

# Literary Spectrum

## The Writer's Reading Habits

*I promised you this essay a few issues ago, then got sidetracked with the letters that some of you wrote. But it's an important issue, so let's take a look at your book shelf and see what we can find there.*

### Writers Must Be Readers

Most writers are prodigious readers. They love words, whether they are reading them or writing them. In fact, I don't think I have ever met a writer who did not like to read. That would be a little like having a cook who did not enjoy eating, or an artist who did not enjoy pictures! I think I can safely say that a writer must enjoy reading, if he is to have any hope of being successful.

It is possible, I suppose, that someone who does not like to read might feel led to be a writer for some reason. But such a person will have little hope of producing any readable writing because he does not know from experience what it is that makes reading enjoyable.

It is true that you can read too much. If you find yourself reading until 2:00 in the morning, night after night, you need a dose of self discipline. If you find yourself reaching for a story book instead of having your personal devotions, or studying your Sunday school lesson, you need to examine your spiritual priorities. If your parents or spouse constantly have to remind you of work you didn't get done because you were curled up on the couch reading, you need to grow up a bit more.

Outside of that kind of constraint, however, reading is good mental exercise for writers. It stretches their mental muscle with new ideas, new words, and new ways of saying things. It inspires them to new efforts. When you read a good book, some of it tends to rub off on you and become a part of you.

Of course, this makes it very important that you are reading the right kind of books....

### What Should Writers Read?

I have some concern about the kind of books that I see Christian young people buying and reading today. Too many are not the kind that will produce the good results that I mentioned in the last section. They are too light and "fluffy" to produce good minds. Instead, they produce lazy minds and, in too many cases, lull their readers to sleep, spiritually.

I am not going to do any categorizing here, either by publisher, or by topic. There is always an exception to every rule like that. However, by the time you get to the age that most of you are, you should not be reading just for entertainment all the time. Instead, you should be looking for books that will teach you something, that will stretch your mind with fresh ideas, and help you to think lofty thoughts. Far

too many of our people are shallow thinkers. One reason for this is that far too many of them only read shallow books, or none at all.

When you start in on a book, ask yourself a few questions. First, will this book help you serve God better, or will it draw you away from Him? If you are honest with yourself, you can normally tell within the first chapter. Second, is it the kind of book that will stretch your mind, or is it simply entertaining? Force yourself to read a difficult book sometimes.

It is not wrong to read a story book. You can learn a lot from a good storybook. But there are many storybooks that are a sheer waste of time. You do not have time to read that kind of book. Develop the kind of Christian maturity that helps you to sort out what you are reading. At your age, you should not need to have someone tell you what to read (though it is proper for parents to know what books are in their house, no matter how old you are). *Discipline yourself to read books that will help you to grow, mentally and spiritually.*

You should be reading more than just storybooks, however, or you will never develop beyond a certain point. Read biographies. Read allegories. Read doctrinal books. Read inspirational books. You may have to train yourself to enjoy some of them, since a poor reading diet is a bit like a habit of chewing gum—it is hard to shake. But once you have seen what good books can do for you, you will wonder what you ever saw in the others.

I am a bit hesitant to give you actual titles and authors, due to the controversial nature of this subject. If your pastor is a reader, ask him to loan you some of the books that have molded his life. Most congregations have some people in them who can give you advice and loan you books. However, I do think that at sometime in their life every writer should read some classics like *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Screwtape Letters*, *Mennonites in Europe*, *Les Miserables*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, just to name a few. The authors of the past tended to be deeper thinkers than the authors of today, or at least they wrote deeper books. One reason for this is that today's readers do not like to read deep books. But if you want to teach yourself to think, you will need to read some of the classical literature of the past, instead of just today's literature.

## **Read the Bible**

The Christian writer needs to be familiar with the Bible. This means that you need to read it regularly beyond just your personal devotions. Have you ever sat down and read the Book of Acts in one or two sittings? Or one of the Gospels? Try it sometime. You will be amazed at the impressions you receive.

Then when you have done this to get the overview of the book, read it through again, a paragraph at a time. Start a journal and record your impressions of each paragraph as you read. Again, you will be startled how the book opens up to you and becomes real to you.

All of these things will help you to develop a spiritually and mentally mature mind that will help make you a good writer.

## **For Feedback**

Here is an excerpt from a letter that a girl in Pennsylvania sent me:

*I enjoy writing. I often find a seed for a good story or poem and would love to work it out, but I don't have the time. I teach school, and love it, but it limits my time for other things. In one of your articles, you emphasized the importance of setting aside a block of several hours for writing. I'm sorry but I can't do that without cheating my students. Should I just forget about writing as long as I'm teaching? (Yes, this summer I have been doing some writing, and thoroughly enjoying it. But what about the inspiration I receive during those other nine months?) Or is there some way I can budget my time better? What are some tips other writers have for me? I know some writers who are busy school teachers (and parents too). How do they do it?*

This seems to be about the number one question I get in the mail. I did address some of this in the last issue. But that was from a different perspective. So, how do *you* find time to write? What has worked for *you*? Have you found a secret that would help others? Send me a letter with your input, and I will try to put together an article from the various responses for one of the next issues.

I would be interested in some other topics for discussion like this as well. Perhaps we could have several discussion issues a year.

Send your input on the above question to:

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Do it NOW before you forget! Let's give it a three week deadline from the time you read this.