

TOO MANY BOOKS, NOT ENOUGH TIME

How to Finally Read the Books You Keep Meaning To

*A free ebook for every book lover
who has ever fallen asleep with a good book on their face.*

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*"A reader lives a thousand lives before he dies. The man who
never reads lives only one." — George R.R. Martin*

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Introduction

The Stack That Stares Back at You

You know exactly what this is about. The pile on the nightstand. The shelf you added a second row to. The e-reader with 340 unread titles. The Goodreads list that has stopped being a wish list and started feeling like homework.

You love books. You genuinely, deeply, joyfully love them. You remember the exact moment you fell for reading, maybe curled up somewhere as a kid, the whole world gone quiet, hours disappearing without you noticing. You remember the particular feeling of finishing a book so good it made you sad to leave it behind.

And yet here you are. Life piling up around you like the books themselves, meaning to get back to it, meaning to carve out the time, finding the weeks slipping past and the stack getting no shorter.

This is not a self-help book telling you to wake up earlier. It is not a productivity guide with a reading tracker and a colour-coded system. It is also not going to make you feel guilty for not reading *War and Peace* this month, or any month.

This is a book about getting back to the thing you love. About making peace with the stack, the list, the guilt, and the beautiful impossible abundance of books that are out there waiting for you. It is written by someone who has felt every single thing you are feeling, for every reader who has ever bought a book with the best of intentions and then watched it sit there being quietly disappointed for six months.

The books are not going anywhere. And neither is your love of reading. It just needs a little room to breathe.

Let us start there.

Chapter One

Why Reading Feels Hard Now (And It Is Not Your Fault)

Before we talk about how to read more, we need to be honest about why reading less happened in the first place. And the answer is not that you got lazy.

Something shifted. It probably happened slowly enough that you did not notice until the gap between you and your books had already grown wide. You used to read every night. Now you pick up a book, read three pages, put it down, pick up your phone, put your phone down, and somewhere in there fall asleep. You wake up the next morning and the book is on the floor and you cannot quite remember what those three pages were about.

This is not a personal failure. It is the entirely predictable result of living in a world that has been specifically engineered to compete with your attention at every moment of every day.

Your attention is worth billions of dollars to companies whose entire business model depends on capturing it and never giving it back.

Social media feeds are designed by some of the most brilliant minds on the planet to be impossible to leave. Streaming services auto-play the next episode before the credits roll. News apps notify you constantly. The world is loud, and it never stops. Reading, by contrast, requires you to be quiet, to be patient, to let a single voice unfold at its own pace. These are not easy things to do anymore.

A generation ago, there was simply less competition. You read in the evenings because there was less else to do. That is not nostalgia talking, it is just true. The attention economy did not exist. The option to doomscroll for three hours

was not on the table. Reading filled the quiet spaces in a day that were genuinely quiet.

Those quiet spaces still exist. You just have to take them back deliberately, which feels like effort, and effort is the last thing most of us have at the end of a long day.

The Concentration Problem

Here is the other thing nobody really wants to say out loud: spending years jumping between apps, notifications and short-form content changes the way your brain wants to work. It starts to expect novelty every thirty seconds. It gets restless when things move slowly. It starts to feel like an itch when nothing is happening.

Reading a novel is, by design, a slow-burn experience. Things build. Characters develop over dozens of pages. The payoff is deep and real but it takes time to arrive. A brain trained on quick rewards can find this genuinely uncomfortable at first, especially when you are out of practice.

The good news is that brains are not fixed. The discomfort does not last. Every time you sit with a book for twenty minutes without reaching for your phone, you are rebuilding something. It comes back. Readers who come back to books after long breaks almost always say the same thing: within a week or two, it clicked again. The hunger came back. The patience returned.

But understanding why it is hard makes it easier to be kind to yourself when it is.

A gentle truth: If you have been struggling to read, you are not broken. You are just a person living in the twenty-first century. That is all this is.

The Guilt Makes It Worse

There is a particular kind of reader guilt that sits alongside the unread pile. Every book you have not read becomes a small accusation. The classics you always meant to tackle. The debut novel you bought because you wanted to support the author. The non-fiction book your friend pressed into your hands saying you absolutely have to read this.

That guilt creates a strange kind of resistance. The more loaded a book feels, the harder it is to pick up. The harder it is to pick up, the more guilty you feel. The more guilty you feel, the more you avoid the shelf entirely and watch another episode of television instead.

We are going to untangle all of that. But first, let us look at the story you might have been telling yourself about what your reading life is supposed to look like.

