

# The Chronicle Review

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## Why I Read



James Yang for *The Chronicle Review*

**By Randall Silvis**

It's not for the reasons I recite to my students.

Reading will increase your vocabulary, I tell them, without you even realizing it.

Reading will make you more informed and more aware of the world around you.

Reading builds neurons and synapses and actually increases your brain power.

Reading will enhance your knowledge and your understanding of the world, and will give you something to talk about at parties. This, in turn, will make you sound more intelligent and less egocentric and will help you get laid.

Reading will make you a better writer. And being a good writer, I tell them, will help you get better grades in all of your subjects. Later, reading will make you stand out from the hundreds of others applying for the same job you want, and will increase your likelihood of getting that job.

Reading, I tell them, by virtue of making you more intelligent and more aware and informed, and a better writer and communicator, will help you, after you get that job you want, to be promoted faster and to climb the ladder of success more quickly than your nonreading colleagues.

Being a reader, I tell them, will help you make more money.

The person who can read but doesn't, I tell them, quoting Mark Twain—because Twain might be the only writer they have all heard of, even if they haven't read anything of his since grammar school—has no advantage over the person who can't read.

In other words, I tell them, if you can read but don't, you might as well be illiterate.

That's something they can chew on for a while.

I don't bother to tell them that reading will sensitize them to the human condition, because they haven't lived long enough to know what is meant by the human condition. Plus, they all believe that they are plenty sensitive already, and that in their whopping 19 or 20 years, they have already amassed an entire universe of sensitivity. Each of them believes he or she may be the most sensitive person alive.

There are other things I don't tell them because, if I did, they would sit there at their desks and stare up at me bewildered, or they would look at each other and roll their eyes, or they would just gaze into the middle distance and tune me out.

I don't tell them, for example, that reading a good novel, like watching a good movie, takes me to places I have never been and might never go. Although watching a movie—say, *The English Patient*—does allow me to experience the harsh beauty of the North African desert or the hushed tragedy of the Villa San Girolamo hospital room, it does so in only two dimensions, and so keeps me outside of those places, a spectator looking at a flat picture that moves.

Reading Michael Ondaatje's novel, on the other hand, puts me into that world, allows me to feel the desert's desiccating heat, the sand fleas and gritty sand in my socks; sucks the moisture from my tongue and nostrils, stings my eyeballs, and sears the soles of my feet. Reading drops me down into the hospital room where Almásy lies bandaged, grotesquely burned. Reading fills my nose and mouth with the putrefying scent of decaying flesh. It puts me so close to beautiful Hana's tears that I can very nearly reach out and wipe them from her cheek.

Reading, I do not tell my students, will startle their senses alive again by throwing open the world when their small, cluttered rooms have grown tight and stale.

Reading will lay a hand on their shoulders when they are homesick, or when their hearts have been broken, or when that C-minus seems like the greatest tragedy in the world.

Reading, I do not tell them, because they would not believe me, can keep you from cutting yourself, can keep you from suffocating in the quicksand of your self-absorbed despair.

Reading, I do not tell them, can turn on the lights in your darkness, can help you see yourself more clearly, can help you find yourself when you are lost.

Reading, I do not tell them, because this is something that cannot be taught but must be learned, can make you feel like not one lone cell stranded in the desolation of the world, but one of eight billion cells conjoined by the world, all hearts echoing the others in the song of one enormous heart.

I do not tell them that being a human is a lonely, lonely business and that only a couple of things can assuage that loneliness. Loving someone is the best remedy, I do not tell them. Making music is good medicine too. And so is reading, another form of love—an act of faith and trust and desire, an act of reaching out and of coming together.

My job is not to ease their loneliness. My job is to give them the skills to help them land a job. So I tell them what I know will keep them from staring at me in bewilderment, will keep them from rolling their eyes or gazing at the wall.

Being a reader can help you get laid, I tell them.

Being a reader can help you make more money.

Some of them will listen. A few will take heed. And every once in a while, one of them will come striding toward me, with a light in her eyes that has never shone

before, and a look on her face of inexpressible surprise, to tell me, "Professor! I read the most fantastic book last night!" And I will know that she, this one out of many, is on her way now to learning all of the rest.

*Randall Silvis, a writer, is teaching writing as an adjunct this year at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania and Seton Hill University. His novel *Flying Fish* is forthcoming from PS Publishing (London).*