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# We Are What We Read — David McCullough on Reading and History

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[David McCullough](#) is probably America's most recognized historian. He has won the National Book Award and two Pulitzer prizes. His biographies of presidents Harry Truman and John Adams were best-sellers, along with his newest book, *1776*, a history of the American Revolution through the lens of that pivotal year.

In his 2003 [Jefferson Lecture](#) for the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#), McCullough offered key insights into his own approach to history and reading. Those who love books and reading will appreciate his comments. This is a man who clearly loves his work:

*I've loved the work, all the way along — the research, the writing, the rewriting, so very much that I've learned about the history of the nation and about human nature. I love the great libraries and archives where I've been privileged to work, and I treasure the friendships I've made with the librarians and archivists who have been so immensely helpful. I've been extremely fortunate in my subjects, I feel. The reward of the work has always been the work itself, and more so the longer I've been at it. The days are never long enough, and I've kept the most interesting company imaginable with people long gone. Some I've come to know better than many I know in real life, since in real life we don't get to read other people's mail.*

Good point. And the comment about reading other people's mail makes me wonder what future biographers and historians will use. The telephone and e-mail may be the enemies of the historian. How will future biographies be written now that we no longer write letters?

As McCullough observed about himself and his biographical subjects, we are what we read.

*We are what we read more than we know. And it was true no less in that distant founding time. Working on the life of John Adams, I tried to read not only what he and others of his day wrote, but what they read. And to take up and read again works of literature of the kind we all remember from high school or college English classes was not only a different kind of research, but pure delight.*

*I read Swift, Pope, Defoe, Sterne, Fielding, and Samuel Johnson again after forty years, and Tobias Smollett and Don Quixote for the first time.*

*I then began to find lines from these writers turning up in the letters of my American subjects, turning up without attribution, because the lines were part them, part of who they were and how they thought and expressed themselves.*

This is a key insight. We are so greatly formed by our reading (or lack of reading), and the persons we read about were shaped by *their* reading.

McCullough also spoke of his own romance with books:

*The first book I ever bought with my own money was a Modern Library edition of Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years before the Mast*. I was fifteen years old. In a book shop in Pittsburgh, I picked up the book from a table, opened to the*

*start of chapter one, read the first sentence, and knew I had to have that book:*

*The fourteenth of August was the day fixed upon for the sailing of the brig Pilgrim, on her voyage from Boston, round Cape Horn, to the western coast of America.*

*Growing up in Pittsburgh, I had never seen the ocean or heard the cry of a sea gull or smelled salt air:*

*I read Kenneth Robert's Oliver Wiswell, Thornton Wilder's The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Frederick Lewis Allen's Only Yesterday, and A Night to Remember by Walter Lord. I thank my lucky stars for Robert Abercrombie, who taught history my senior year in high school and made Morison and Commager's The Growth of the American Republic required reading. In the college years, I must have read a half dozen novels on the Second World War, including Herman Wouk's The Caine Mutiny and Irwin Shaw's The Young Lions.*

David McCullough has been criticized by academic historians for the fact that he writes popular history. There is a need for academic research that will never interest the general public, but McCullough explains his approach:

*I loved all those books, and they're all still in print, still being read, which is no mystery. They're superbly well done, wonderfully well written.*

*There should be no hesitation ever about giving anyone a book to enjoy, at any age. There should be no hesitation about teaching future teachers with books they will enjoy. No harm's done to history by making it something someone would want to read.*

No harm done by making history something people would want to read? That comment is very illuminating in itself.

Reading is a crucial means of education and gaining knowledge. But books mean more than knowledge in the most basic sense. Books allow minds to meet, ideas to be exchanged, and experiences to be remembered or imagined. Those who do not read impoverish themselves by choice. They are the thieves of their own imaginations and wisdom.

Parents should take note of McCullough's recollections as they think of boys and reading. Note that McCullough's first book purchase was made at age 15, but that he had been voraciously reading for many years by then. Note also the type of book to which young David McCullough was drawn — books of history (including novels) that excited his passions. He was formed by his imagination of the Titanic sinking, of World War II, and of other big events of history. Let's be glad he had the freedom and encouragement to read those books.

There is much more in McCullough's [Jefferson Lecture](#), which is not only available in [text](#) form, but also in [audio](#). Hearing him deliver the address is a rare pleasure.

