding a pleasurable hobby you really enjoy brings positive feelings into your life,” she adds.

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between *The Real Housewives* on TV or a book, I choose the book.”

Opening a book has “something so calming about it,” Iqbal explains. “The lights and movement from a screen do not calm my body the way turning pages or folding page corners do, or sitting in peace and quiet does—knowing no one will be running in asking me to do something.”

## 4 WELCOME DISTRACTION

For Alina Adams, a writer in New York City, reading is the only thing that helps her endure getting on an airplane. A nervous flier, she finds it almost impossible to eat, sleep or stop worrying when she’s in the air. So she lays in a supply of “airplane books.”

“They make time pass faster and help you forget you are on an airplane to begin with. These have to be books compelling enough to keep my attention and make a 22-hour international flight feel like a local hop,” she explains.

## 5 CALMING INFLUENCE

Paul Corona, MD, author of the three-book set *Healing the Mind and Body*, notes that reading is an excellent remedy for worry and rumination.

“Reading takes you out of yourself,” he says. “It’s good to be transported out of that thinking pattern by reading, even if it’s only temporary.”

When Lindsey Winsemius of Grand Haven, Michigan, gets too far inside her own head, she often can quiet her mind by filling it with a writer’s words. At times, she admits, she finds it difficult to concentrate. But if she can engage herself in a good book, “I do find it helpful ... mainly to take my mind away from the negative thought spiral.”

That oft-repeated bromide—“reading takes you out of yourself”—may be the literal truth. In a study using brain scans to track how reading affects neural connectivity, researchers at Emory University found changes in networks

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associated with physical sensation and movement. This suggests that as we read, we place ourselves “in the body of the protagonist.”

## 6 SOCIAL TEACHER

Narrative fiction may sharpen the social skill of empathy—helping you better understand other people’s thoughts and feelings—according to a 2009 study by Canadian researchers.

The study authors speculated that our brains fire up in response to reading about social situations just as they would in the actual setting, thus strengthening all those neural connections. Alternately, we may actually gain practical knowledge about how to conduct ourselves from how the fictional characters interact.

“Reading narratives, even those explicitly labeled as fiction, is far from a meaningless leisure activity that ends when one closes the cover of a book,” they conclude.

More recently, American researchers linked greater empathy and socialization to reading literary fiction specifically—a Louise Erdrich novel rather than a John Grisham page-turner, say—because those kind of narratives tend to focus on characters’ inner lives and relationships.

## 7 CHANGE AGENT

Getting “lost” in a fictional character’s experiences may influence thoughts and actions in your own life—a process called “experience-taking.”

In one study at Ohio State University, reading about a university student who overcame obstacles in order to vote made the real-life students more likely to vote in a presidential election later that week. In another, reading about a character who is revealed later in the story to be of a different race or sexual orientation led to more accepting attitudes and less stereotyping.

“Experience-taking can be a powerful way to change our behavior and thoughts in meaningful and beneficial ways,” reported study co-author Lisa Libby, PhD.

## 8 THERAPEUTIC TOOL

Reading nonfiction also delivers inspiration for change.

In Britain, the National Health Service in 2013 approved a program called Books on Prescription for people with moderate mental health challenges. This “bibliotherapy” approach—sort of “read one and call me in the morning”—involves sending patients to the local library for a self-help title (such as the cognitive behavioral handbooks *Mind Over Mood* and *The Feeling Good Handbook*) from a pre-selected list.

(An offshoot called Reading Well: Mood-boosting Books compiles uplifting fiction, nonfiction and poetry titles selected by readers and reading groups.)

David Laurell, an editor in Los Angeles, likes inspirational titles with a feel-good quality. He also turns to biographies or autobiographies “to absorb insights from someone who has

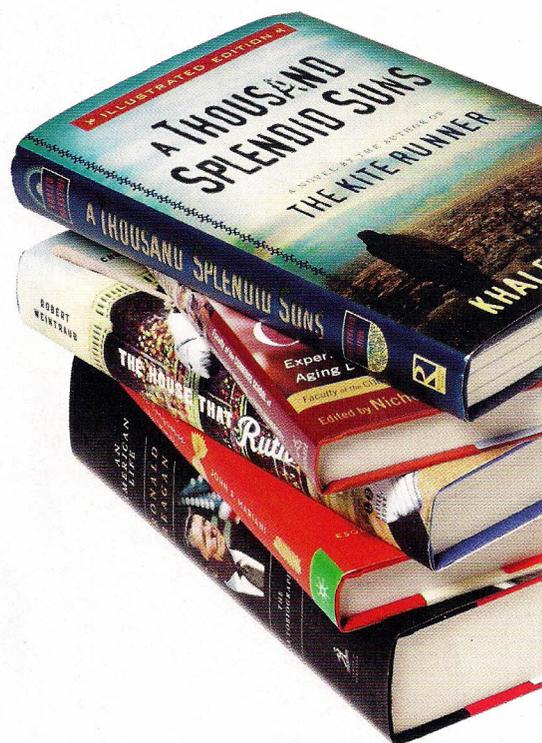
left a mark on the world. We all borrow from people we admire.”

