

Learn to Read, Kid, But Don't Fall in Love

By Rainbow Rowell, posted on rainbowrowell.com on Feb. 18, 2013

It's not enough that your kids learn to read. You want them to *love* to read.

It's the love of reading that's linked to success and happiness — to better education, better jobs and fewer cavities. The more kids read, the better they do, period. So it's your job, as a parent, to *make* them love it . . .

Except you can't really make anyone love anything.

All you can really do is read to them and read around them, and hope that reading is like chicken pox, that they'll eventually succumb to it with enough exposure.

I have mixed feelings about all this. Obviously.

On the one hand, I believe that reading is fundamentally a good thing — maybe even the ultimate good thing.

On the other, I think that pushing your kids to read is sort of like pushing them to play with matches.

Reading is at least as dangerous as it is useful. *At least*. If you love to read — really, truly love to read — it's more like having an addiction than a superpower.

I'm sure it helps on standardized tests and job applications. I'm sure it makes you more thoughtful, more strategic, more compassionate . . .

I'm sure that, in a way, reading sets you free.

But it also untethers you from the real world. People who fall in love with books never really stop falling.

Obviously, again, I'm speaking from experience. I have a . . . *problem* with reading.

Everyone but my husband, and maybe my mother, will read that sentence and think that I'm exaggerating or trying to be provocative.

I'm not.

I can't stop reading. It's always been this way. When I was a kid, I'd read in the dark. (That might be why I'm the only one in the family with glasses.) I'd read at the table. I'd read at recess. I'd read in the car right up until the moment that I was going to be sick.

And I read even more now, now that I'm an adult and nobody can tell me to stop.

If I'm late to meet you somewhere, you should just assume that I was reading in the car.

If I show up wrinkled with my hair in a ponytail, it's because I read straight through the time I gave myself to shower.

I read instead of clean. I read instead of sleep. I read instead of *write*.

If I'm not reading (I do make a special effort with my husband and my kids), I'm still thinking about reading. I'm still feeling the loss of it. And I live — if not in fear — in *anxiety* that I'm going to be stuck someplace without a book. I pack books for vacation the way other people pack prescription drugs.

As far as I can tell, at this point in my life, reading is far more destructive than it is beneficial. It's passive. It's unproductive. Self-centered. Completely anti-social. If you're a good reader (and I am an excellent reader), you can make yourself disappear in any situation.

Reading is escape.

Reading is running away.

If you love to read — really, really love to read — you never quite feel full. You never feel like the contents of your own head are enough. You're always on a quest for *new* and *more*.

And nobody stops you. Nobody says, "You should really rein in all that reading."

Reading is like Mother Teresa or breastfeeding. Untouchable. Unassailable. If you're a kid with a reading problem, people pin awards on you. If you're an adult, they pretend to be impressed.

But nobody tells you to stop.

I can at least make a living this way. Sometimes it feels like writing is just a side effect of reading. Word poisoning. Like my brain is so saturated with words that it's sloughing off phrases just to make room.

Sometimes I worry that I'm not really living. That I'm spending as much time in secondhand lives than I am in the real thing. Sometimes, when I'm tired, the written word tips blarily into the real one, and I forget that no one around me knows where I've been.

So . . .

This is what I'm supposed to want for my kids, right? That they love reading? That something catches fire inside of them?

I'm doing my best. I set the table with books; I paper the walls with them. But sometimes I think that my sons would be better off . . . *free*.

Once a kid realizes that every book is a doorway into a new world, what incentive does he have to come back?