

A photograph of a white armchair in a room. A floor lamp with a bright light is positioned to the left of the chair. A book is resting on the left armrest of the chair. The room has green walls and a wooden floor.

**JWR  
4.18**

A collage of various books and a pair of glasses. The books are of different sizes and colors, some open and some closed. The glasses are a pair of blue-rimmed glasses.

**Never Lend Books**

## JWR – 4.18

### Never Lend Books

“Never lend books, for no one ever returns them; the only books I have in my library are books that other folks have lent to me.”

Anatole France



Occasionally someone asks me what I'm reading.

I get a little self-conscious because these days I've been reading books that might not qualify as classics. They're not found on a shelf at Barnes & Noble. Catch 22 was probably the last piece of truly classic literature I read. That was well over a year ago.

How do you decide what to read? Assuming you read anything at all. A lot of people don't read for entertainment, and that's fine. But they get borderline hostile about it, which I think is a defense mechanism. “Oh, I don't have the time to sit down and read a *book*.” “Why would I spend days reading a *book* when I can watch a movie in two hours?”

Ever since I was a kid, I stuck to the same author. When I was in elementary school I think I only read Judy Blume and Beverly Cleary. I have no idea what I read in middle school (probably nothing), but I recall finding a copy of Stephen King's Needful Things in the cafeteria my freshman year of high school. I picked it up, but had no real desire to read it. I tried for two days to give it away, but nobody would take it. I actually succeeded in giving it to someone at lunch on the second day only to find it sitting on a table when lunch was over. I took it home.

Now I pretty much have every Stephen King book. If you look at my bookcase, it seems like a disproportionate number of the books are King's, but that's a misnomer for two reasons: 1) many of King's books in my possession are hard cover so they sit prouder than paperbacks, and 2) many of his books are bigger than your average book of 300 pages so they literally take up more room.

In college I was introduced to Don DeLillo's White Noise, a book which changed everything about literature for me. Since then I've read most of his books but none of them are nearly as interesting or captivating as White Noise. It was about this time that I also began to read a more diverse selection of authors and subjects, but it's tough breaking old habits.

I used to go on a reading tear for a few months that would come to an abrupt end when I'd open a book that I hated. I really don't like not finishing a book, so even if I thought the book was awful, I'd stop reading it for a while and eventually pick it up again where I left off. And I don't like reading more than one book at a time, so if I'm stuck on a title I don't like, I won't start another one. On a tough book getting to the halfway point can be a struggle and take a long time, but the second half tends to go much quicker, like the gravity of the larger half pulls at the smaller half. When I finished a book in agonizing boredom, I'd just stop reading for a long time.



nce I tell someone what I'm reading, they ask how I find the books I read (after the weird look). There are three methods.

A few years ago I believed I was fed up with "mainstream" entertainment to the point where I started looking for something different. I did some internet research and found some studios that make low budget, underground horror flicks. One of these studios had an actress named Misty Mundae in a lot of their movies. Everyone had glowing things to say about Misty, so I decided to buy a movie called "Playmate of the Apes." I love the original "Planet of the Apes," so I thought a flick playing off that classic would be a good place to start. Well, it sucked. It was basically soft core

porn, which is fine, but not what I was looking for. So, any time you want to borrow it, just let me know.

I tell you this because although looking for underground movies that I would enjoy didn't pan out; "underground" literature was another story all together. Books were a more natural fit as entertainment that I find captivating. There was never a shortage of movies I found enjoyable. I have plenty of music I like. But books, man. I wanted to look for books that wouldn't stop me from wanting to pick up a book and read.

Okay, so underground literature is method one.

I like zombies. I think they're neat. I love some zombie movies, others are simply bad. But did you know there is a lot of zombie fiction out there? Since "Shaun of the Dead" (my very favorite movie) and the "Resident Evil" games, zombie fiction (which was once about as plentiful as military science fiction [I'm thinking of Armor, Starship Troopers and The Forever War as key examples, and those are about it]) has become plentiful thanks mainly to a few small publishing houses that will actually publish those types of books (notably Permuted Press). Self-published books are not to be ignored, either. Zombie books have also become popular to the extent that a couple titles like Day by Day Armageddon and Plague of the Dead have been republished in larger runs by Pocket Books. (And actually, I recently found the reprint of Day by Day Armageddon on a shelf at Barnes & Noble. I was so excited I almost bought it again.)

