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Travelling Companions: The Healing Power of Books

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During the stormy winter days of early 2014, I had the opportunity to visit old friends—books that provided me with pleasure and adventure in good times and escape and solace during difficult times. Books have been my travelling companions at home and abroad. During this winter's snow-enforced isolation, my friends and colleagues have also been catching up on their reading. Immersed in our various texts, some literary and some not so literary, we left cold wintry scenes for adventures, mystery, warm beaches, and new beginnings.

Researchers have found that reading can be a wonderful source of [stress](#) release. Opening a book can take you to another place and time. Reading is tantamount to a mental holiday during which we lose ourselves in a gripping story that, in addition, helps us understand our world and ourselves more fully. Such a holiday is widely available and inexpensive. Yet in our fast paced technologically oriented world fewer and fewer people partake in the adventure or the pleasures of reading. A new Pew Research Center Poll reported in *The Week* (February 7, 2014) found that 23 percent of adults in the United States did not read a single book in 2013, a percentage that is higher than previous reports. Reading is on the decline, which is a puzzle given that multiple forms of books are now readily available. Technology has significantly eased the access to books. Longer workdays, hectic commutes, and keeping up with texts and e-mails, keep working women and men so busy they rarely have time or make time to enjoy the pleasures of a good book.

Reading is not only good for the imagination; it also provides positive physical benefits. Reading reduces or helps us better manage the stress and strain of everyday life. It lowers the heart rate and relaxes muscles. It lowers blood pressure and reduces tension. A 2009 study at the University of Sussex found that reading could reduce stress by up to 68%. According to this study, reading is more effective than other forms of relaxation—even listening to music.

Despite the decline in the number of people who read regularly, the art of the story is still alive and well. Older men and women tend to read more than younger adults. On iPods, iPads, and Kindles one can increase font size making reading easier on aging eyes. These devices are also easier to carry around, especially when traveling. Studies have shown that older Americans also tend to visit libraries more frequently than younger adults. They see libraries as a personal resource as well as a link to their neighborhoods and cities.

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, reading has many positive cognitive consequences. It improves “fluid” intellectual skills that are said to decline with age. It leads to an expanded vocabulary, enhances [memory](#), problem solving, and other cognitive skills. Reading also helps maintain “crystalized” [intelligence](#), the sum of our accumulated experience and knowledge. What’s more, reading helps us to be more relaxed and mindful.

When I was a girl growing up in Iran, many people I encountered considered the ability to read and write as a privilege. When my father was angry with me

he would send me to my room and threaten to take away my books and not allow me to go to school. I did not understand his threat until I realized that he perceived school attendance and literacy to be a highly prized privilege. When he was a young boy his father had kept him from school until he was 9 years old. Once he was finally able to attend school, he remembered his struggle to keep up with his age mates, which garnered in him a deep reverence for the reading. My father never lost his respect for the written word—for novels, newspapers and magazines. He saw any type of reading as a pathway to knowledge and success.

My father's [childhood](#) challenges still underscore the struggles of many people—of all ages—around the world. Far too often boys and especially girls are denied the privilege of an [education](#). Studies have indicated that literacy is associated with greater income and health. A better life starts with reading. Even in the United States literacy rates are being threatened. A 2010 report by Johns Hopkins researchers showed that over 1,700 schools nationwide are so-called "dropout factories." These schools are often in high-poverty areas. Children who do not learn to read are at a serious disadvantage. All too often they end spending their entire lives living on the lower end of the social inequality ladder.

We are privileged to live in a society with high literacy rates. 99% of American men and women can read, at least at a minimum level. In many other countries literacy rates are much lower. Although improvements are being made, 774 million adults, two thirds of whom are women, around the world are still not able to read a book, something that the majority of Americans have readily available. <http://www.uis.unesco.org/literacy/Pages/data-release-map-2013.aspx>

What can be done to increase reading in contemporary America? Elders who are retired have more time and can certainly read for pleasure and stress [management](#). They can also serve as role models as well as help others to read. Why not become a mentor for a child or adult who cannot read or cannot read well. Although great works of literature are wonderful to read, it does not matter what we read, as long as we read. Any book can become your trustworthy travelling companion. If we enjoy and appreciate the power of stories, we can make use of an easy and inexpensive way to see the world, reduce stress, and add pleasure to our busy lives. Find a library, a new or used bookshop, and take 30 minutes a day to read, learn, escape, [fantasize](#), and dream.