
Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 10:13

Is it just pure snobbery or is it essential?

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Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Crusoe - 02-04-2008 10:33

Not what they read, but whether they read - to me it's often (though not always) an indicator of how curious and keen to learn someone is, which is something I find attractive (and the absence of that curiosity unattractive). If all they read is, I dunno, pulp fiction or chick fic I'd also hesitate a little, but that is getting more into snobbery.

If someone has other interests that demonstrate the same thing then it wouldn't bother me so much.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Ginger Yellow - 02-04-2008 10:34

Being the NYT Book Review there's plenty of pointless snobbery in that article, but of course someone's reading habits have a bearing on how you perceive them. I wouldn't call it "judging", as such, but it does give you an insight into their personality and preferences.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 10:47

This just started off a discussion* on another board I frequent so I was interested to see what of thought.

I don't know; when someone says 'urgh, she says she reads Dan Brown, I couldn't possibly relate to someone that thick' I get all kinds of cross, not only because I don't really think it's a reliable indicator of anything of the sort.

I suppose also I think of reading as a bit of a private thing and don't really expect to often talk about books in proper detail with anyone. I married someone who doesn't really read fiction at all, which I would have said was impossible at one time. he does read non-fiction but just isn't obsessive about books the way I really am. Then again, we have vast serious and possibly irreconcilable problems, so I can't really use it as an argument either way.

*and led to a bit of a personal argument, but let's not do that

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Wyatt Earp - 02-04-2008 10:47

I do to some extent, yeah, as part of the overall picture. It wouldn't do, I don't reckon, to take a position like "If you don't share my passion for the philosophically-inspired short stories of Jorge Luis Borges then It Is Not To Be," but on the other hand, I don't think I could ever feel a hardcore Jeffrey Archer fan was any kind of soulmate. Such a person might be genuinely kind and worthy, but you know what? Not enough.

It even works on the level of friendship. I find I can easily tolerate bizarre claims on the part of my friends concerning music (such as, to choose from among the most egregious, the proposterous notion that the Sisters' version of 'Gimmie Shelter' is better than the original). Such foibles are easily outweighed by the fact that the holder of this (frankly buffoonish) opinion loves late Waugh and early Kundera. Among the many virtues of E10 Rifle, in my book, is that he's prone to go on about how brilliant The Great Gatsby is. If it needed underlining how great a guy Andy C is (which of course it doesn't), his penchant for alluding to Wodehouse would do the job. I mean I could go on.

Literary taste, more than taste in most other forms of art, does say something about the kind of person you are. It's rarely a dealbreaker where your mates are concerned, but it's in there, no doubt.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Ginger Yellow - 02-04-2008 10:52

"I suppose also I think of reading as a bit of a private thing and don't really expect to often talk about books in proper detail with anyone. "

See, I'm the opposite. Reading for me is all about discovering and sharing knowledge and beauty. One of the things I dislike most about OTF is the way Books is so neglected and we rarely have lengthy threads about individual books or authors - the ones we do have tend to be about fiction I haven't read, although I recall we had a big Ancestor's Tale one a while back.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Wyatt Earp - 02-04-2008 10:54

OTBooks seems livelier on here so far, for some reason. I guess the only way was up.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 10:55

Oh I don't mean I don't want to. I do, very much. When I say expect I mean, expect from most of the people I know. I would love it otf books develops lots and becomes full of interesting discussion.

I hang around on the GU books forum a lot but people on there talk mostly about clothes, cheese, etc, sometimes it seems.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by The Chubby Cyclist - 02-04-2008 11:41

I don't think I judge people by individual books. But the kinds of books they read tells you something about a person. I don't care if someone has failed to enjoy The Master And Margarita, or whether they have a penchant for bad chick-lit, say, provided that they read some fairly serious novels now and again, and do it because they enjoy it. If someone only reads chick-lit, or only reads bad American self-help books, then that tells you something about their character, I think.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Antonio Gramsci - 02-04-2008 11:42

I don't judge people as good or bad based on books, (unless, y'know, they happen to have the "Left Behind" series hanging around prominently) but sniffing around people's bookshelves at parties is certainly one of my habits. Perhaps more reliably than musical tastes, one's selection of books is a very quick guide to someone's "tribe" and overall outlook - whose opinions they value, etc.

Non-fiction is a better litmus test for this than fiction, I find.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Antonio Gramsci - 02-04-2008 11:43

Chubby and I are of one mind and one time, apparently.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 11:45

I can't get on with biography*, so biography enthusiasts unnerve me a bit. Then again, I could probably learn from one.

* I realise this is a stupid opinion to hold and I might as well say 'I don't like fiction' etc, but it's the general principle that I don't like; I can't help it.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 11:48

This will get close to the conversation there was on the old board about reading things in public to impress people/talking to people using their book as an icebreaker etc, but I remember some guy once congratulating me because I was reading a Patrick White novel. it's possibly one of the most patronising things I've ever heard.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Antonio Gramsci - 02-04-2008 11:59

I don't have a problem with biography. But people who *only* read biography are unnerving. It implies an especially blinkered approach to history.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Wyatt Earp - 02-04-2008 12:01

Be aware you're cussing down my Mum there.

But, er yeah. You're right.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 12:08

I think part at least of my problem is hearing people say things like, "You need to know about his life to understand his work," or, "Well, her sister was adopted so obviously that's why this book is about that," etc. Which is the fault of the person, not the biographies, etc, and it's not my only reason, but still.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Antonio Gramsci - 02-04-2008 12:16

Didn't mean to diss your mum, Wyatt. But it seems to me this may be a phase-of-life thing. Older people seem to buy and read bios more than the young. There's one young fellow in my office who is addicted to biography, but true to form he is the oldest soul in the office (he could be a grandfather right now).

