

Reading Guide

Paperbacks as Journal Reflections

Have you ever used your paperback novel as a personal reflections journal? Highlighting, underlining, and notes in the margin may seem heretical to some, but interacting with a novel or inspirational book can offer insight into our own thoughts and emotional states. Better than having a conversation with the author, it means having a conversation with ourselves, which in turn, helps us have more honest, productive conversations with others.

Here are some helpful questions to garner insight while reading. Keep a pen, pencil, or highlighter close at hand just in case. 😊

- Why did I have to read particular sections over again?
Are they poorly written? Beautifully written?
Are they telling me something I need to hear? Or reminding me of something I've forgotten?
Are they frightening me? Why?
- Consider strong emotional reactions to characters, scenes, and events.
Am I reminded of a repressed grief?
Do I need to work on processing something?
How can I best work through these emotions when I put the book aside?
- What does the conflict in this story do to me?
Am I afraid it will never get resolved?
Are there unresolved conflicts in my life?
- Do the characters' emotions feel familiar?
- Do I feel less lonely because the characters understand what it is like to hurt or be misunderstood?
- Who are the people in my life who show me real compassion?
Do I feel empathy for others?
- Is there anyone in the story that I admire? Why?
What qualities does he or she have that I wish I had?
Can I learn to be more like that?
- Does an injustice in the story make me want to do something that I'm afraid to do in real life?

- If I see the unfairness in the story, do I identify it when it happens in real life? Do I stand up for myself the way I want to stand up for an abused character?
- Who do I find dislikable or repugnant in the story?
Who do they remind me of in my life?
Have my disagreeable feelings been repressed or managed well?
What are the characters teaching me about dealing with challenging people?
- If my life were a story, who would be the heroes?
The villains?
Sideline characters? Are there sideline people in real life?
Who might be the narrator?
- Is there a hidden force in the story?
How do I identify the hidden forces in my life?
What do I really believe—just between me and the characters—when no one is watching?
Can I own my beliefs? Share them with someone?
- What ugly characteristics do I fear I might share with the worst characters?
- What are the lovely qualities that I share with the best characters?

Like a dream, stories highlight our unconscious hidden selves and allow us to face our inner complexities.

The most powerful part of reading a good book is not meeting great characters but discovering a new facet of our true selves.