Chapter Two

The Reading Life You Were Sold vs. The One You Can Actually Have

Somewhere along the way, most readers pick up an idea of what a proper reading life looks like. It usually involves a wing-backed chair, excellent light, a cup of tea that is always at the right temperature, and long uninterrupted hours.

That is a beautiful picture. It is also, for most people living actual lives with jobs and children and commutes and a kitchen that needs cleaning, essentially fictional.

The gap between the reading life you imagined and the reading life you have is one of the main reasons people feel like they are failing at something they love. They are not measuring themselves against what reading actually is. They are measuring themselves against a fantasy.

Real reading happens in ten-minute windows while the pasta boils. It happens on the bus. It happens in waiting rooms and in the five minutes before sleep takes you.

Real reading is interrupted. Real reading means losing your place and going back three pages. Real reading is falling asleep mid-chapter and picking it up again the next day. Real reading looks nothing like the Instagram photo and everything like a normal human life.

This matters because once you stop waiting for the perfect conditions, you start seeing opportunities that were always there.

The Quantity Myth

There is also an unhealthy obsession in reading culture with how many books you read. Reading challenges encouraging you to finish fifty books a year. Goodreads asking you in January to set your annual goal. Friends casually mentioning they read ninety-three books last year, as if this is a normal thing to say at a dinner party.

The number of books you read has almost nothing to do with how rich your reading life is. Someone who reads three books a year slowly and lovingly, who thinks about them for weeks, who talks about them with friends and returns to favourite passages, is having a far more profound reading experience than someone blazing through a book every four days and barely pausing to absorb what happened.

You are not in a race. There is no prize. The goal is not to read more books. The goal is to love reading more. Those are not the same thing, and confusing them is making a lot of people miserable.

Try this: Delete your annual reading goal for a while. Just read. Read slowly if you want. Read one book three times if you want. Stop counting.

Practical tip: Write down the last three books you genuinely loved and ask yourself what they had in common. That pattern is your reading DNA. Use it to choose your next book rather than relying on a bestseller list or someone else's recommendation.

What Kind of Reader Are You, Really?

Part of finding your reading life is being honest about the reader you actually are rather than the reader you think you should be. Some questions worth sitting with:

Do you genuinely enjoy literary fiction, or do you read it because you think you should? There is no wrong answer here. A gripping crime novel read with real pleasure is worth a hundred literary prizes read with dutiful joylessness.

Do you like reading at night, or does it always make you fall asleep? Maybe you are a morning reader. Maybe you are a lunchtime reader. Most people never ask this question. They just assume reading happens at bedtime and then wonder why they keep waking up with the book on their face.

Do you like to have one book on the go, or do you secretly do better with two or three? There are readers who find switching between books energising and readers who find it completely derailing. Neither way is right. Know which one you are.

Do you like to own books, or would you actually be happier using the library and keeping your shelves manageable? The library is wonderful and underused and it is full of books that cost you absolutely nothing.

The reading life that works is the one built around who you actually are. Not the version of yourself you want to be. The real one, in the real house, with the real schedule.

Chapter Three

Giving Yourself Permission to Stop

This might be the most liberating chapter in this book, and also the one that will cause the most internal resistance.

You are allowed to stop reading a book you are not enjoying.

You did not sign a contract. The author will not know. Nobody is grading you. There are too many good books in the world to spend your precious reading time grinding through one that is not working for you.

And yet. The guilt. The sense of obligation. The feeling that you have already spent money on it, or that other people loved it and there must be something wrong with you for not connecting with it, or that you are so close to the end that stopping now would be a waste.

The sunk cost of thirty pages already read is not a good reason to read two hundred more that you are dreading.

Giving yourself permission to abandon a book is one of the most significant things you can do for your reading life. It keeps reading feeling like a choice rather than a chore. It means every book you are reading is one you actually want to be reading. It makes the whole thing lighter.

The 50-Page Rule

Some readers like having a simple rule to take the decision out of their hands. The one that gets mentioned most often goes like this: give every book fifty pages. If by page fifty you are not engaged, put it down. The book might be for

someone else. It might be for you at a different time in your life. But right now, it is not the book for you, and that is fine.

Other readers prefer to subtract their age from a hundred and use that number. Which means the older you get, the less time you are obligated to give to something that is not working. This feels exactly right.

There is also a simpler version: if you are dreading picking it up, put it down. Your body already knows. It does not need a rule.

The Books You Think You Should Read

A special word about the canonical classics. The long Victorian novels. The important works of literature that sit on your shelf like slightly disappointed ancestors.

You do not have to read them. That is the truth. No law of the universe requires you to get through *Ulysses*. If you want to read them, wonderful. If you have started them three times and never made it past page forty, perhaps they are simply not your books. That does not mean you are not a proper reader. It means you are a reader with particular tastes, which is exactly what every great reader is.

