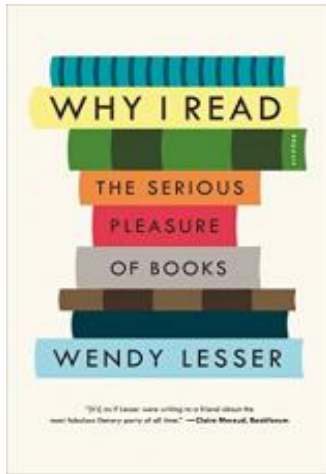


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# Why I Read: The Serious Pleasure of Books

by Wendy Lesser

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## About the Book

“Wendy Lesser’s extraordinary alertness, intelligence, and curiosity have made her one of America’s most significant cultural critics,” writes Stephen Greenblatt.

In *WHY I READ*, she draws on a lifetime of pleasure reading and decades of editing to describe a life lived in and through literature. As Lesser examines work from such perspectives as “Character and Plot,” “Novelty,” “Grandeur and Intimacy” and “Authority,” the reader will discover a definition of literature that is as broad as it is broad-minded. In addition to novels and stories, Lesser explores plays, poems and essays, along with mysteries, science fiction and memoirs. Her passion for reading is infectious --- and it resonates on every page.

Iconoclastic, conversational and full of insight, *WHY I READ* will delight avid readers as well as neophytes in search of sheer literary fun.

## Discussion Guide

1. Why do you read? How do your reasons compare to Wendy Lesser’s?
2. Reflecting on works as diverse as *PARADISE LOST* and modern thrillers, Lesser vividly describes the influence of well-drawn characters (minor ones as well as those who take center stage) and the difference between “serious novels” and those meant purely for entertainment. Where do you personally draw this literary line? In your home library, how do you distinguish between literature and commercial works?

3. At the end of the second chapter, Lesser observes that the "eerily bridgeable gap between the you and the me of a literary work is also a space between the living and the dead, the imagined and the real, the singular and the collective." How did her discussion of literary "space" transform your experience of narrative voices?
4. Discussing the concept of novelty, Lesser describes a diverse array of writers --- including Norman Mailer, Roberto Bolaño, Thornton Wilder, and Louise Glück --- who share a mastery of suspending reality or reinventing structures, sometimes through the process of translation. In your opinion, which form (narrative nonfiction, fiction, drama, poetry, essay) best lends itself to novelty? What does it take for a writer to translate an imagined world effectively for you?
5. As Lesser explores questions of authority, what does she reveal about an author's ability to persuade (particularly in many canonical Russian works) and to build trust as a historical truth-teller?
6. Discuss D. H. Lawrence's advice, quoted on page 105: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." Are you able to immerse yourself in literature without being distracted by the author's possible motives or questions about the author's biography?
7. In "Grandeur and Intimacy," Lesser considers the notion of Jewish writers who participate in a collective memory, influenced by history while shaping the history that will be lived by their readers. What do you make of the literature of your ancestors? Does it give voice to your identity?
8. Are you drawn to literature that takes you elsewhere, or do you prefer to stay close to home in your reading experiences? Through novelists such as Haruki Murakami and translators such as Alfred Birnbaum, what's the farthest distance a book has taken you? Like Lesser, are you a connoisseur of translators?
9. On page 176, Lesser invokes Plato's rejection of poetry in his quest for truth. What is your stance in this debate, especially as a reader in the Information Age? How much reality should a society expect from its literary artists and other storytellers?
10. Are you willing to overlook imperfections in a work of literature? If so, discuss a literary imperfection that has been particularly puzzling, intriguing, or endearing to you.
11. Describe the physical traits of your most treasured books. Are they paperbacks, hardcovers, or ebooks? How does the design influence your imagination? Did you read WHY I READ on hard copy or digitally?
12. Which titles would top your hundred books to read for pleasure?
13. How did WHY I READ enhance your appreciation of the previous books by Wendy Lesser that you have enjoyed?

## Author Bio

Wendy Lesser is the founder and editor of *The Threepenny Review*, which Adam Zagajewski has called "one of the most original literary magazines not only in the U.S. but also on the entire planet." She is the author of eight previous books of nonfiction and one novel. Her most recent book is the prizewinning *MUSIC FOR SILENCED VOICES: Shostakovich*

and His Fifteen String Quartets. She has written for *The New York Times Book Review*, the *London Review of Books*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and other publications. She divides her time between Berkeley, California, and New York City.

## Critical Praise

“Reading *WHY I READ* delivers all the pleasure of discussing one’s favorite books with a marvelously articulate, intelligent, opinionated friend. It’s like joining the book club of your dreams, one in which you don’t have to do any of the work or think up intelligent things to say, but can simply enjoy reading about books you’ve read or want to read.”

—Francine Prose, author of *READING LIKE A WRITER*

“Wendy Lesser’s extraordinary alertness, intelligence, and curiosity have made her one of America’s most significant cultural critics.”

—Stephen Greenblatt

“In this elegantly meandering narrative, critic and editor Lesser (*MUSIC FOR SILENCED VOICES: Shostakovich and His Fifteen String Quartets*), founder of the *Threepenny Review*, takes us through her expansive reading life. This is not so much a memoir of reading as it is about the craft of literature—the merits of both grandeur and intimacy, the double-edged sword of novelty, the ways character and plot are inextricably linked . . . Lesser’s idiosyncratic reading list and her wealth of insights will speak to booklovers of all types.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“The rare and marvelous pleasure of meeting a fellow reader, the sort of person who, in childhood, automatically turned the cereal box so her eyes could rest on words at all times, is here given new form. Wendy Lesser is candid, democratic, brisk, passionate, stubborn, fiercely exact; as in all memorable conversations, I found myself sometimes wishing to debate, and often bursting into private festivals of concurrence. This is a book of rich provocations and rich delights. More than most contemporary critics, Lesser trusts her instinct: what a joy it is to listen, through these pages, to her bold assessments and charismatic opinions.”

—Louise Glück, author of *POEMS 1962–2012*

“Wendy Lesser has read just about everything, and proves a wonderfully companionable guide to books high and low. Rather than attempting anything ponderously encyclopedic, she follows her hunches, asking good, probing questions, voicing cultivated, intelligent opinions and surprising judgments, and doing it all with humor, dash, and skeptical humility. The result is a treat for all who love reading.”

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