

LET ME TELL YOU ALL ABOUT THE BOOKS I HAVEN'T READ

Can a new course help devotees devour 20,000 words a minute?

Jonathan Margolis adjusts his specs.

Illustration: David Humphries

If you are reading this magazine it's likely that you are into nice stuff – quality goods, sophisticated entertainment, indulgent holidays. But I would also hazard a guess that there's one luxury you would give anything to have, yet fear you never will. I refer, of course, to the gift of more time.

I would also suggest that high on the list of stuff you would love more time for is the chance to read more. Not reading books – be they for pleasure, information or professional advancement – it's a plague of the educated and affluent. The guilty, uncracked spine, the unopened business report, even the unleaved coffee-table book are symbols of our overstuffed modern existence. I reckon eight out of 10 of the books on my shelves are virtually untouched. A recent survey for Teletext found that almost half of books we buy are never finished; I can't believe we actually read the other half. Bill Clinton's *My Life, Eats, Shoots & Leaves* by Lynne Truss, Captain Corelli's *Mandolin* by Louis de Bernières and, of course James Joyce's *Ulysses* are all top contenders for the unread classic of the past century.

Hovering like a bad smell around all your unread books, I would further bet, is an uneasy feeling that people we consider cleverer than is do not possess such things. We feel they somehow defy the clock and read more and this explains why they are more successful than us. A guy I was at school with, now one of the country's leading QCs, used to read translations of medieval Italian literature in a single evening when he was 16. And this he did for fun. The cause of the slow reader and the no-reader has been boosted lately in France (where they do love their unpick-unpable doorstops) by a new book (ironic, non?) called *How To Talk About Books You Haven't Read* by Pierre Bayard, a psychoanalyst and literature professor. I haven't read the thing (obviously), but according to a 300-word piece about it in a magazine, Bayard reassures us that just knowing about a book as opposed to having read it is no shame. Some intellectuals, Montaigne and Oscar Wilde among them, "often spoke about books they hadn't read, and didn't feel guilty about it", Bayard writes (I gather).

And it is Bayard's theory that the secret to knowledge and cultivation lies not in the traditional, linear approach to books (ie, reading them) but somehow "living with them", which led me to a fascinating three days recently, learning not just to "speed-read" but to "Quantum Read" – that is, to consume books as if they were bags of Maltesers, chowing down on them in a few minutes and, allegedly, getting sufficient out of such a cursory reading to satisfy.

Speed-reading has been around a long time, of course, and isn't universally respected. Think only of one of Woody Allen's most memorable lines – "I took a speed-reading course and read *War and Peace* in 20 minutes. It involves Russia." Quantum Reading was developed in the UK by a man called Paul Hobbs. At 20,000-30,000 words per minute, Quantum Reading purports to be much faster than

speed-reading (World Championship Speed Reading contestants apparently read up to a mere 2,000wpm). Hobbs teaches small groups of two or more over two to five days to achieve extraordinary feats of speed and comprehension – up to 10 non-fiction books a day, of which he claims you will understand and retain as much as 80 per cent of what you need.

Hobbs is a bright and charismatic chap and a quite brilliant tutor, rather like an old-fashioned grammar school teacher in style. The underlying theory of his system, adapted from that of Paul Scheele's PhotoReading system in the US, and other theorists, is controversial; it is that by training the eyes and brain to scan pages at a ridiculously high speed you can "download" a significant degree of familiarity with the text into the subconscious mind. The method is not one I would recommend doing on a plane or train. Firstly, you turn pages of the book as fast as you can, focusing on the spine, and then you do the same with the book upside down, from back to front. Having performed this bizarre one-minute or less "read", you can then access the data you have soaked up by a series of deeper scans. The first such is skip-reading with two fingers running down each page and allowing the already familiarised mind to guide you to the interesting bits, then reading these nuggets "normally". There are further stages after that, one of which is reading (but much faster than you probably do now) the whole book normally.

What is equally contentious about the Hobbs system (and infuriating to literary types) is the way it questions the paradigm that book needs to be read word for word to understand it. Hobbs asserts that just 20 per cent of any body of written information (and the system is heavily skewed towards non-fiction reading) is likely to contain the core messages, the rest being packaging. Accordingly, a lot of the course involves helping us establish exactly what our purpose in reading a book is.

The first two books I "read" on Hobbs' course were Stephen Fry's autobiography (*Moab is My Washpot, Arrow, £7.99*) and a book on Islam by Reza Aslan (*no god but God, Arrow, £8.99*) that I picked up in Singapore airport and never opened.

The first I wanted to read because my wife loves it, the second because a close friend is Moslem and I've always been curious to know more about her belief system.

The experience of "reading" each book in half an hour was fascinating and extremely nourishing. There's a strange, dream-like quality to the inward flow of information, which includes a slightly frustrating feeling that I would still benefit from reading the books (especially the Aslan one) more slowly. Hobbs doesn't disagree with the latter; he reiterates that the process of Quantum Reading is "hard work and boring" but that the benefit of finally having an interview-level appreciation of what a book is about after a few minutes of concentrated downloading is immensely empowering – and indeed it is. What was significant about my appreciation of the Aslan book is that I now realise that it is supremely relevant to my purpose (ie, understanding Islam better but with no need for much detail) and hence worthy of another read.

What your subconscious mind picks out to concentrate on in a Quantum-read book pretty much convinced me that the Quantum Reading system (and I'm sure PhotoReading too, if you're in the US) works. You may well be sceptical about some of the more leftfield parts, but it would be hard to come away still intimidated by the guilty pressure of unread material. It may well change your life for the better; it's early days yet, but I think it may just have done it for me.

Call Paul Hobbs on 01784 44 04 04 to discuss a course, which costs from £1,000 a day.

For more information, see the website www.thethinkingconsultancy.com



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