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Etienne - 02-04-2008 13:53

I am, instinctively, a snob on matters cultural.

Which is why it's such a useful corrective to share a house with someone who watches mainly reality show crap, listens to Will Young, the Eagles and other MOR tosh, and reads mostly chick-lit or lightweight historical fiction. She's also intelligent, quick-witted, culturally literate and quite possibly could be soulmate, even if she doesn't appreciate Wodehouse.

I guess the crucial factor is that she's quite capable of enjoying quality fiction or quality TV (I'm less sure about the music), but usually chooses not to as she prefers to keep her concentration for other stuff. I don't agree with that as an order of priorities, but it's clearly qualitatively different from someone who is dismissive of, or incapable of understanding it.

Frankly, I don't believe anyone isn't judged on what books they read though, and I don't think it's particularly dubious to do so.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by boris - 02-04-2008 14:13

Similarly, Chubbs, if all they read is fairly serious novels that might also suggest something negative about their character.

Having said that, I try not to judge people at all by things like what books they like or don't like, but rather by the opinions they hold (which aren't always reflected in their chosen reading matter). I'd be a tad suspicious, though, if I went into someone's house and all they had on their bookshelves were the Brimson brothers' books, or eulogies to Hitler etc.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by toro toro toro toro - 02-04-2008 14:15

I judge people by the books they read, it's unavoidable. But I try to use it as a basis for further enquiry, rather than for forming an opinion. After all, there's *shitloads* of stuff I haven't read, or even much heard of, which other people like and is probably great. So I can't really turn my nose up at someone's not knowing Roth if I haven't read Woolf...

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Antonio Gramsci - 02-04-2008 14:16

I have a Brimson book. It's not as horrible as some other football books I've had the misfortune to purchase.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Amor de Cosmos - 02-04-2008 14:19

In answer to the thread's title I'd have to say no. Much more influential is how people respond and think about the books they've read, rather than the volumes themselves. In fact I have more respect for someone who'd read the works of Jeffrey Archer, for example, and had something interesting and original to say about them, than another person who's shelves are laden with modern classics but merely regurgitates fashionable opinion regarding their contents.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 14:20

Yeah one of the nicest things is to get recommendations, find out about new stuff etc, so people do not have to like the same things at all for me to like them.

If I ever met anyone who claimed to be able to like Woolf I'd be thoroughly impressed. I struggled through Mrs Dalloway and then decided life was too short.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 14:22

In fact I have more respect for someone who'd reads the works of Jeffrey Archer, for example, and had something interesting and original to say about them, than another person who's shelves are laden with modern classics but merely regurgitates fashionable opinion regarding their contents.

or just read them so as to say that they have read them.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by toro toro toro toro - 02-04-2008 14:23

Well, the Woolf example was my cheesemonger, and she usually has impeccable taste. I owe her Beckett, so she gets more leeway than most.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by boris - 02-04-2008 14:29

Antonio Gramsci wrote:

I have a Brimson book. It's not as horrible as some other football books I've had the misfortune to purchase. I won't judge you for it, Antonio

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Antonio Gramsci - 02-04-2008 14:30

You're more forgiving than I am, obviously.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Ginger Yellow - 02-04-2008 14:30

"In answer to the thread's title I'd have to say no. Much more influential is how people respond and think about the books they've read, rather than the volumes themselves."

That goes without saying, surely. Anyone (with money) can have a collection.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Lyra - 02-04-2008 14:30

I've never read any Beckett, which I know is thoroughly appalling. Too thick for Nabokov and not even an attempt at Beckett. I don't know.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Wyatt Earp - 02-04-2008 21:50

Amor de Cosmos wrote:

In answer to the thread's title I'd have to say no. Much more influential is how people respond and think about the books they've read, rather than the volumes themselves. In fact I have more respect for someone who'd reads the works of Jeffrey Archer, for example, and had something interesting and original to say about them, than another person who's shelves are laden with modern classics but merely regurgitates fashionable opinion regarding their contents. There's a lot in that, certainly.

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Re:Do you judge people by the books they read?

Posted by Reed Miller - 02-04-2008 22:14

Lots of good points.

What people have to say and think about what they've read is more important than that they've read it and or liked it.

I've known a few people who don't read at all who were fine people, but I don't think we'd have much to talk about over the long term.

People who read fluffy "Chick Lit" don't bother me as long as they understand that what they're reading is not terribly profound. After all, a lot of what I read is "genre fiction." I am turned off by people who read Dan Brown or The Secret or various quack self-help books and believe that it's really great literature and/or philosophy.

I think it was Lenin who said, "It's one thing to be smart about dumb things, it's quite another to be dumb about smart things."

I agree that biographies provide a limited perspective on history, but good biographies can often say a lot about history. I also agree that they seem to be popular with older people and I'm not sure why that is exactly, but I think part of it is that biographies seem to be marketed by the publishers a lot more heavily than other kinds of historical non-fiction. I could be wrong but it seems like I see more reviews of biographies in the Washington Post book section or flogged by the author on Charlie Rose or The Daily Show than other kinds of historical books.

Perhaps its because biographies are easier to summarize. It's easier for a quick review of talk show blurb to say "It's the biography of FDR and its pretty good" than it would be to explain "It's a survey of the complex social, economic and political upheavals in the US in the between-the-wars period with special attention on the causes of the Great Depression, American Isolationism, the great wave of Immigration and Keynesian economic policies."

The latter would probably be more interesting and more thorough, but it's harder to sell, I imagine.

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