

When I meet a friend or acquaintance I've not seen for awhile, one of my first questions--after observing the expected formalities of "how have you been?" and "what are you doing these days?" --is very likely to be, "What are you reading now?" The answer I never want to hear and seldom do, is "Nothing." Reading is such an integral part of my life and that of my friends and family that *not* to have a book underway is both unusual and undesirable.

Our work and our way of living are not amicable to a lot of travel, we do not have television, we have gone to only a handful of movies over the years, and we don't belong to a lot of clubs or societies, so reading is the perfect pastime for us when we have leisure hours.

Although we have a few hundred books of our own, regular trips to the public libraries provide the bulk of our reading material. I was happy when the area library removed the "six book limit" from their policy. Now, I can browse the "new books" area and search the library stacks for material to take me through the following couple of weeks.

I also belong to a women's reading group at our local library. There are just a few of us, and our tastes in books are certainly varied, but we get together every two weeks to talk about what we've read. Unlike the habit of most book clubs, we do not usually all read the same book. Rather, we tell each other about what we are reading at the present time. I like this. I have developed interest in many types of books from listening to what other readers have to say about them. It also helps in my own reading to distill from a book the nuggets of insight or information that might be significant to others without telling so much of the story that it ruins the book for them.

I don't read in the "traditional" way. In fact, my reading style is totally incomprehensible to some of the people in our book group. In the first place, if I don't like a book, I don't feel compelled to finish it. I don't read--cover to cover--all the books I bring home from the library. My reading is not a school assignment that I have to finish. I can decide for myself to just put a book back in the bag until I have a chance to return it to the library.

If a book I am reading is fictional, I start by reading a chapter or

two in order to understand the premise of the story, be introduced to the characters, and get a general feel for the narrative. Then, I read the end. This method upsets many of my reading friends. But, it is a story, after all, and if I don't like the way the author has dealt with the ending, I am under no obligation to finish the book. If I do like what the writer has done, I go back and read the book through.

If the book is nonfiction, I read in the more traditional manner--front to back. But, if the author has not done a good job--in my opinion--with the material he or she has dealt with, I feel no obligation to finish the book. It, too, goes back into my book bag partially unread.

Like many of my generation, I learned to read long before I started school. In my case, I probably learned from the Uncle Wiggly stories that appeared on the comics page in our daily newspaper. I remember looking forward to them every day. I suppose someone read them to me in the beginning, and as I looked on while my dad or mother was reading, I learned myself. The shredded wheat box was another source of reading instruction. I do know that books became important to me at a very early age.

When we were in the lower grades, a great innovation came to our school. The bookmobile came to us. I had never heard of such a thing--books, shelves and shelves of books in the vehicle that parked behind the school, and we were allowed to borrow them, take them home, and return them the next time the bookmobile came to us. Our school room had a copy of two of Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House series--*Little House on the Prairie* and *The Long Winter*, But I discovered there were several more books about the Ingalls family! And there were other books, more books that interested me than I could have dreamed.

I have many favorite authors these days. Two of them have died during the past year or so. Recently, one of our most renowned Michigan authors, Jim Harrison, died. And last year, perhaps my all time favorite story teller, Ivan Doig, also passed away. But, their books live on, and I re-read books regularly. I like the fiction of John Sandford and David Baldacci, and Wendell Berry's tales of the folks in Port William are as meaningful to me as his nonfiction. Sam Pickering's essays tickle me

and make me wish I was a student in one of his classes, and Chris Stewart's descriptions of homesteading in rural Spain--encountered in a book I borrowed from the library--resulted in my purchasing the two books that followed. Vilhelm Moberg's emigrant novels of Swedish settlement in America I loved when I read them in English years ago. Now, thanks to a friend in Sweden, I am reading them in Swedish and enjoying them even more. Everything that Barbara Kingsolver has written has been worth my time, and Kurt Vonnegut is still relevant. As he wrote, "What could be nicer than this?"

I like biographies, nonfiction adventure tales, historical fiction, mysteries, how-to books, and field guides to flowers, birds, trees, tracks, scat, wildlife, and more. I read cookbooks as avidly as novels, and a new bread baking book is sure to get my attention.

I don't have an e-book reader. I am sure that they are very useful and handy, and books are so readily available for them now. But, I like the feel of a "real" book, the smell of it, the way I can page back and forth easily to skim or to check on something I may have forgotten. But, reading is reading, and I know that many people enjoy their books equally when they use their electronic readers.

And "enjoy a book" is just what I am going to do now, since I have an hour or two before chore time. An interesting story, a good light, a comfortable chair, and a cup of tea. A perfect way to start the day.