

A thousand books to read before I die



Arnoud De Meyer

When did I read my first book? I really cannot remember, but I know that I have been passionate about reading since I was a very small kid.

I used to devour three or four books a week, and I was well known in my local library for the weekly visits, sometimes exasperating the librarian when I was searching for the latest book. My phantasy was stimulated by the stories, and I learned a lot about how to use and shape my own and foreign languages through reading.

Even today I read a book a week. Yes, my job keeps me quite busy and so I may not always find the time. But I find it very relaxing to just sit down and enjoy the companionship of a good book.

You may find it strange that I use the word companion to describe a book. Yes, in my hands a book often becomes alive. It communicates with me; it challenges me. Reading makes me reflect on myself and on the situations around me. Holidays for me are partially about reading, and on a plane I often read, while others watch movies.

Contrary to what my friends think, there are no books on my night table. I don't fall asleep with books. They keep me awake. When I make the mistake of starting to read before bedtime, I find myself reading deep into the night.

I still like printed books. Yes I can read long documents and professional files on a screen and find it often convenient to do so in order to avoid carrying heavy files. But I do not use a Kindle or some other electronic device to read. I like to feel the paper, I like to smell the ink and I adore turning pages.

My choice of books is eclectic: it ranges from a good detective novel to biographies to historical essays to books related to my job.

Some books I have enjoyed reading recently include: Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens*, A Brief History Of Mankind, Pedro Domingos' *The Master Algorithm*, and my colleague Lily Kong's and Orlando Woods' *Religion And Space*.

I also enjoyed reading a second

time Umberto Eco's *The Name Of The Rose*, which I got out of my library when he died at the end of February. I recently also read a few novels and biographies in Dutch and French. I do this to stay fluent in my mother tongue (Dutch) and to maintain my fluency in French.

A few years ago, one of my younger nephews told me that I speak "old Dutch". He meant that I was not in tune with how young people in Belgium use their language. I was shocked and suddenly felt old. That encouraged me to start reading contemporary novels in my own language. It helped me rejuvenate the use of my language and it actually has enabled me to keep in touch with the changes in popular culture in my country of birth.

And now my whole family knows that the best present they can give me is a good recently published

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book. Books keep me young.

What makes a book great? It must have character, it has to be opinionated and try to convince me. It must build up to a climax and entice me to read till the last paragraph. And it should make me feel unhappy that I have turned the last page.

This applies to essays and literary, detective or adventure novels. A book that does not grab me can easily linger on my table for months. But I also know that I have to be in the right mood for a book: sometimes I need to leave it aside for a while and when I pick it up later, I feel that I can connect with the book better. Perhaps it has to do with the context, my current challenges in the job or a few new and recent experiences.

Choosing what to read is an important task. At a rate of 50 books a year and with a life expectancy of another 20 to 25 years, I may be blessed with another 1,000 books to read. That is not a lot. So I had better choose my books well.

And if I find that if I don't connect to a particular book, I will set it aside. If I continue reading a bad book, the opportunity cost of foregoing a good book is just too high.

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