

# How to Read and Why

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Information is endlessly available to us; where shall wisdom be found?" is the crucial question with which renowned literary critic Harold Bloom begins this impassioned book on the pleasures and benefits of reading well. For more than forty years, Bloom has transformed college students into lifelong readers with his unrivaled love for literature. Now, at a time when faster and easier electronic media threatens to eclipse the practice of reading, Bloom draws on his experience as critic, teacher, and prolific reader to plumb the great books for their sustaining wisdom.

Shedding all polemic, Bloom addresses the solitary reader, who, he urges, should read for the purest of all reasons: to discover and augment the self. His ultimate faith in the restorative power of literature resonates on every page of this infinitely rewarding and important book.

Harold Bloom's urgency in *How to Read and Why* may have much to do with his age. He brackets his combative, inspiring manual with the news that he is nearing 70 and hasn't time for the mediocre. (One doubts that he ever did.) Nor will he countenance such fashionable notions as the death of the author or abide "the vagaries of our current counter-Puritanism" let alone "ideological cheerleading." Successively exploring the short story, poetry, the novel, and drama, Bloom illuminates both the how and why of his title and points us in all the right directions: toward the Romantics because they "startle us out of our sleep-of-death into a more capacious sense of life"; toward Austen, James, Proust; toward Thomas Mann, Toni Morrison, and Cormac McCarthy; toward Cervantes and Shakespeare (but of course!), Ibsen and Oscar Wilde.

How should we read? Slowly, with love, openness, and with our inner ear cocked. Then we should reread, reread, reread, and do so aloud as often as possible. "As a boy of eight," he tells us, "I would walk about chanting Housman's and William Blake's lyrics to myself, and I still do, less frequently yet with undiminished fervor." And why should we engage in this apparently solitary activity? To increase our wit and imagination, our sense of intimacy--in short, our entire consciousness--and also to heal our pain. "Until you become yourself," Bloom avers, "what benefit can you be to others." So much for reading as an escape from the self!

Still, many of this volume's pleasures may indeed be selfish. The author is at his best when he is thinking aloud and anew, and his material offers him--and therefore us--endless opportunities for discovery. Bloom cherishes poetry because it is "a prophetic mode" and fiction for its wisdom. Intriguingly, he fears more for the fate of the latter: "Novels require more readers than poems do, a statement so odd that it puzzles me, even as I agree with it." We must, he adjures, crusade against its possible extinction and read novels "in the coming years of the third millennium, as they were read in the eighteenth and nineteenth century: for aesthetic pleasure and for spiritual insight."

Bloom is never heavy, since his vision quest contains a healthy love of irony--Jedediah Purdy, take note: "Strip irony away from reading, and it loses at once all discipline and all surprise." And this supreme critic makes us want to equal his reading prowess because he writes as well as he reads; his epigrams are equal to his opinions. He is also a master allusionist and quoter. His section on Hedda Gabler is preceded by three extraordinary statements, two from Ibsen, who insists, "There must be a troll in what I write." Who would not want to proceed? Of course, Bloom can also accomplish his goal by sheer obstinacy.

As far as he is concerned, Don Quixote may have been the first novel but it remains to this day the best one. Is he perhaps tweaking us into reading this gigantic masterwork by such bald overstatement? Bloom knows full well that a prophet should stop at nothing to get his belief and love across, and throughout *How to Read and Why* he is as unstinting as the visionary company he adores. --Kerry Fried

Harold Bloom is Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University. He has written more than sixty books, including *Cleopatra: I Am Fire and Air*, *Falstaff: Give Me Life*, *The Western Canon*, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, and *How to Read and Why*. He is a MacArthur Prize fellow, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the recipient of many awards, including the Academy's Gold Medal for Criticism. He lives in New Haven, Connecticut.

#### Other Books

*How to Read a Poem*. *How to Read a Poem* is an introduction to creative reading, the art of coming up with something to say about a text. It presents a new method for learning and teaching the skills of poetic interpretation, providing its readers with practical steps they can use to construct perceptive, inventive readings of any poem they might read. The Introduction sets out the aims of the book and provides some basic operating principles for applying the seven steps. In each subsequent chapter, the step is introduced and explained, relevant points of interpretative theory and methodology are discussed and illustrated with multiple examples, and the step is put into practice in a final section.

Through these final sections, step by step, the book develops an extended reading of a single poem, Letitia Landon's "Lines Written under a Picture of a Girl Burning a Love-Letter" from 1822. That reading is sustained across the whole arc of the book, providing a detailed worked example of how to read a poem. This accessible and enjoyable guide is the ideal introduction to anyone approaching the detailed study of poetry for the first time and offers valuable theoretical insights for those more experienced in the area.

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