The classics that survive do so because they have spoken genuinely to millions of people over time. But not every classic speaks to every person, and the ones that are right for you will feel right the moment you open them. You will not need to force them.

The shelf confession: Pick up one book from your shelf that has been sitting unread for more than two years. Ask yourself honestly: am I ever going to read this? If the answer is probably not, donate it and let it find its person. It will be a relief.

Chapter Four

Making Time Without Wrecking Your Life

The time exists. It is just currently occupied by other things. The question is whether any of those things are worth trading.

Let us be honest about where the time actually goes. Most of us spend more time on our phones than we realise, far more. The average person in 2024 spent over four hours a day on their phone. Four hours. That is not a judgement, it is just a number. But it is a number that puts the complaint about not having time to read in a rather interesting light.

This is not a lecture about screentime. This is just the observation that the time is usually there. It is a question of what you want to do with it.

The Small Windows

The single most effective change most readers make is deciding to use small pockets of time rather than waiting for long, uninterrupted stretches. Twenty minutes of reading a day adds up to roughly fifteen books a year. Twenty minutes is nothing. It is the time spent waiting for a meeting to start. It is the coffee break. It is the ten minutes before the rest of the house wakes up.

The habit that works for a lot of people is embarrassingly simple: put the book where the phone is. On the nightstand, on the coffee table, in your bag. Every time you reach for the phone out of boredom or habit, the book is right there instead. It does not work every time. But it works often enough.

You do not need to redesign your life to read more. You just need to make the book slightly easier to reach than the phone.

Audiobooks deserve a proper mention here, not as a lesser form of reading but as a genuinely wonderful one. Commuting, cooking, walking the dog, doing the dishes, going for a run: all of these become reading time the moment you have a good audiobook queued up. People who resist audiobooks often find that the right narrator in the right book converts them completely. It is still reading. It is still living inside a story. Give it a proper try if you have not.

Creating a Reading Ritual

There is real power in having a specific time and place that your brain begins to associate with reading. Not because routines are inherently virtuous, but because they lower the activation energy required to start. When reading is just what you do at nine in the evening with a cup of tea in that particular chair, you do not have to decide to read. You just do it.

The ritual does not need to be elaborate. It can be as simple as making a hot drink and sitting somewhere comfortable with no screens nearby. But if you do it consistently for a few weeks, your brain will start to associate that sequence of actions with the pleasurable absorption of a good book, and it will start to want it.

The hardest part is always the first few pages, when your brain is still trying to pull you back to your notifications. Getting past that initial resistance is the whole battle. Once you are in, you are in. Ten minutes later you will not want to stop.

Worth trying: Set a very small reading goal. Not a page count or time target. Just: I will read at least one page before I sleep. One page is so undemanding that you will almost always do more. But even on the hardest days, one page counts.

Reading and the People Around You

A quick word about reading in households where not everyone reads, or where children need your attention, or where life is genuinely, relentlessly full. Carving out reading time in those circumstances is not selfish. Looking after something that brings you joy and rest is not selfish. You are allowed to close a door for thirty minutes. You are allowed to say this is my time now.

Some of the most devoted readers alive are parents of small children who read in the car during school pick-up. They read in the bathroom. They read on the one morning a week they wake up before the rest of the house. They are fierce about it, and they are right to be. Their reading life belongs to them.

Chapter Five

How to Choose What to Read Next

The paradox of abundance is real. When you have two hundred books on your to-read list, choosing one feels almost impossible. So you choose none, and read nothing. This is fixable.

The first thing to do is stop thinking of your to-read list as something you are obligated to work through in order. It is not a queue. It is more like a menu. You do not feel guilty for not ordering everything on the menu every time you visit a restaurant. You just order what you want today.

What you want today depends on your mood, your energy, what you are going through. Some days call for a novel that will completely absorb you. Some days call for something funny and easy. Some days call for a non-fiction book that will make you think about your life. Some days call for a re-read of something so comfortable it is like putting on an old jumper.

All of those are valid choices. Learning to check in with what you actually want to read rather than what you feel you ought to read is one of the most important skills a reader can develop.

Mood Reading

Mood reading is exactly what it sounds like: choosing your next book based entirely on how you feel right now. It sounds indulgent. It is actually just practical. A book that fits your current mood will be read. A book that does not will sit unread and make you feel guilty.

The reader going through a hard time who picks up a serious, devastating literary novel because it is on their to-read list will struggle. The same reader

who picks up a comforting, warm, funny book will read until two in the morning and feel genuinely better for it. Neither book is superior. One is right for this moment and one is not.

