

How to Mark A Book

MORTIMER J. ADLER



YOU know you have to read "between the lines" to get the most out of anything. I want to persuade you to do something equally important in the course of your reading. I want to persuade you to "write between the lines." Unless you do, you are not likely to do the most efficient kind of reading.

I contend, quite bluntly, that marking up a book is not an act of mutilation but of love.

You shouldn't mark up a book which isn't yours. Librarians (or your friends) who lend you books expect you to keep them clean, and you should. If you decide that I am right about the usefulness of marking books, you will have to buy them. Most of the world's great books are available today, in reprint editions, at less than a dollar.

There are two ways in which one can own a book. The first is the property right you establish by paying for it, just as you pay for clothes and furniture. But this act of purchase is only the prelude to possession. Full ownership comes only when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it is by writing in it. An illustration may make the point clear. You buy a beefsteak and transfer it from the butcher's icebox to your own. But you do not own the beefsteak in the most important sense until you consume it and get it into your bloodstream. I am arguing that books, too, must be absorbed in your bloodstream to do you any good.

Confusion about what it means to own a book leads people to a false reverence for paper, binding, and type—a respect for the physical thing—the craft of the printer rather than the genius of the author. They forget that it is possible for a man to acquire the idea, to possess the beauty, which a great book contains, without staking his claim by pasting his bookplate inside the cover. Having a fine library doesn't prove that its owner has a mind enriched by books; it proves nothing more than that he, his father, or his wife, was rich enough to buy them.

There are three kinds of book owners. The first has all the standard sets and best-sellers—unread, untouched. (This deluded individual owns wood-pulp and ink, not books.) The second has a great many books—a few of them read through, most of them

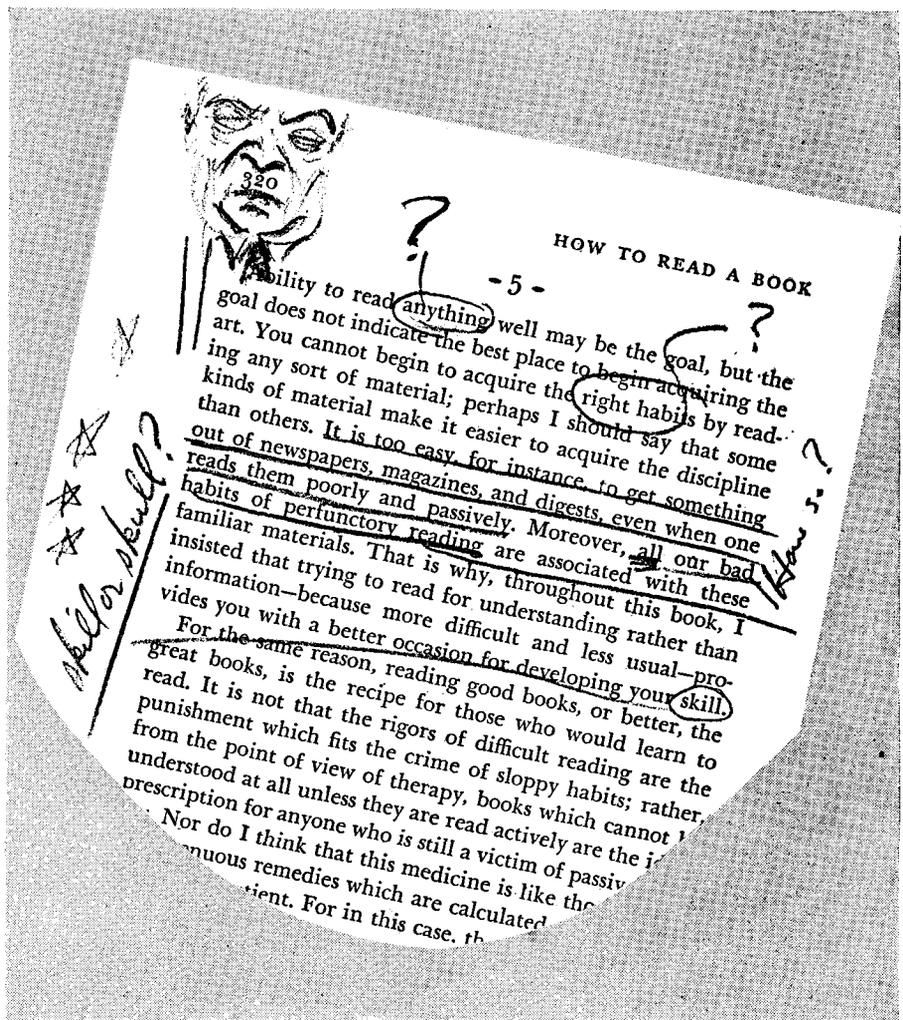
dipped into, but all of them as clean and shiny as the day they were bought. (This person would probably like to make books his own, but is restrained by a false respect for their physical appearance.) The third has a few books or many—every one of them dog-eared and dilapidated, shaken and loosened by continual use, marked and scribbled in from front to back. (This man owns books.)

