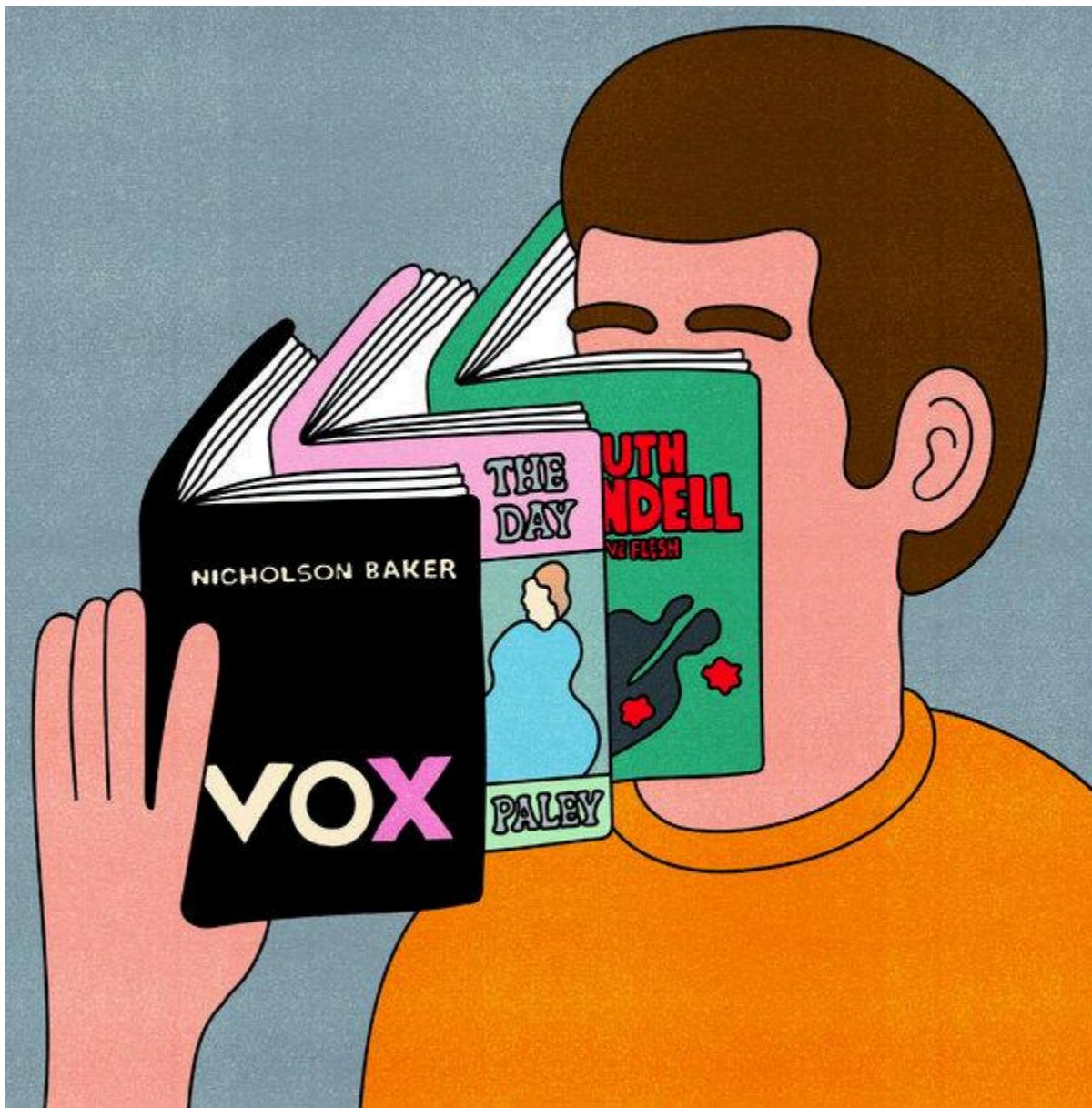


Opinion

Why You Should Start Binge-Reading Right Now

Ditch Netflix for a novel. And not just because a novelist is telling you to.

By Ben Dolnick, , May 4, 2019 – *The New York Times*



Mr. Dolnick is a novelist.

