

J.R. Miller:

"The wish falls often warm upon my heartâ€”that I may learn nothing here, that I cannot continue in the other world; that I may do nothing here, but deeds that will bear fruit in heaven." Richter

It is said, that it would require hundreds of years to read the titles alone, of all the books in the world's libraries. Even of those that issue each year from the press newly written, one person can read but a very meager percentage. It is therefore a physical impossibility to read all the books which the art of printing has put within our reach. Even if our whole time were to be devoted to reading, we could in our brief years peruse but a very small portion of them. Then it must be considered that in these busy days, when active duties press so imperiously, the most of us can devote but a few hours each day at the best to reading, and very many find, not hoursâ€”but minutes only, for this purpose. There are hosts of busy people who cannot read more than a handful of books in a year.

It is settled, therefore, for us all, that we must be content to leave the great mass of printed books unread. Even those who are favored with most leisure cannot read one in a thousand, or ten thousandâ€”of the books that offer themselves. And those whose hands are full of activities can scarcely touch the great mountain of printed matter that looms up invitingly before them.

The important question, then, is: On what principle should we select out of this great wilderness of literature the books we shall read? If I can read but a dozen volumes this year, how am I to determine what volumes of the thousands they shall be?

For all books are not alike good. There are books that are not worth reading at all. Then, of those that are good, the value is relative. The simplest wisdom teaches that we should choose those which will repay us most richly. Let us look at some principles relating to this subject which are worthy of consideration.

There are books that are tainted with impurity. Of course all such are to be excluded from our catalogue. We can no more afford to read a vile book, however daintily and delicately the vileness may be draped, than we can afford to admit an impure companionship into our lives. Perhaps the most of us are not sufficiently careful in this matter. The country is flooded with publications, oftentimes attractively prepared, elaborately illustrated, their impurity concealed under harmless titlesâ€”but in which lurks the fatal poison of moral death. Many good people are beguiled into reading books or papers of this class, as a recreation. When we remember that everything we read leaves its impression upon our inner life and makes its enduring mark upon our character, the importance of this subject appears.

The geologist will take you to some old rock-formation, and will show you, on what was once the shore of an ancient sea, the traces left by the waves, the tracks of the bird that walked along in the sand one day, and the print of the leaf that fell and lay there. The shore hardened into rock, and the rock holds every trace through all these centuries. So it is in character-building. Everything that we take into our life leaves its permanent impression.

Then, when we consider the subject from a Christian view-point, it becomes even more important. Our work here is spiritual culture. We are to keep most sedulous watch over our hearts, that nothing shall tarnish their purity. We are to admit into our minds, nothing that may dim our spiritual vision or break in any degree the continuity of our communion with God; and it is well known that any corrupt thing, admitted even for a moment into our thoughts, not only stains our mindâ€”but leaves a memory that may draw a trail of stain after it forever.

It is related of a celebrated painter that he could not look upon a disgusting object when engaged in his work without seeing the effect of it in the productions of his brush and pencil afterward. A distinguished clergyman, in speaking of the effect upon the mind of reading certain classes of literature, gives a bit of his own experience. He was beguiled into reading a number of the works of a popular writer which were not supposed to have any irreligion in themâ€”but he could not preach with any comfort for six months afterward. If we would keep the tender joy of our heart-experiences unbroken, we must hold the most rigid watch over our reading, conscientiously excluding not only all that is obviously impureâ€”but all in which lurks even a suggestion of wrong.

There are many books that are free from immoral taint, that we must exclude alsoâ€”unless we want to throw away our time, and waste our opportunities for improvement. They are unobjectionable on moral groundsâ€”but are vapid, frivolous, empty. There are many popular novels that have even a sort of religious

odor, which yet teach nothing, give no heavenly impulse, furnish no food for thought, add no additional fact to our store of godly knowledge, leave no touch of beauty. There is nothing of value in them!

