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What is a Good Book?

John Ruskin

☛ Look for these expressions and guess their meaning from the context

canaille

peerage

fain

national noblesse of words

The good book of the hour, then—I do not speak of the bad ones—is simply the useful or pleasant talk of some person whom you cannot otherwise converse with, printed for you. Very useful often, telling you what you need to know; very pleasant often, as a sensible friend's present talk would be. These bright accounts of travels; good-humoured and witty discussions of question; lively or pathetic story-telling in the form of novel; firm fact-telling by the real agents concerned in the events of passing history—all these books of the hour, multiplying among us as education becomes more general, are a peculiar characteristic and possession of the present age: we ought to be entirely thankful for them, and entirely ashamed of ourselves if we make no good use of them. But we make the worst possible use if we allow them to usurp the place of true books: for, strictly speaking, they are not books at all but merely letters or newspapers in good print. Our friend's letter may be delightful, or necessary, today: whether worth keeping or not, is to be considered. The newspaper may be entirely proper at breakfast time but, assuredly, it is not reading for all day. So, though bound up in a volume, the long letter which gives you so pleasant an account of the inns, and roads, and weather last year at such a place, or which tells you that amusing story or gives you the real circumstances of such and such events, however valuable for occasional reference, may not be, in the real sense of

the word, a 'book' at all, nor, in the real sense, to be 'read'. A book is essentially not a talked thing but a written thing; and written, not with the view of more communication, but of permanence. The book of talk is printed only because its author cannot speak to thousands of people at once; if he could, he would—the volume is mere 'multiplication' of his voice. You cannot talk to your friend in India; if you could, you would; you would write instead: that is mere 'conveyance' of voice. But a book is written, not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to preserve it. The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful. So far as he knows no one has yet said it; so far as he knows, no one else can say it. He is bound to say it, clearly and melodiously if he may; clearly, at all events. In the sum of his life he finds this to be the thing or group of things, manifest to him—this is the piece of true knowledge, or sight, which his share of sunshine and earth has permitted him to seize. He would fain set it down forever, engrave it on a rock, if he could, saying, 'This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved, and hated, like another; my life was as the vapour, and is not; but this I saw and knew; this, if anything, of mine, is worth your memory.' That his 'writing', it is, in his small human way, and with whatever degree of true inspiration is in him, his inscription, or scripture. That is a 'Book'.

Perhaps you think no books were ever so written?

But, again, I ask you; do you at all believe in honesty or, at all, in kindness? Or do you think there is never any honesty or benevolence in wise people? None of us, I hope, are so unhappy as to think that. Well, whatever bit of a wise man's work is honestly and benevolently done, that bit is his book, or his piece of art. It is mixed always with evil fragments—ill-done, redundant, affected work. But if you read rightly, you will easily discover the true bits, and those **are** the book.

Now books of this kind have been written in all ages by their greatest men—by great leaders, great statesmen and great thinkers. These are all at your choice; and life is short. You have heard as much before; yet have you

measured and mapped out this short life and its possibilities? Do you know, if you read this, that you cannot read that—that what you lose today you cannot gain tomorrow? Will you go and gossip with your housemaid, or your stable-boy, when you may talk with queens and kings; or flatter yourselves that it is with any worthy consciousness of your own claims to respect that you jostle with the common crowd for *entrée* here, an audience there, when all the while this eternal court is open to you, with its society wide as the world, multitudinous as its days, the chosen and the mighty, of every place and time? Into that you may enter always; in that you may take fellowship and rank according to your wish; from that, once entered into it, you can never be outcast but by your own fault; by your aristocracy of companionship there, your own inherent aristocracy will be assuredly tested and the motives with which you strive to take high place in the society of the living, measured, as to all the truth and sincerity that are in them, by the place you desire to take in this company of the Dead.

‘The place you desire’, and the place you ‘fit yourself for’, I must also say; because, observe, this court of the past differs from all living aristocracy in this—it is open to labour and to merit but to nothing else. No wealth will bribe, no name will overawe, no artifice will deceive the guardian of those Elysian gates. In the deep sense, no vile or vulgar person ever enters there. At the portieres of that silent Faubourg St. Germain, there is but brief question, ‘Do you deserve to enter? Pass. Do you ask to be the companion of nobles? Do you long for the conversation of the wise? Learn to understand it, and you shall hear it. But on other terms? No. If you will not rise to us, we cannot stoop to you. The living lord may assume courtesy, the living philosopher explain his thought to you with considerable pain; but here we neither feign nor interpret; you must rise to the level of our thoughts if you would be gladdened by them, and share our feelings, if you would recognise our presence.’

This, then, is what you have to do and I admit that it is much. You must, in a word, love these people if you are

to be among them. No ambition is of any use. They scorn your ambition. You must love them and show your love by a true desire to be taught by them, and to enter their thoughts. To enter into theirs, observe; not to find your own expressed by them. If the person who wrote the book is not wiser than you, you need not read it; if he be, he will think differently from you in many respects.

