

Do books matter? The impact of reading upon cultural capital

Why do we like so much to read? The American writer Christopher Morley tells that “when you sell a book to a person, you do not sell just twelve ounces of paper, ink and glue, you sell a whole new life. Love, friendship, and ships in the sea at night, there’s all heaven and earth in a book, a real book”. Reading is sublime, we all know. But the question is simple and yet complex: how so many people wonder at least once what books are useful for? What is the goal of reading? Why did many people fail to find a satisfactory answer, original, sensible or practical?

Some (perhaps many) consider reading a waste of time, an unedifying and unnecessary activity, just because they have not realised yet that books were created for us and their final purpose is still us. We all know the importance of schoolbooks for the cultural background of individuals. But books are not to be regarded as mere instruments to be approached during the school years with the sole purpose of acquiring a sort of dimensional knowledge. Books are much and much more. Containers of images, sounds and emotions, so important that reading habits should not begin and should not be seeded only at school. It needs long practice, that should start within the family and possibly in the age of innocence (before the school years).

A recent economic study focuses upon the impact exerted by education on income in Europe, distinguishing between individuals living in rural or urban areas, and among children and adolescents who had access to books in their homes. The results obtained show that a high presence of books at home is a powerful synonym of a strong educational background. It was also demonstrated that those who were introduced to reading from an early age have developed cognitive abilities and socio-emotional factors that have been highlighted as determinants of economic success in life (G. Brunello, G. Weber and T., “Books Are Forever: Early Life Conditions, Education and Lifetime Income”. In IZA DP no. 6386.2012).

It is thus demonstrated that there is a strong correlation between books, education, culture and income, which in turn generates the achievement of better living conditions, not only from a strictly economic point of view but also in terms of achieving personal success. You could say that reading helps in all areas of life. Reading can be defined by many as a “wonderful” attitude, it should be considered as the downside of writing (activities that have been walking hand in hand for ages). Those who cannot read will not write, and vice-versa. Everything around us cannot be known, interpreted and understood if books had not made it: an intensive possession of concepts leads us to write.

From the most famous passage of literature, scientific manual on human history, the most widely read bestseller, whenever we open a book it’s like opening a door, crossed the front where we could be anything. A book is a story to tell, but it lives out of the storytelling of many others, crafting a unique stratification of wisdom and intention. When still closed a book is just a paper box, as Borges suggested. Once opened, each book starts an indefinite, magmatic and intensive discussion with other books, and its direction and outcome cannot be predicted.

Although fascinating, reading is not yet such a popular activity. Figures about Italy suggest an insufficient critical mass of readers: total indifference or occasional reading still prevail. Such narrow dimensions put Italy at the bottom of the European rankings. Why do we read so little and give books a marginal importance? Is it really possible that the new media, from television to the web, have moved us away from the healthy habit of reading? Distracted by new trends and increasingly unable to manage their time, less

people are enjoying the joys that anyone can experience browsing and sniffing a good book.

The new forms of digital writing systems may have affected reading: although there is no unanimous interpretation the diffused feeling is that we are facing a new revolution after the historical passages from orality to writing, from roll-to-paged book, from manuscript to printed book. The new books can be read on computers, PDAs, mobile phones or the latest generation of special tools, e-book readers, tools that can substitute the material cradle of a book, but that leave quality and poetry unchanged.

Those who show an increased disaffection towards books are mostly young people, 45% of them between 6 and 19 years old do not even read one single book apart from schoolbooks. Women are more likely to read in all age groups, and people living in the northern areas tend to read more. The Center for the Book and Reading (CEPELL) has been founded in Italy in 2010, it is an autonomous Institute of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Activities and has the task of disseminating books and reading in Italy, and of promoting the book, culture and national authors abroad. The objectives of the Centre are to reconnect or to bring closer to a book for the first time an increasing number of Italians with the purpose to increase the number of readers of 50% over the next ten years.

The initiatives that the Centre proposes are all admirable, among them the choice of a day in which everyone will be invited to give a book to those they love, a model applicable to reading promotion throughout the country. The donation of good quality books, which aims to give the book a high social value through the free donation of books that publishers eliminate, and to carry out an annual comparative study on the future of books, attempting to give the Italian writers and works a strong relevance on international scale.

The effective starting point aimed at stimulating the revival of reading, at increasing the amount of books in the Italian homes, at overcoming the widespread sporadic and occasion interest for books, can be the free distribution of books (a form of institutional bookcrossing) operated by publishers and with a precise attention to the poor and weak families and social groups.



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