

Slow Reading by John Miedema. Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, 2009. 92pp. ISBN 978-0-9802004-4-7.

Fast! The speed of life seems to rule our world today. Fast food, fast cars, fast connections, instant communication, instant gratification...time races forward, technology races forward, and we race to keep up. Social commentators, psychologists, and educators decry the cost of the sped-up world on our abilities to focus and perform tasks that require time and concentration. Nicholas Carr (2008) describes his own experiences in his article “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”:

I’m not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I’m reading. Immersing myself in a book or lengthy article used to be easy...That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle.

Several movements are now questioning the wisdom of life in a constant fast lane, proposing alternatives that bring satisfaction at a slower pace. Groups advocating slow food, slow travel, slow parenting, slow sex, slow art, and other slow movement activities champion the benefits of more deliberation and reflection in our everyday lives. In his book *Slow Reading*, author John Miedema presents the title concept as a spectrum of voluntary actions that readers of all levels and tastes can use to increase their pleasure and comprehension, while examining its development and numerous facets.

Slow Reading contains only sixty-five pages of text, but it is packed with discussions and references that support the author’s goal of providing “a first, full sketch of the breadth of the subject of slow reading, encouraging further research in the area, and inspiring readers to take up slow reading for pleasure” (p. 5). The detailed index affords quick access to specific points in the discussions, and an eleven page bibliography provides an exhaustive list for further investigation into the topic and its related fields. Miedema began researching the concept of slow reading while a student in the Library and Information Science program at the University of Western Ontario, and this book developed out of his master’s thesis. The discussions in each chapter are brief, but offer plenty of food for thought for educators, librarians, pedagogical researchers, and others interested in the impact of technology on the act and future of reading.

The five chapters of the book consist of four essays exploring the topic from different perspectives and disciplines and a summary of ideas for the implementation of slow reading. Miedema emphasizes that “Slow reading is not about reading as slow as possible at all times, but rather exercising the right to

slow down at will” (p. 7). It is not an intervention for diagnosed reading impediments such as dyslexia or eye problems but a set of tools and philosophy to increase comprehension and enjoyment.

Chapter one, “The personal nature of slow reading,” begins with a brief historical survey of slow reading. Biblical and Enlightenment sources refer to the symbolic consumption of a book until it becomes part of the body and soul, and methods of close reading for literary criticism and pedagogical purposes are discussed. Lay readers are encouraged to adapt the method of slow reading that best suits their individual style, need, and circumstance – slowing down only at specific passages, subvocalization, arguing with the text, and performance reading are but some of the examples presented.

The next chapter, “Slow reading in an information ecology,” examines the various types and purposes of reading in an increasingly online environment. It explores such questions as whether or not there is still a place for print and paper, and how format influence reading style and how the brain processes text. According to Miedema, “There is a close relationship between the media we use to read – books or digital technology – and the way we read and think...Digital technology is often preferable for searching and scanning short snippets...slow reading of books is still essential for nurturing literacy and the capacity for extended linear thought” (pp. 19-20). An overview of the predicted demise of print is presented with evidence that books are yet thriving and offers some possible explanations for this phenomenon. Challenges with this analysis lie with the fact that technologies and adaptations to new technologies are still evolving. The hybridity of print and online formats for different types of reading seen today may shift in the future as devices are developed that more closely duplicate the characteristics of the book. While these technologies may not negate the need or use of slow reading, it is important to consider the arguments of this chapter with an open mind to changes in the near future. Miedema appears to equate slow reading with printed books, but these two concepts may grow more independent of each other in the near future.

The context of slow reading within the larger slow movement is presented in the third chapter, “The slow movement and slow reading.” Carl Honoré (2004) has written extensively of the various slow movements, and Miedema cites many of them, but specifically compares slow reading to slow food. He suggests that just as the latter emphasizes local produce and culinary traditions, the concept of slow reading could be extended to include emphasis by public libraries and institutions on local authors, histories, and culture.

In his fourth essay, “The psychology of slow reading,” Miedema cites psychological studies to further his thesis of how adults as well as children can utilize deep engagement in a good story to foster imagination, creativity, problem solving, and purely pleasurable experiences in our everyday lives. Miedema

examines certain neurological aspects of reading, but of particular interest is the research showing evidence of “delay neurons” which slow neuronal transmission for milliseconds. The author uses this to argue against futurists who claim that acceleration is always positive stating, “Our brains have evolved to use slowness as part of our overall information processing experience” (p. 61).

Miedema has masterfully woven a broad range of scholarship into a very thought-provoking premise, which does indeed meet his desire of stimulating further reflection. Because of the book’s brevity however, the reader often feels teased but not fulfilled. At times it reads like a formulaic literature review which presents a brief description of one study or subtopic before moving on the next, missing the opportunity for more thoroughly developed discussions that would alleviate the jagged transitions. For example, he closes his chapter on the personal nature of slow reading with an allusion to its implications for librarians working in a reader’s advisory role. But instead of expanding this idea fuller, he merely summarizes ideas of one author in a single paragraph. In spite of this shortcoming, the overall effect of this little book is captivating, and all of Miedema’s essays should be read slowly in order to fully appreciate this exciting idea.

References

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Reviewer

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