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REFLECTIONS ON READING

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The 23rd of February, 1455, is widely recognized as the date when German inventor Johannes Gutenberg printed the first Western book produced using movable type. This is the date commemorated by Printed Book Day, an occasion that brings together authors, librarians, and bibliophiles to pay homage to the printed word. The Gutenberg Bibles printed over five and a half centuries ago are arguably the most famous books in human history. Only twenty-one complete copies exist today, each with an estimated value of between twenty-five and thirty million dollars. The invention of movable type transformed society as few other inventions have before or after, making books available to the general public rather than only individuals and institutions that could afford precious engraved or handwritten manuscripts. In the modern era, the number of books published by a country is often seen as a measure of the nation's standard of living and level of education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization estimates that over two million new titles were published worldwide in 2013. In the United States alone over 304,000 new titles appeared. Reading is big business, even in a world often dominated by television, cinema, and other forms of the moving image.

One reason why many still have a fascination for books is the long-term bond engendered between a reader and a book's characters and events. This bond is formed in part by the amount of time a reader must dedicate to a book. Many social critics bemoan the fact that modern Americans, particularly younger citizens, seem to have developed very short attention spans. There is evidence to support this assertion. The average hour-long television program provides less than forty-three minutes of actual content, the remaining time being taken up by commercial messages. In this short period of time, situations must be described, characters introduced, and the issues brought to an acceptable conclusion. The length of the average motion picture is 120 minutes, longer than many television dramas yet still a severe time constraint.

By contrast, consider the investment of time and the commitment necessary to read a book. Reading speed depends on many variables, including the subject matter and the physical surroundings. But for purposes of discussion, it is interesting to note that at an average reading pace of two hundred words per minute, Harper Lee's classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes over eight uninterrupted hours to complete; Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* will demand your undivided attention for upward of forty-nine hours! As a final example, reading the 1.7 million words of the five books of George R. R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series (the basis for the immensely popular television series *Game of Thrones*) will take nearly 142 hours of focused effort.

Some might see these statistics as an indictment of the process of reading, but I see them in another light altogether. Reading a book is often an escape from the world around you. It enables you mentally to visit places and meet characters that you may never see in real life. Books offer detail and richness of description that can rival reality, and they are accessible to all. Books have often been described as doorways to other worlds, to other times, and to other perspectives on life. When you allow yourself to be captured by a book, the dozens, or scores, or hundreds of hours spent reading seem to fly past and often leave you wanting more. Press reports indicate that millions of readers are anxiously awaiting the next installment in the *Ice and Fire* series, still hungry even after a mental meal lasting about 142 hours.

The lesson then seems clear: if you really want to understand a subject or want to experience vicariously a different culture, career, or destination, reading a book is the way to achieve your objective. One final thought about the value of books comes from Harvard University's longest-serving president, Charles William Eliot, who once noted, "Books are the quietest and most constant of friends; they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors, and the most patient of teachers." Over the past eight years, the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program has purchased over a hundred thousand books and distributed them to ships, stations, and libraries throughout the fleet. We encourage you to seek out a book from one of these collections (or from a nearby public library or bookstore) and find in it a *friend, counselor, or teacher* of your own.

JOHN E. JACKSON