



Read, Read, Read

Reading is fast becoming a lost art. In our digital age of television and Internet, even the leisurely reading of the morning paper is going out of habit with most people. Sometimes, when I happen to be in a particularly cynical frame of mind, I can't help thinking that the only people who read anymore are writers. Or is it that readers are more likely to want to write?

I've always been a bookworm. I was reading novels by the time I was seven or eight, absorbing myself in faraway worlds and the transformative power of the written word. I grew up with the likes of *The Black Stallion*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *Little Women*, reading them over and over, pounding their stories, their characters, their plot structures into my little brain. Nowadays, I read over 100 books a year, mostly in the hour before bed and on my days off. I read everything I can get my hands on: historicals, fantasies, science fiction, suspense, thrillers, creative nonfiction, biographies, philosophy, even the occasional chick lit. I've made it a personal goal to read all the classics before I die; so far I've made it up through the D's and hope to start in on Alexandre Dumas and Daphne du Maurier very soon.

I read because I enjoy it, because books are the needle to this junkie, because without them I'd probably go stark raving cranky and drive away friends and enemies alike. But aside from the pure pleasure of it, reading is also a vital part of writing. Whether we read because we write, or we write because we read—writers must read. The muse is just as demanding of its nourishment as our stomachs could ever be. Without the refreshment of other people's stories, our own are likely to wither up and die a gray, wrinkly death.

Two weeks ago, in response to my post about "The Value of Stories That Fail"

(<http://wordplay-kmweiland.blogspot.com/2009/04/value-of-stories-that-fail.html>) several of you, my readers, commented about the necessity of reading. Shaddy, who authors the blog "Paper Cut Screams" (<http://papercutscreams.blogspot.com/>) pointed out:

I've been reading much longer than I've been writing. Reading gives a writer a huge advantage because we just have a feel for how a sentence should be put together and how a story should proceed. We certainly aren't "there" when we pick up our pens, but we have a general feel for the direction we should go.

Most of us, when we first decide to put pen to paper and unleash the stories roaming around in our brains, have little to no idea what we're doing. We may never have heard of "POV" or "*in media res*" or "character motivation." Plot and even characters may well be a slippery notion. In short, we don't often know much of anything about writing. We only know we have a story to tell, and we sit down and tell it on little more than sheer instinct. And thanks to our history as readers, our instincts are usually pretty good.

Reading is one of those things that, since we mostly do it for pleasure, is easy to dismiss or shove onto the back burner. In the crazy scramble of life, as we struggle to find time to for all things we must *do* (including our writing), it's sometimes tempting to shove something as "useless" as reading onto the back burner. It's even easy to feel guilty about snuggling up with a book when other, more important tasks (such as rewriting our horrible climax or fiddling with the dialogue on page 39) are looming in the foreground. But I will go so far as to say that, if we intend to be any good as writers, reading is important, even vital, to our success. Study to show yourselves approved. Read not just for the joy of it, but as a means of strengthening the instinctual sense of what works.

MisterChris, author of the blogs "ADHD Family Fun" (<http://adhdfamilyfun.blogspot.com/>), "Creative Adventuring" (<http://creativeadventuring.blogspot.com/>), and "Got Shovel" (<http://gotshovel.blogspot.com/>) agreed with "the idea that readers are better writers—They at least know what they 'like to read'." And if you know what you like to read, chances are you'll figure out how to write it.

On my bulletin board by my desk, I've pinned a clipping from a literary magazine. It says simply:

read

read

read

read

read

read

read

read

read

like your life

depends on it,

because it does.



About the Author: K.M. Weiland grew up chasing Billy the Kid and Jesse James on horseback through the sand hills of western Nebraska, where she still lives. A lifelong fan of history and the power of the written word, she enjoys sharing both through her many fictional stories and her novel, *A Man Called Outlaw*. Visit her blog "Wordplay" to read her take on the writing life.

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