Is it false respect, you may ask, to preserve intact and unblemished a beautifully printed book, an elegantly bound edition? Of course not. I'd no more scribble all over a first edition of "Paradise Lost" than I'd give my baby a set of crayons and an original

Rembrandt! I wouldn't mark up a painting or a statue. Its soul, so to speak, is inseparable from its body. And the beauty of a rare edition or of a richly manufactured volume is like that of a painting or a statue.

But the soul of a book can be separated from its body. A book is more like the score of a piece of music than it is like a painting. No great musician confuses a symphony with the printed sheets of music. Arturo Toscanini reveres Brahms, but Toscanini's score of the C-minor Symphony is so thoroughly marked up that no one but the maestro himself can read it. The reason why a great conductor makes notations on his musical scores—marks them up again and again each time he returns to study them—is the reason why you should mark your books. If your respect for magnificent binding or typography gets in the way, buy yourself a cheap edition and pay your respects to the author.

Why is marking up a book indispensable to reading? First, it keeps you awake. (And I don't mean merely



The SRL editors, who yield to no one their firm hold on a pencil, went back to a review copy of Mr. Adler's "How to Read a Book," and came across this page, which, while it illustrates some of the points made by Mr. Adler in his article, demonstrates that he who marks is tempted also to doodle. Perhaps, after all, this page is an example of how *not* to mark a book.

conscious; I mean wide awake.) In the second place, reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The marked book is usually the thought-through book. Finally, writing helps you remember the thoughts you had, or the thoughts the author expressed. Let me develop these three points.

If reading is to accomplish anything more than passing time, it must be active. You can't let your eyes glide across the lines of a book and come up with an understanding of what you have read. Now an ordinary piece of light fiction, like, say, "Gone with the Wind," doesn't require the most active kind of reading. The books you read for pleasure can be read in a state of relaxation, and nothing is lost. But a great book, rich in ideas and beauty, a book that raises and tries to answer great fundamental questions, demands the most active reading of which you are capable. You don't absorb the ideas of John Dewey the way you absorb the crooning of Mr. Vallee. You have to reach for them. That you cannot do while you're asleep.

If, when you've finished reading a book, the pages are filled with your notes, you know that you read actively. The most famous *active* reader of great books I know is President Hutchins, of the University of Chicago. He also has the hardest schedule of business activities of any man I know. He invariably reads with a pencil, and sometimes, when he picks up a book and pencil in the evening, he finds himself, instead of making intelligent notes, drawing what he calls "caviar factories" on the margins. When that happens, he puts the book down. He knows he's too tired to read, and he's just wasting time.

But, you may ask, why is writing necessary? Well, the physical act of writing, with your own hand, brings words and sentences more sharply before your mind and preserves them better in your memory. To set down your reaction to important words and sentences you have read, and the questions they have raised in your mind, is to preserve those reactions and sharpen those questions.