That's method two: zombie fiction.

The third way I found books that interest me more than the crap Dan Brown writes was through Kurt Vonnegut. If you don't know, Vonnegut is that guy who wrote Slaughterhouse Five and Cat's Cradle among other amazing books. On Amazon's pages for some of Vonnegut's books they had suggestions for other books that you might enjoy by a guy named Carlton Mellick III. Some reviews called him "this generation's Vonnegut." I'm not quite sure I agree with that, but the one title I found particularly intriguing was Satan Burger. The cover art is obscene by most standards and the plot, while having nothing to do with the cover art, was particularly insane. It's been at least a couple years since I read it and I would still have a difficult time pin pointing a plot or purpose of the book.

At the time it was called an anti-novel. Shortly thereafter books like that were branded Gonzo fiction. Now the publishers (mainly Eraserhead Press) seem to be sticking with the genre label Bizarro fiction. I thought Satan Burger was amazing and the fact that it was one of the first

books (if not *the* first book) that I found on my own in my attempt to seek out a different sort of page turner gives it a special place in my heart.

Method three started out as finding literature like Vonnegut's, but has become Bizarro books.

**I** love Amazon, and not just because they carry books that you won't find in a book store, and not just because of their assertions of what customers ultimately buy after viewing this item...

If you think about it, movies are almost always created to appeal to as many people as possible. And that's a smart move considering how much movies cost to make, distribute and market. To my limited knowledge, books cost whatever the publishing company pays the author, plus the cost to print and distribute – almost always far less than even low budget movies. Occasionally a movie will become a cult classic. This is a movie that typically had a low budget but didn't have mass appeal. The relatively small number of people who did enjoy the movie found something that spoke to them, hence their dedication to it. The way the publishing world works is almost inherently opposite from the film industry. Only a small percentage of books truly have mass appeal, however, like most movies with mass appeal, they tend to lack any real substance.

Television and movies are no substitute for books, and books are no substitute for television or movies. There are certain things that you can't effectively convey in each form of entertainment. Laugh out loud humor is probably the hardest thing to convey in a book, but TV and movie comedies can seem effortless because of the visuals and timing, not to mention the ease with which you can share it with someone. Conversely books are able to let you in on small but significant insights, moods, clues and so on with just a few words whereas in many movies and TV shows, you are practically hit over the head in order to effectively show those devices.

I actually get anxious and excited about some books before I start reading them. If I'm reading a book that's not blowing my skirt up, sometimes I'll just grab a book I have yet to start and look at the cover art, page through it without reading, getting a sense of how long the chapters are and how many breaks are in each chapter (this leads to occasional surprises with certain books like Saramago's The Double and Danielewski's House of Leaves), read the synopsis and reviews on the back cover or dust jacket, look over the title page and the author's bio. Sometimes there's a page at the back of the book with a word about the typeface used. I like books where the page edges are uneven, although I know this is intentional nowadays. Cormack McCarthy's The Road was a book I

looked over several times before I read it. That was a book I almost didn't buy because it was an Oprah Book Club Selection.

I like to get books new, but sometimes a book I want is out of print and I'll have to buy it secondhand. Usually those books will show up in excellent condition, sometimes like new, but I recently got one by James Gunn called The Toy Collector that came from the Vancouver Public Library. A stamp inside the front cover indicated it was "REMOVED FROM COLLECTION – VPL" and the dust cover was laminated and taped to the hard binding. It's a little beat up, but the coincidental thing is there's a paragraph in the book about how a character doesn't like used books.

There are only a handful of books I've actually read more than once and I wish I could do that more often. But it's this compulsion I have to keep reading new books, to see what else is out there, to be introduced to new characters and events. Maybe I'm making up for all the books I read repeatedly when I was a kid. There is nothing like getting into a book that not only compels you to turn the page, but also changes your opinion about something or gives you some insight you never had before. I do intend to reread some classics. For example, I intend to read the uncut edition of The Stand. That's a classic, damnit!