There is a great demand in these days, for this easy kind of reading. It agrees well with the indolent disposition of many, who want nothing that requires close application or vigorous thinking, or patient, earnest mental toil. It is not directly harmful. It could not be indicted for bad moral quality or influence. It leaves no debris of vile rubbish behind. It may be orthodox, full of sentimental talk about religion and of pious moralizing on sundry duties. It starts no impure suggestion. It teaches no false doctrine or wrong principle. It debauches no conscience. It flows over our souls like soft sentimental music.

And yet it is decidedly evil in its effects upon mind and heart—for it imparts no vigor; it vitiates the appetite; it enervates the mind and destroys all taste for anything solid and substantial in literature. It so enfeebles the powers of attention, thought, memory and all the intellectual machinery, that there is no ability left to grapple with really important subjects. Next to the great evil produced by impure and tainted literature, comes the debilitating influence of the enormous flood of inane, worthless publications filling the country.

If we can read in our brief, busy years—but a very limited number of books of any kind—should not those few be the very best, richest, most substantial and useful that we can find in the whole range of literature?

If one hundred books lie before me, and I have time to read but one of them; if I am wise, I will select that one which will bring to me the largest amount of useful information, which will start in my mind the grandest thoughts, the noblest impulses, the holiest conceptions, the purest emotions, or which sets before me the truest ideals of Christian virtue and godly character!

But how do most people read? On what principle do they decide what to read—or what not to read? Is there one in a hundred who ever gives a serious thought to the question, or makes any intelligent choice whatever? With many it is "the last novel," utterly regardless of what it is. With others, it is anything that is talked about or extensively advertised. We live in a time when the trivial is glorified and magnified, and held up in the blaze of sensation, so as to attract the gaze of the multitude, and sell. That is all many books are made for—to sell. They are written for money, they are printed, illustrated, bound, ornamented, titled—simply for money! There is no value in them. There was no high motive, no thought of doing good to anyone, of starting a new impulse, of adding to the fund of the world's joy or comfort or knowledge. They were wrought out of mercenary brains. They were made to sell, and to sell they must appeal to the desire for sensation, excitement, romance, diversion or entertainment.

So it comes to pass, that the country is flooded with utterly worthless publications, while really good and profitable books are left unsold and unread! The multitude goes into ecstasies over foolish tales, sentimental novels, flashy magazines, and a thousand trivial works that please or excite for a day—while the really profitable books, are passed by unnoticed!

Hence, while everybody reads, few read the really profitable books. Modern culture knows all about the spectacular literature that flashes up and dies out again—but knows nothing of history or true poetry or really great fiction. Many people who have not the courage to confess ignorance of the last novel, regard it as no shame to be utterly ignorant of the majestic old classics. In the floods of ephemeral literature, the great books are buried away. The 'Pilgrim's Progress' is only known from being referred to so often, while the thousand summer volumes on sentimental religion are eagerly devoured by pious people!

It is time for a revolution on this subject. We must gain courage to remain ignorant of the great mass of books in the annual Nile-overflow of the printing-press. We must read the great masters in religion, and we must have a system by which our reading shall be rigidly controlled and directed—or we shall spend all our life and not be profited. Aimless rambling from book to book accomplishes little. We should select conscientiously, wisely, systematically.

Having stricken from the catalogue everything that bears any immoral taint and whatever is merely ephemeral and trivial, there remains a grand residuum of truly great works, some old, some new, from which we must again select according to our individual taste, occupation, leisure, attainments and opportunities. We should read as a staple, works that require close attention, thought, and study.

All books that set before us grand ideals of godly character, are in some sense great. The ancients were accustomed to place the statues of their distinguished ancestors about their homes, that their children might, by contemplating them, be stimulated to emulate their noble qualities. Great lives embalmed in printed

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volumes, have a wondrous power to kindle the hearts of the young, for "a good book holds, as in a vial, the purest efficacy and extraction of the living intellect that bred it."

There are great books enough to occupy us during all our short and busy years; and if we are wise, we will resolutely avoid all but the richest and the best. As one has written, "We need to be reminded every day how many are the books of inimitable glory which, with all our eagerness after reading, we have never taken in our hands. It will astonish most of us to find how much of our industry is given to the books which leave no mark" how often we rake in the litter of the printing-press, while a crown of gold and rubies is offered us in vain!"