How we read in the digital age

The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Are So Important in a Distracted Time

By Chuck Leddy

Our is an age of digital distraction. More and more people, on buses, on subways or just walking down the street, are completely absorbed in their digital devices, fixated on sending text messages, reading e-mails, surfing the Web and, increasingly, reading e-books. As Mark Twain wrote, "We are all a little mad, and must not let it show." And yet, when we do, we shift our attention quickly, so as not to miss the next big thing coming onto our screens. In short, as former Los Angeles Times book editor and lifelong reader David Ulin notes, we are developing short attention spans that make it increasingly difficult to read those old-fashioned objects called books.

Ulin's narrative is one long, insightful meditation on how reading has become endangered in our digital age, and why the art of reading books is now more necessary than ever. Much of Ulin's focus is on the misunderstandings between him and his teenage son Noah about the value of reading. Noah, who's embraced digital technology like a fish takes to water, thinks reading is dull and largely meaningless. Ulin challenges him to go deeper, but the relationship, however difficult for both, also forces Ulin to confront what's happened to reading and why.

As Ulin looks at his son and the information stream the young man constantly—and comfortably—swims in, he begins to ask basic questions: "How do things [like reading books] stick to us in a culture where information and ideas flare up so quickly that we have no time to assess one before another takes its place?" Living amid information overload, our relationship with that information is necessarily superficial. But, as Ulin notes, a book isn't just a collection of data, text printed randomly on the page. To engage with a book, to really have a relationship with it, means inhabiting both the story and the worldview of its author. That's as far from instant messaging as it gets.

Ulin clearly loves books. He describes how they helped form his character and his career. Ulin's narrative powerfully illuminates his passionate engagement with the books he loves, from The Great Gatsby to Ulysses and many more. Reading a good book, Ulin writes, "can collapse the distances, bring us into not just the thoughts but also the perceptions of a writer, allow us, however fleetingly, to see things, literally, through his or her eyes." What Ulin celebrates about reading is its interiority, the way it serves as a kind of inner, intimate form of communication between writer and reader. "Perhaps most important," Ulin notes, "is the way reading requires us to pay attention, which cannot help but return us to the realm of inner life."

The kind of communication that digital technology promotes, writer Ulin is quite the opposite, filled with superficiality and the trivia of daily life (think of all the Facebook postings that basically say, "I'm eating a cheeseburger for lunch."). The distance created by virtual communication, and its lightning-fast speed, works against a deeper understanding of ourselves and others (the interiority Ulin so loves in books). Ulin summarizes his case against digital communication: "In the name of connectivity it distances us from each other and, even more, from ourselves."

Yet Ulin is anything but a neo-Luddite denouncing the elimination of digital technology. He's hooked on it himself, and, at times, can see clearly that advances like e-books could change the whole reading experience for the better by adding features like music, video and hyperlinks. He even learns from his son about a Facebook page (named "I Attend Jay Gatsby's Parties") that celebrates and comments upon The Great Gatsby. Ulin is bowled over by the enthusiasm and creativity of some of the page's posts, and it helps him understand how young people like his son read novels today.

Ulin ends the book by expressing the singular magic of reading the final pages of The Great Gatsby. For him, the dark beauty and deep psychological insight of Fitzgerald's words, and the way those words resonate inside him, makes the reading experience spiritually enlightening: "I find myself in the thrall of that interior communion, so Fitzgerald inhabits me and I animate him."

Reading Ulin's book provides all the pleasures of a rich conversation with a person who loves books as he loves life itself. Books will survive, Ulin believes, because we need them, and the speed and ease of digital technology are no substitute for the life lessons great literature teaches.

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Pulitzer Prize-winning author Chuck Leddy is contributing editor of The Writer and a member of the National Book Critics Circle. His book reviews appear regularly in The Boston Globe, and he has also contributed to The Washington Post and San Francisco Chronicle. He lives in the Boston area.