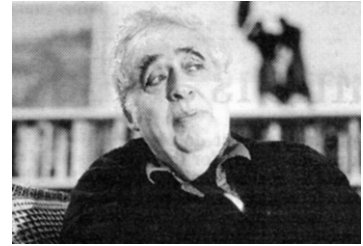


If you want to feel part of humanity, read

1 **W**HY do people read? To cite only the baldest dichotomy, some, addicted to Tom Clancy or Stephen King, look for fear and adventure. Others want to understand relationships and identify with characters.



2 This book sets out to do a very valuable thing: to define what the best motives might be for reading. Bloom is — famously — anything but a cultural egalitarian. In *The Western Canon* (1994) he stated that there were categorically better and worse books and gave us a long list of those he felt we should read.

3 High on his list were Shakespeare, Dante and Dickens. Bloom was savagely attacked by many academics for his audacity. But Bloom, who is in his 70s, does not care what academics think and his new book shows it.

4 So why does Bloom think we should read? Chiefly in order to understand ourselves, he argues. There are authors who can express our very own thoughts, but with a clarity and psychological accuracy we could not match. They know us better than we know ourselves.

5 What was shy and confused within us is unapologetically and cogently phrased in their writing, our pencil-marks in the margins indicating where we have found a piece of ourselves, a sentence or two built of the very substance of which our own minds are made — a congruence all the more striking if the work was written by someone in an age of top hats or togas. We should venerate these strangers for reminding us who we are.

6 We should also read, says Bloom, in order to feel less lonely. There are books which speak to us no less intensely — but more reliably — than our friends and lovers. They prevent the morose suspicion that we do not fully belong to the human species, that we lie beyond comprehension. The author locates words to depict a situation we thought ourselves alone in feeling and so makes us feel better.

7 If we are able to relate our experiences to those described in great books written long ago, it is, says Bloom, because there are fewer human types than there are people. Hamlet is one character in a play set at the Danish court, and yet there are, Bloom points out, Hamlets all round us.

8 The genius of Shakespeare was to thread together disparate characteristics and so define a permanent human possibility. There are many Ophelias in New York.

9 I should also warn any potential readers that much of this book is devoted to telling us not how and why but rather what we should read. And the advice is liable to leave many of us — even the most educated — feeling uncomfortable.

- 10 The modern book-lover is condemned to a nauseous feeling of being under-read, and a visit to a large bookshop may provoke as much despair as exhilaration.
- 11 Sadly, Bloom does not rescue us from this feeling: in his eyes, we have to read more or less every "classic" book, and if possible read it three times, then read it aloud, then memorise it. This may be fine if you are a professor of literature with time on your hands, but it is hardly going to help the common reader whom Bloom seeks to address.

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