Even if you wrote on a scratch pad, and threw the paper away when you had finished writing, your grasp of the book would be surer. But you don't have to throw the paper away. The margins (top and bottom, as well as side), the end-papers, the very space between the lines, are all available. They aren't sacred. And, best of all, your marks and notes become an integral part of the book and stay there forever. You can pick up the book the following week or year, and there are all your points of agreement, disagree-

ment, doubt, and inquiry. It's like resuming an interrupted conversation with the advantage of being able to pick up where you left off.

And that is exactly what reading a book should be: a conversation between you and the author. Presumably he knows more about the subject than you do; naturally, you'll have the proper humility as you approach him. But don't let anybody tell you that a reader is supposed to be solely on the receiving end. Understanding is a two-way operation; learning doesn't consist in being an empty receptacle. The learner has to question himself and question the teacher. He even has to argue with the teacher, once he understands what the teacher is saying. And marking a book is literally an expression of your differences, or agreements of opinion, with the author.

There are all kinds of devices for marking a book intelligently and fruitfully. Here's the way I do it:

1. *Underlining*: of major points, of important or forceful statements.

2. *Vertical lines at the margin*: to emphasize a statement already underlined.

3. *Star, asterisk, or other doo-dad at the margin*: to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or twenty most important statements in the book. (You may want to fold the bottom corner of each page on which you use such marks. It won't hurt the sturdy paper on which most modern books are printed, and you will be able to take the book off the shelf at any time and, by opening it at the folded-corner page, refresh your recollection of the book.)

4. *Numbers in the margin*: to indicate the sequence of points the author makes in developing a single argument.

5. *Numbers of other pages in the margin*: to indicate where else in the book the author made points relevant to the point marked; to tie up the ideas in a book, which, though they may be separated by many pages, belong together.

6. *Circling of key words or phrases*.

7. *Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page, for the sake of*: recording questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raised in your mind; reducing a complicated discussion to a simple statement; record-

ing the sequence of major points right through the books. I use the end-papers at the back of the book to make a personal index of the author's points in the order of their appearance.

The front end-papers are, to me, the most important. Some people reserve them for a fancy bookplate. I reserve them for fancy thinking. After I have finished reading the book and making my personal index on the back end-papers, I turn to the front and try to outline the book, not page by page, or point by point (I've already done that at the back), but as an integrated structure, with a basic unity and an order of parts. This outline is, to me, the measure of my understanding of the work.

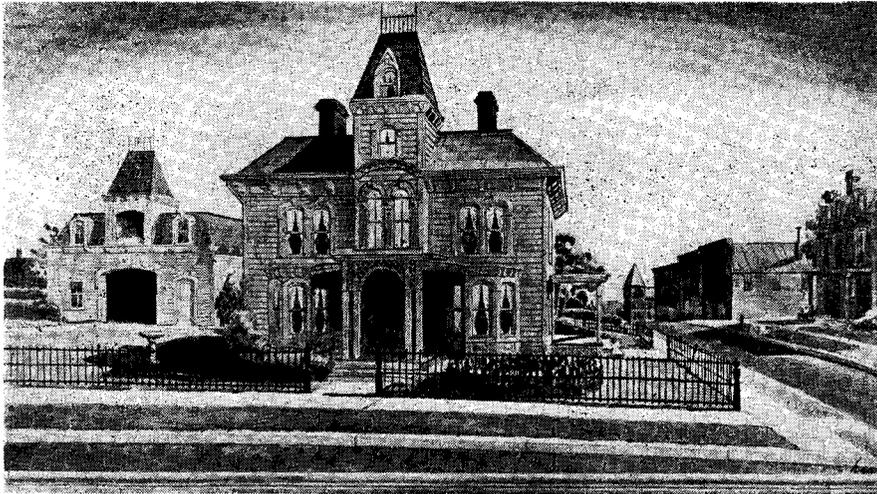
If you're a die-hard anti-book-marker, you may object that the margins, the space between the lines, and the end-papers don't give you room enough. All right. How about using a scratch pad slightly smaller than the page-size of the book—so that the edges of the sheets won't protrude? Make your index, outlines, and even your notes on the pad, and then insert these sheets permanently inside the front and back covers of the book.