It is worth knowing your own patterns. When you are tired and depleted, what works? When you are energised and curious, what works? When you are sad, what do you reach for? When you are happy and want to celebrate that feeling? Over time you will build an instinct for this that serves you well.

There is no hierarchy of books. A novel that brings you joy, makes you laugh, keeps you turning pages at midnight is doing exactly what a book is supposed to do.

Getting Good Recommendations

The problem with book recommendations is that most of them are imprecise. Someone tells you a book is brilliant without knowing enough about what you love to know whether it is brilliant for you. The most useful recommendations come from people who know your taste deeply, or from sources that have proven reliable for you specifically over time.

Finding a reviewer whose taste reliably overlaps with yours is worth more than any bestseller list. It might be a friend, a book blogger, a bookseller at an independent bookshop who actually reads, or a podcast host. When you find them, hold onto them.

Bookshop staff are wildly underrated. A good independent bookshop is staffed by people who read obsessively and take genuine pleasure in matching readers to books. Tell them what you loved recently and what you hated and let them do their job. It is one of the great pleasures of the book world.

Before you buy: Ask yourself whether this is a book you want to own or a book you want to read. These are different things. If it is the latter, try the library first. Your shelves will thank you, and so will your bank account.

The Re-Read

Re-reading is one of the most undervalued experiences in a reading life, and one that people give up too easily because of the lurking guilt of the unread pile.

When you re-read a book you love, you are not wasting time that could be spent on new books. You are going back to a place that has meaning for you. You will find things in it that you missed the first time. You will notice how much you have changed since you last read it. You will feel the particular comfort of being somewhere familiar and beloved.

Some books are worth reading once. Some are worth returning to for the rest of your life. There is nothing wrong with spending a week back inside a world you already know and love.

Chapter Six

Reading in the Real World

This chapter is about the practical, slightly messy reality of keeping a reading life going when life insists on being complicated.

Reading slumps are real and they happen to every reader. There will be weeks and sometimes months where you cannot find your way into a book. Every opening page feels like work. Nothing holds you. You start things and abandon them. You feel disconnected from the thing you usually love most.

This happens to everyone. This happens to people who read professionally. It is not a sign that you have lost your love of reading. It is usually a sign that something else in your life is taking up too much space, whether that is stress, grief, anxiety, exhaustion, or just the general weight of getting through a difficult stretch.

The right response to a reading slump is almost never to push harder. It is usually to lower the bar completely. Go back to something comfortable and familiar. Try a genre you have never considered. Try short stories, which ask less of you than a novel. Try graphic novels. Try very short books. Try not reading at all for a while and seeing what you miss about it.

The slump always ends. Reading always comes back. Trust that.

The Book You Cannot Get Into

Different from a slump is the experience of a particular book that will not yield to you. You pick it up, you try, you put it down, you feel guilty, you try again. This specific torture.

Sometimes the answer is that the book is simply not for you and never will be, and you are allowed to stop. But sometimes the answer is timing. Books meet us when we are ready for them. There are books that have defeated readers for years and then been read in a single weekend when the time was finally right. If a book feels like it might become important to you but is not landing right now, put it on a different shelf. Not the abandoned pile. A waiting shelf. Come back in a year.

Talking About Books

One of the things that makes reading feel alive is talking about it. Not reviews, not recommendations necessarily, just conversation. The kind you have when both people have read the same book and you discover that you experienced it completely differently. The moment when someone else puts into words exactly the thing you felt but could not articulate. The argument about a character's choices that goes on far longer than any argument about that character deserves.

Book clubs are one way to get this, and a good one is a genuinely wonderful thing. But informal conversations count just as much. Telling someone at work that you have been up too late reading something brilliant. Sending your friend a text that just says you have to read this. The conversation that starts on social media and sprawls into something real.

These conversations are part of what reading is for. Books want to be discussed. They are more fully themselves when they are shared.

The Physical Book vs. Everything Else

Print books, ebooks, audiobooks. Everyone has opinions. Most of those opinions are more tribal than practical, and the honest answer is that each format has genuine advantages and the best readers usually use all three depending on context.

The physical book is tactile and beautiful and does not need a charge and has pages you can actually turn and a satisfying weight in your hand and a spine that looks good on a shelf. It is also heavy in your bag and requires decent light and cannot be read with one eye while doing other things.

The ebook is light and holds a library in your pocket and lets you read in the dark without disturbing anyone and allows you to buy a book at midnight when the desire hits. It is also easy to forget you own because it is invisible and occasionally feels like looking at a screen when you are already tired of screens.