One night a couple of summers ago, the power went out and, unable to watch Netflix or engage in my customary internet fugue, I lit a candle and picked up a thriller by Ruth Rendell. For the first time in as long as I could remember, my sole source of entertainment for an evening was going to be a book.

And yes, yes, just as you'd expect, it was wonderful, it was cozy, the internet is terrible. But what struck me more than the night's general delightfulness, was how much my experience of reading the book was influenced by the speed with which I was suddenly moving through it. To that point, I'd been reading the book the way I usually read books, which is to say in five- or 10-minute snatches before bed. And I'd been more or less enjoying it — watching Rendell's criminal protagonist get out of prison, following along as he searched for his victim — but I'd been enjoying it the way a person enjoys hors d'oeuvres at a cocktail party. *Those cheese puffs are delicious; I just wish I could sit down with a plate of them.* Now, by reading for an hour or two straight, I'd found my way into the caterer's tent. I could savor the particular tart flavor of the author's voice. I could admire the elegance of the trap she was setting for her doomed criminal.

Before my storm-induced Rendell marathon, I'd been reading the wrong way. John Gardner, the literary critic, wrote that the job of the novelist is to create a "vivid and continuous dream" for the reader, but I'd somehow developed a case of readerly sleep apnea. I'd gotten into the habit of consuming novels so fitfully that I was all but sealed off from their pleasures. It was as if I'd been watching movies in a special buffering-only mode, or listening to music through the world's balkiest Bluetooth headphones.

This style of reading had, I realized, shunted me into a vicious circle. I was reading less because I was enjoying it less, which made reading even less enjoyable, which inclined me to read even less. In this way, a bookmark lodged at page 128 of "Wolf Hall" began to seem as immovable as a Stonehenge tablet.

I had accidentally discovered one of the great disadvantages of books (a medium that is not exactly short on disadvantages at the moment). There is no team of brilliant and vaguely sinister engineers, cooking up ways to get you binge reading. There is no auto-play technology frictionlessly delivering you from one chapter of the novel you're reading to the next. There is only you, alone in the silence of your room with a chapter break before you and your phone cooing at you from the dresser. No one could blame you for putting "The Count of Monte Cristo" back on the bedside table where it spends its days. Maybe, like a long-forgotten glass of water, it will evaporate of its own accord.

But in book after book, if you do push on through one chapter break, and then on through the chapter break after that, something amazing happens. Subplots that would once have been murky to the point of incomprehensibility (what was the deal with that dead sea captain again?) step into the light. Little jokes and echoes, separated by dozens or even hundreds of pages, come rustling out of the text forest. A writer's voice — Grace Paley at her slangy best, Nicholson Baker at his hypomanic craziest — starts to seep into and color the voice of your innermost thoughts.

You will, in other words, find yourself propelled through a book that would once have been a multiseason dead weight in your tote bag. And this will not be the creepy propulsion of the countdown that draws you guiltily into a "White Collar" marathon, but the intimate, happy propulsion that keeps you talking well into the night with a visiting friend.

Now this may all seem a bit rich, coming from a fiction writer. *You aren't enjoying reading? Then read longer! Read faster! The problem is you!* But the corollary to this way of reading — of taking books down in gulps rather than sips — is that you will discover much more quickly when a book

isn't for you, and you can then set it aside without the nagging suspicion that you might have sabotaged it by your method of ingestion.

Fine, you say. If I were Thoreau, with nothing more on my agenda than a pond walk at noon and an apple at 3, it might be nice to read like this. But who has the time?

To which I say: Let's talk again about all those hours of "White Collar."

Because the mind — for all its endless rationalizations and solemn prohibitions — is in fact a ceaseless pleasure hound. Once I'm actually enjoying a book, it really does feel as if the pages are turning themselves; I find myself reading in all the little pockets of time that were once reserved for the serious business of checking to see if my dishwasher pods have shipped.

And pleasure is, after all — once I scrape away the layers of self-image and pretentiousness — the reason that I read. When I've found the right book, and I'm reading it the right way, reading is *fun* — head-tingling, goosebump-raising fun. It's a vivid and continuous dream that is somehow both directed from without and cast from within, and I get to be awake for it. Netflix can wait.