Laurell says he usually has “a couple of books going at the same time.” He likes to revisit books from his past, bringing a new perspective to familiar material.

“As you grow, when you return to read something you brushed over previously, now you can better understand so much more. And just like when you leave a movie, when you take a break from a book, you realize you have a different feeling about the world and the people around you.”

## 9 SOCIAL LUBRICANT

Although reading is by nature a solitary activity, discussing what you read with others appears to improve mood, enhance well-being, reduce feelings of isolation, and foster a sense of community. A 2010 study at the University of Liverpool also found that book group participants grew in self-awareness and the ability to articulate “profound issues of being.”



Two earlier British surveys also reported that “significant proportions” of people in reading groups benefited from the social aspect and feelings of inclusion, as well as the simple opportunity to relax.<sup>E</sup>

Mailloux, the Alberta therapist, is an enthusiastic member of a book club that meets at the Peace River Municipal Library.

“It’s a place where I can mix fiction and real life, having meaningful discussions with people who’ve read what I read,” she says. “You can choose to speak or not. It ‘gets you out there,’ and out of your own head in a safe way.

“The relationships aren’t always about you and other club members—they’re about you and the book’s characters,” she adds.

## 10 REJUVENATION

“I read fiction to awaken my mind and get the creative juices flowing each day,” says Saverio Mancina, a marketing and communications consultant based in Manhattan. “I set aside one hour each morning before breakfast to read a novel.”

Mancina does plenty of other kinds of reading during the day—three newspapers, magazine articles, other documents—but it’s work, not relaxation. To clear his mind, he sets aside another 30 minutes to revisit his current novel.

“It rejuvenates my energy by slowing me down for a focused amount of time and unplugging me from the day’s demands,” he says. **e**

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# RECOMMENDED READING

## THIS YEAR'S PICKS

The term “beach read” was invented for the kind of book that provides a dose of entertainment on a lazy summer’s day. Here are the TOP PICKS FOR 2015 from the American Library Association’s Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) in the following genres:

### ADRENALINE:

***Broken Monsters***, by Lauren Beukes.

### FANTASY:

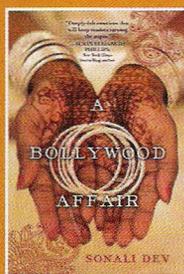
***The Goblin Emperor***, by Katherine Addison.

### HISTORICAL FICTION:

***Bitter Greens***, by Kate Forsyth.

### HORROR:

***The Lesser Dead***, by Christopher Buehlman.



### MYSTERY:

***Murder at the Brightwell***, by Ashley Weaver.

### ROMANCE:

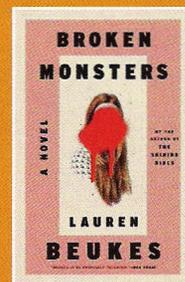
***A Bollywood Affair***, by Sonali Dev.

### SCIENCE FICTION:

***The Martian***, by Andy Weir.

### WOMEN'S FICTION:

***My Real Children***, by Jo Walton.



## CLASSICS

On the other hand, you might be inclined to use your down time to check off some of the classic novels you never got around to. Here are “14 BOOKS YOU REALLY SHOULD HAVE READ BY NOW” from *Reader’s Digest*:

***The Great Gatsby***, by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

***To Kill a Mockingbird***, by Harper Lee.

***On the Road***, by Jack Kerouac.

***Tell Me a Riddle***, by Tillie Olsen.

***Great Expectations***, by Charles Dickens.

***All Quiet on the Western Front***, by Erich Maria Remarque.

***War and Peace***, by Leo Tolstoy.



***The Heart is a Lonely Hunter***, by Carson McCullers.

***Native Son***, by Richard Wright.

***The Road***, by Cormac McCarthy.

***Frankenstein***, by Mary Shelley.

***A Good Man is Hard to Find***, by Flannery O’Connor.

***The Catcher in the Rye***, by J.D. Salinger.

***The Chronicles of Narnia***, by C.S. Lewis.

