

Why Do We Read?



I Read This Over Shabbos is a weekly newsletter from Rivka Bennun Kay about Jewish book culture, book recommendations, and modern ideas. Receive this free newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing [here](#). Questions, comments, or feedback? Email Rivka at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

What book first sparked your love of reading?

Mary Beard, the famous English classicist, hates this question. Nevertheless, I shall tell you. It's Harry Potter. Obviously.

I picked up Harry Potter for the first time in second grade, originally in competition with a friend to see which of us could finish the series first. (It took me over a year to finish all seven books, but I did ultimately win.)

Beard, who chaired the 2026 Booker Prize judging panel, said recently that she dislikes the phrase "I really love reading." She went on to say that more than just a passion, reading is essential to humanity, and that by just describing reading as something we like to do, we underestimate its power. "I challenge anybody to say they feel better after they have read Kafka," she said, drawing laughter from the audience. "I don't believe they have, right? That doesn't mean they shouldn't be reading Kafka, does it?"

“And some of these books are not, I think, going to make you feel better,” she continues. “They’re going to make you see the world differently. And that’s not about love.”

I want to complicate that: Learning to love reading is exactly how I learned what it’s worth. And I think Beard is right that reading might be more important today than it ever was. Reading might be declining for good, Rose Horowitz argued in an August essay in *The Atlantic*, which makes it matter more.

I personally find it depressing to think that reading may die for good. I also understand why scholars like Beard strongly advocate for an approach that views reading as something as vital as eating. We eat so we can live in the world. We read so we can understand the world.

The thing about eating is that we don’t just eat to survive. We eat because we love food! No one has ever argued that “I love food” insults the necessity of a full meal. You can love something and need it at the same time.

Of course, Beard can argue that my food analogy breaks down. Hunger forces us to eat, whereas nothing forces us to read. But that’s exactly why it’s so important to simply love reading. Horowitz writes that today, “people have to be really determined to read,” and determination has to come from somewhere.

As a seven-year-old, my determination to finish Harry Potter was fueled by a competition with a friend. It was also fueled by a warning from my mom that the first chapter of *The Goblet of Fire* was too scary, which obviously made me want to read it even more. (She was right. I should’ve waited a few years before getting to that book.) Looking back, competition is what first got me to open those books. These days, my opponent is my phone.

But the further I dug into the books, the more I fell in love with stories. I grew older and reread those books, each time emerging with newer, more sophisticated takeaways from the magical series. As a child I understood the series’ takeaways about love and friendship, but when I revisited the books years later I understood more about what it had to say about politics, corruption, truth, reality. To me, that’s what Beard means when she says that reading makes you see the world differently. I got there by wanting to keep reading, not by being told it was essential.

Today, as an adult in a chaotic world, I don’t read because I’ve decided it’s essential. I read because I love it, and that’s how I know it is essential.

Beard is right that reading Kafka won't make me feel better. There's an important place for books that are hard to read but necessary for our conception of the world. I might even go so far as to say that we should make an effort to read hard books. Loving to read is what makes that effort possible.

In today's climate, where my phone provides healthy competition against the pile of books on my nightstand, reading is an act of defiance, a statement that I choose this because I simply love it. Delightfully, Horowitch writes that the more we read, the easier it is for us to read. For me, that means each night the book wins makes the next one a little easier to win. So while I understand what Beard was getting at, I will continue to say, proudly, that "I really love reading."