Very ready we are to say of a book, 'How good this is—that's exactly what I think!' But the right feeling is, 'How strange that is! I never thought of that before and yet I see it is true; or if I do not now, I hope I shall, some day.' But whether thus submissively or not, at least be sure that you go to the author to get at his meaning, not to find yours. Judge it afterwards, if you think yourself qualified to do so; but ascertain it first. And be sure also, if the author is worth anything, that you will get at his meaning all at once; nay, that at his whole meaning you will not for a long time arrive in any wise. Not that he does not say what he means, and in strong words too; but he cannot say it all; and what is more strange, will not, but in a hidden way and in parables, in order that he may be sure you want it. I cannot quite see the reason of this, nor analyse that cruel reticence in the breasts of wise men which makes them always hide their deeper thoughts. They do not give it to you by way of help, but of reward, and will make themselves sure that you deserve it before they allow you to reach it. But it is the same with the physical type of wisdom, gold. There seems, to you and me, no reason why the electric forces of the earth should not carry whatever there is of gold within it at once to the mountain tops, so that kings and people might know that all the gold they could get was there; and without any trouble of digging, or anxiety, or chance, or waste of time, cut it away, and coin as much as they needed. But nature does not manage it so. She puts it in little fissures in the earth, nobody knows where: you may dig long and find none; you must dig painfully to find any.

And it is just the same with men's best wisdom. When you come to a good book, you must ask yourself, 'Am I inclined to work as an Australian miner would? Are my

pickaxes and shovels in good order and am I in good trim myself, my sleeves well up to the elbow, and my breath good, and my temper?’ And, keeping the figure a little longer, even at the cost of tiresomeness, for it is a thoroughly useful one, the metal you are in search of being the author’s mind or meaning, his words are as the rock which you have to crush and smelt in order to get at it. And your pickaxes are your own care, wit and learning; your smelting furnace is your own thoughtful soul. Do not hope to get at any good author’s meaning without these tools and that fire; often you will need sharpest, finest chiselling, and patientest fusing, before you can gather one grain of metal.

And, therefore, first of all, I tell you, earnestly and authoritatively (I **know** I am right in this), you must get into the habit of looking intensely at words and assuring yourself of their meaning, syllable by syllable—nay, letter by letter. For, though it is only by reason of the opposition of letters in the function of signs, to sounds in the function of signs, that the study of books is called ‘literature’, and that a man versed in it is called, by the consent of nations, a man of letters instead of a man of books, or of words, you may yet connect with that accidental nomenclature this real principle: that you might read all the books in the British Museum (if you could live long enough), and remain an utterly ‘illiterate’, uneducated person; but that if you read ten pages of a good book, letter by letter—that is to say, with real accuracy—you are forever more in some measure with an educated person. The entire difference between education and non-education (as regards the merely intellectual part of it), consists in this accuracy. A well-educated gentleman may not know many languages—may not be able to speak any but his own—may have read very few books. But whatever language he knows, he knows precisely; whatever word he pronounces, he pronounces rightly; above all, he is learned in the peerage of words; knows the words of true descent and ancient blood, at a glance, from words of modern canaille; remembers all their ancestry—their inter-marriages, distantest relationships, and the extent to which they were admitted, and offices they held, among the national noblesse of words at any

time, and in any country. But an uneducated person may know by memory any number of languages and talk them all, and yet truly not know a word of any—not a word even of his own. An ordinarily clever and sensible seaman will be able to make his way ashore at most ports; yet he has only to speak a sentence of any language to be known for an illiterate person: so also the accent, or turn of expression of a single sentence will at once mark a scholar. And this so strongly felt, so conclusively admitted, by educated persons, that a false accent or a mistaken syllable is enough, in the parliament of any civilized nation, to assign a man a certain degree of inferior standing forever. And this is right; but it is a pity that the accuracy insisted on is not greater, and required to a serious purpose. It is right that a false Latin quantity should excite a smile in the House of Commons; but it is wrong that a false English meaning should **not** excite a frown there. Let the accent of words be watched, by all means, but let the meaning be watched more closely still, and fewer will do the work. A few words, well chosen and well distinguished, will do work that a thousand cannot, when everyone is acting, equivocally, in the function of another. Yes; and words, if they are not watched, will do deadly work sometimes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Ruskin (1819–1900) was a powerful and influential critic of the nineteenth century. He wrote on a variety of subjects: nature, art, architecture, politics, history. All his work is characterised by a clarity of vision.

His first volume, *Modern Painters*, appeared in 1843—it defended modernism in the arts among the works of social criticism are *Unto this Last* (1862), and *Sesame and Lilies* (1871) from which this extract has been taken.

His ideas on architecture are presented in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1853).



UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

1. What, according to Ruskin, are the limitations of the good book of the hour?
2. What are the criteria that Ruskin feels that readers should fulfil to make themselves fit for the company of the Dead.
3. Why does Ruskin feel that reading the work of a good author is a painstaking task?
4. What is the emphasis placed by Ruskin on accuracy?

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Discuss in pairs

1. Ruskin's insistence on looking intensely at words, and assuring oneself of meaning, syllable by syllable—nay, letter by letter.
2. Choice of diction is very crucial to the communication of meaning.

APPRECIATION

1. The text is an excerpt from *Sesame and Lilies* which consists of two essays, primarily, written for delivery as public lectures in 1864. Identify the features that fit the speech mode. Notice the sentence patterns.
2. The lecture was delivered in 1864. What are the shifts in style and diction that make the language different from the way it is used today?

LANGUAGE WORK

1. Many sentences and paragraphs in the excerpt begin with the word 'And'. To what extent does this contribute to the rhetorical style of the lecture?
2. Study each of the following sentences and notice the balance between its parts. Pick out other sentences in the text that reflect this kind of balance
 - a. It is right that a false Latin quantity should excite a smile in the House of Commons; but it is wrong that a false English meaning should **not** excite a frown there.
 - b. Let the accent of words be watched, by all means, but let the meaning be watched more closely still, and fewer will do the work.

SUGGESTED READING

1. *Sesame and Lilies* by John Ruskin
2. *Seven Lamps of Architecture* by John Ruskin



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