

A Summary

How to talk about books that you haven't read

Pierre Bayard (185pgs, 2007)

Pierre Bayard's book 'How to talk about books that you haven't read' is written with the objective of liberating us from the undue burdens imposed on the act of 'reading' by society.

The book is divided into 3 sections. In the 1st section, it looks at the act of reading, and explores how the act of reading straddles a continuum of reading experiences, from the extremes of non-reading as a conscious practice, to the extremes of forgetting what you have read.

In the 2nd section, the book covers various scenarios where you may end up having to talk about a book you haven't read, say to a knowledgeable crowd or with the writer of the book himself. In the 3rd and last section, the book explores how we should behave in the above and other awkward scenarios, and suggests recommendations as to how we can extract value out of the act of non-reading.

In the 1st section, which explores the different kinds of reading experiences, Bayard starts by highlighting the burdens placed by society around reading - that we have an obligation to read, especially the key canonical texts, that we have an obligation to read thoroughly, and that one must read a book in order to talk about it with some authority.

These obligations result in guilt and shame on the part of non-readers given the stigma attached to the practice of non-reading, notwithstanding the fact that there are thousands of books published each year that we are expected to read but can't. Yet, reading in itself is not a uniform act. It ranges across a gradation of experiences and is imbued with several meanings. What does it mean to have read a book when you have forgotten the content, or even that you have forgotten that you read it? How does this act of reading compare with that of someone who hasn't read the book but knows enough about it - via reading the blurb, author's bio, reviews to understand its key meaning

and link it to other books? Who really has read the books?

To better clarify how a non-reader can often know more about the book than a reader, Bayard introduces the concept of a collective library - which consists of the larger set of books that are central to our culture. Conversations about books are often more about how a book relates to the collective library, than it is about a detailed examination of the book itself. Thus, if a cultivated person hasn't read a book but has enough knowledge to situate it in the wider collective library, it will give him enough ballast to speak about the book. Awareness of content is not as important as awareness of location. Relations amongst books are more important than the books themselves.

For a nonreader, the best way to know about the book is to read metadata (pages, category, year published, author name etc), mesodata (*my term for all the chatter about a book on forums, criticism, reviews, author interviews etc*) or even talk to people and listen to their views on the book. We need to keep in mind that the books people talk about or reference are really screen books - what the reader thinks he knows about and believes about the book, only glancingly related to the real work. For Bayard, the book is an object that can only be described and defined in imprecise terms.

Slightly along the continuum from non-reading is that of skimming a book. Skimming is the preferred way to read encyclopaedias, guidebooks, books of lists etc. Skimming, according to Bayard, can help us get a better perspective over the work as well as what it shares with other books, without us getting lost in the details.

Finally, at the other extreme you have books that you have read but no longer remember anything of, In fact you may even have forgotten that you read them. Is this still reading, if you don't remember having read the book? What does reading really mean if you skim through / read a few reviews and know more of a book that you haven't 'read', compared to a book that you have read at length but have forgotten about?

In Section 2 of the book, Bayard portrays 4 different encounters or situations, where a protagonist ends up talking about books he hasn't

read to an audience of book enthusiasts, professors, writers and a lover respectively.

In these chapters, Bayard introduces the concepts of

- Inner library - those set of books belonging to the collective library which have shaped an individual's personality particularly; each personality having a distinct inner library). In fact, even if two people have identical inner libraries, the way the books shaped them as well as their relationships with these books will be distinct.
- Inner book - an imaginary internal book that acts as a kind of grid between the reader and other texts, determining how he will interpret these texts and what he will remember from them.

It is the presence of these differing inner libraries and inner books that make it hard for us to discuss books with others. What we think we is the book we have read has been transformed into a different screen book - thanks to how the inner book interpreted it - unrelated to the same book in the mind of another reader (where it too has been transformed).

In the 3rd and last section, Bayard lays down recommendations that he has gathered from a lifetime of non-reading, to help in situations such as in section 2.

These recommendations include

1. Overcoming shame by freeing ourselves of the image that cultural literacy is without gaps. All people have gaps in their reading. If we are not to be overpowered by the fact that we haven't read 'what is required of us' and suffer from shame, we need to first acknowledge the shame and put into perspective. Only then can we hope to survive the avalanche of books that makes it impossible to consume it all.
2. Recognizing that books are transformed from what they are in reality to what they become in the readers' minds (led by his inner book). Often the transformation is due to the changing reputation

of the writer in society as that too impacts how the book is situated in the collective library

3. Feeling free to invent and transform the book's plot or characters in our minds, and not feeling ashamed at yourself if you happen to have changed anything in the story. Why should you not feel ashamed?
 1. It is difficult to ascertain what the other person (to whom you are describing the story of the book) knows
 2. The process of reading and absorption via an inner book transforms the image that we have of the book. Once it is absorbed and internalized the book has fundamentally changed. It is now a screen book which has a tenuous link with the real book
4. Using the book as a lever to explore our inner selves. Reflection on our selves is the primary justification for any critique-oriented activity, including reading a book. Going too deep into a work can pull you away from self-reflection. As Bayard says “The path toward our selves passes through books but this must remain a passage”. We should not get weighed by the book itself. We must not be perturbed if the book or the memory of the contents of the book have receded to the farther climes of memory, so long as we are able to place it in our collective library and have been able to help support the work we do on ourselves.

Beyond self-discovery, talking about unread books leads us back to a creative process, helping us invent our own text (as we recreate the book in a new light) and thereby become our own writers.

We must profoundly transform our relationship with books by extricating ourselves from a series of mostly unconscious taboos (read exhaustively, cant talk without reading etc.) and even feeling hesitant at the thought of subjecting these books to transformation.