The audiobook is transformative for commuters, for people with visual impairments, for anyone who has hours of their life taken up by activities that occupy their hands but not their minds. It is also easy to zone out during and occasionally ruin with a narrator whose voice turns out to be deeply irritating.

Use whatever works. Mix formats. Use the library. Let the book form follow the function and stop feeling guilty about reading on your phone if that is what you actually do.

Chapter Seven

The Long Game

A reading life is not built in a month. It is something that grows slowly, in the background of a life, accumulating depth and meaning over years and decades.

The readers who end up with the richest relationships with books are not the ones who read the most in a given year. They are the ones who kept coming back. Who read through periods when it was hard. Who were honest about what they needed from their books at different stages of their lives. Who let their taste change and evolve. Who were not precious about the rules.

There will be seasons of your life when you read constantly. There will be seasons when you barely read at all. Both are fine. Both are part of a long reading life. The seasons when reading felt impossible often turn out to be the ones that taught you something about what you actually wanted when you came back to it.

What Books Do That Nothing Else Does

It is worth pausing, in all the practical conversation about habits and time and format, to remember what books are actually doing for us. Why we want this in our lives.

Books offer something that almost nothing else in modern life does: depth. Not the two-minute summary version. Not the hot take or the thread. The full, slow, considered, patient unfolding of a world, a mind, an argument, a story. The experience of living inside someone else's consciousness for hours. The gradual, irreversible expansion of your understanding of what it is to be human.

Reading literary fiction has been shown to increase empathy in measurable ways. Reading widely across different cultures, experiences and periods builds a kind of understanding that is impossible to get from any other source. And all of that is before we even get to the pure pleasure of a great story told well, which needs no justification beyond itself.

Books make you more yourself, and at the same time, they make you larger than yourself. There is nothing else quite like it.

Knowing this is useful when reading feels hard. It is useful when the phone is calling and the book requires patience. You are not just passing time when you read. You are doing something that changes you, slowly, in ways you might not even notice until years later when you recognise that a book you read at twenty-three shaped the person you became at forty.

Teaching Reading to the People Around You

If you have children in your life, the greatest gift you can give them is not the right books. It is watching you love reading. Children who see the adults around them absorbed in books, who grow up understanding that reading is something grown-ups choose and enjoy rather than something they are made to do at school, are far more likely to become readers themselves.

You do not have to make it a lesson. You just have to be a reader, visibly, in front of them. Read at the dinner table sometimes. Tell them what you are reading about. Say out loud that you are excited to get back to your book. Let them see the joy.

The Unread Pile, Revisited

Let us go back to the stack. The nightstand pile. The shelf that needs a second row. The e-reader with 340 unread titles.

That stack is not a measure of your failure. It is a record of your curiosity. It is proof that you have spent years collecting things that interested you, that moved you, that made you think this might be worth my time. Every book on that pile is an invitation. None of them are obligations.

You will read some of them and they will change your life. You will read some of them and forget them within a week and that will be fine too. You will not read some of them, and you will eventually let them go to someone else, and they will find their reader, and that is exactly what is supposed to happen.

The pile is not the enemy. It is just a pile of books. And you love books. Start there.

A Final Word

The Books Are Still There

Here is what I want to leave you with.

The love did not go anywhere. Whatever life has done to your reading habit, whatever the years have taken from your quiet time or your concentration or your guilt-free evenings, the love of books is still exactly where you left it. It has been waiting very patiently.

You do not have to read more books. You do not have to keep up. You do not have to finish things that bore you or impress anyone with your list or justify your choices or measure yourself against any reader other than the one you want to be.

You just have to pick up the book.

Not a perfect book. Not the right book. Just whatever is nearest. Just one page. Just enough to remember that this is the thing you love.

The rest will follow. It always has.

Happy reading.

Quick Reference

Ten Things to Remember on the Hard Days

1. You are allowed to stop reading any book that is not working for you. No explanation needed.
2. There is no correct number of books to read in a year. Two books read lovingly beats twenty read guiltily.
3. The slump always ends. Every reader has them. They are not permanent.
4. Audiobooks count. Graphic novels count. Re-reads count. Your reading life, your rules.
5. The pile is made of invitations, not obligations. You are not behind.
6. Twenty minutes of reading a day adds up to roughly fifteen books a year. Small windows are enough.
7. Put the book where the phone is. That is often the whole fix.
8. The perfect reading conditions are not coming. Read now, in the imperfect ones.
9. Genre fiction is not lesser fiction. Read what you love without apology.
10. You are a reader. Not because of what you have read or how much. Because of what you feel when you open a good book. That has always been enough.

*Share this ebook freely with anyone who loves books.
The only thing better than reading is reading together.*