I'm a jerk about books the same way I'm a jerk about movies and music. If I don't think a book or author is worthy, I'm going to be a snob about it. James Patterson, Dan Brown and Stephanie Meyer are horrible. But to be fair, I've never read a Stephanie Meyer book. I've read a lot about her writing. I haven't been put off by reviews like that since I considered reading Battlefield Earth. Generally the more popular a book is, the more apt I am to say, "No thanks." The Harry Potter books are like that. I'm sure they're entertaining and all, but everyone reads them. People who don't read read them. Plus, like the Twilight books, they're for young adults. Again, that doesn't make the books bad; it just makes them less interesting to me.

I was on the train to Chicago and the guy in front of me was reading The Lost Symbol. I wanted to hit him in the head so badly.

It's not like I read high class literature, though. Letters from Hades and Cybernetrix won't be on the syllabus for your 200-level literature course next semester. I have a list of books called "The Well Read Individual." I've read only a few of the works on the list, however it's lacking as Rampaging Fuckers of Everything on the Crazy Shitting Planet of the Vomit Atmosphere is not on the list.

But I read, and that makes me better than you.

**M**y desert island books:

The Catcher in the Rye by JD Salinger. He just died a few weeks ago. I love this book. I first read it when I was ten or eleven and couldn't put it down. I read it on the school bus at a time when I got car sick. I still read it, not every year, but nearly. Each time I read it I get a different take on Holden. One year I thought he was really cool, one year he annoyed me to no end, one year it struck me how disturbed he was, and the last time I read it I felt incredibly sorry for him. There has been some noise about removing this book from schools' curriculums. That's fine with me. I never had a class where we read it.

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison. This was assigned in one of my college literature courses and although I haven't revisited it since, I still think about it frequently. The symbolism in this book alone makes it worth the read. And it's not, like, overly-obvious symbolism, it's a bit subtle, but beautifully presented. This is another book I intend to read again in the near future.

House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski. This book is in the form of a manuscript written about a film that doesn't exist that's about a [house](#) bigger on the inside than its structure should allow. It has hundreds of footnotes written by a guy who found and compiled the manuscript that are a story unto themselves. This book uses page space in amazing ways. Boiled down, it's a haunted [house](#) story, but it's one of the only books I've read that kept me awake in bed, sometimes for hours after I closed it for the night.

Satan Burger by Carlton Mellick III. As I said, this was the first book I found on my own that knocked me on my ass. It's such a strange, trippy ride and, really, not all that sacrilegious. Ah... actually, it probably is. If I read this book for the first time only last week, my impressions about it probably wouldn't be so strong, I think. But as it is, this book will hold a place in my memory forever.

Atlas Shrugged by Ayn Rand. This thousand page brick was recommended by a friend years ago. I was advised to skip the eighty page monologue near the end and didn't. You can totally skip it. But, still, it's potentially a life-changing book. If you read it, try not to be too much of an asshole afterwards. Objectivism and all that, you know?

White Noise by Don DeLillo. Another book from a college lit course. Before I read it, I had no idea books like this existed. Some critics call this book pretentious, but I simply think it's many of the characters that are. It doesn't change the insightful and original way modern American life is dissected.

Day by Day Armageddon by JL Bourne. This is the best zombie book I've read yet (and simply a really well presented story). The journal format is incredibly effective

and suspenseful. This book had me peeking out my windows late at night and made me feel like I needed to buy a gun. So I did. The sequel is coming out this summer.

**B**ooks on long-term loan from my lending library:

Jeff has had my copy of Tim O'Brien's The Things They Carried for years.

I lost a copy of Don DeLillo's White Noise\* to a person I stopped being friends with. I had to buy another copy.

Chris has had my copy of Walter M. Miller Jr.'s A Canticle for Leibowitz for about two years now.

Dan from PSI had my copy of Koushun Takami's Battle Royale\* for over a year, but I recently got it back over an awesome lunch at Kaiser's in Kenosha. They have stuffed burgers. He never read it.

Beth has my copy of House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski, although she has had plans to read it next for a while. She also has Extinction Journals by Jeremy Robert Johnson, but has no real plans to read it... she just can't get past the cockroach suit.

Wendy has my copy of Max L. Brooks' World War Z and she just moved into her new house, so it's probably gone forever.

My mom has David Wong's John Dies at the End and will continue to have it because she's doesn't just read a book all the way through.

\*Situation resolved.

**“It’s a gift. Never lend books.”**  
William Adama

**J**ohn