Or, you may say that this business of marking books is going to slow up your reading. It probably will. That's one of the reasons for doing it. Most of us have been taken in by the notion that speed of reading is a measure of our intelligence. There is no such thing as the right speed for intelligent reading. Some things should be read quickly and effortlessly, and some should be read slowly and even laboriously. The sign of intelligence in reading is the ability to read different things differently according to their worth. In the case of good books, the point is not to see how many of them you can get through, but rather how many can get through you—how many you can make your own. A few friends are better than a thousand acquaintances. If this be your aim, as it should be, you will not be impatient if it takes more time and effort to read a great book than it does a newspaper.

You may have one final objection to marking books. You can't lend them to your friends because nobody else can read them without being distracted by your notes. Furthermore, you won't want to lend them because a marked copy is a kind of intellectual diary, and lending it is almost like giving your mind away.

If your friend wishes to read your "Plutarch's Lives," "Shakespeare," or "The Federalist Papers," tell him gently but firmly, to buy a copy. You will lend him your car or your coat—but your books are as much a part of you as your head or your heart.





From the jacket-design by Alanson B. Heves for "Sioux City"

Boom City of the Eighties

SIOUX CITY. By J. Hyatt Downing.
New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
1940. 314 pp. \$2.50.

Reviewed by RICHARD A. CORDELL

J. HYATT DOWNING has written three novels of the Middle Border, which Hamlin Garland with his powerful pessimism first utilized in fiction just fifty years ago. Although Downing has no buoyant illusions about the hard work, the futile battle against drought and insect, the crooked politics, and the shameless rapacity of promoter and land speculator, he knows (with greater perspective and wider personal experience) that Garland did not tell the whole story.

Into his first two novels, "A Prayer for Tomorrow" and "Hope of Living," Downing incorporates personal and family experiences. In "Sioux City" he writes of the town where he has lived only in recent years, limiting himself to the gaudy boom period of the mid-eighties. Although Sioux City was not incorporated until 1857, when its population numbered only four hundred, its growth was so phenomenal that by 1885 enthusiastic citizens visualized it rivaling Chicago as the metropolis of the West. Zealous promoters and real estate opportunists acted accordingly, and with capricious nature's assistance (for a number of seasons the Missouri bottoms produced record crops while elsewhere were droughts and other calamities) actually succeeded in raising the city by its own bootstraps. A sharp growth in population was accompanied by preposterous schemes of expansion, although conservatives and skeptics realized that Sioux City because of its geographical location would never become an industrial city of a million inhabitants. The frenzy lasted long

enough to see the dream of an elevated railway (the third in America) come true, and the completion of the Corn Palace, which brought President Cleveland to the city for a two-hour visit. The bubble burst in 1893, but the novel carries its story only to 1887.

The narrative is concerned principally with young Anthony Trant, who returns to Sioux City from college in 1884 and determines to reap a fortune from the boom. He is ruthless and cold, and no compunctious visitings of remorse block his march to his first million. Although he gains the world, it cannot be said that he loses his soul, for he has none to lose. His only redeeming trait is his love for the daughter of an improvident farmer, but his pride and ambition prevent the marriage which might have humanized him, but which more likely would have spelt misery for her. Trant's success is a striking illustration of the old saw that if one is not careful he will be sure to get what he wants in this world.

"Sioux City" is a vigorous, interesting novel and shows an advance in both characterization and handling of material over Downing's first two novels; moreover the style is less frilly, more sharply masculine. There is less sentimentality, although the novelist is somewhat guilty in his portraits of the hero's father and the heroine's family. One wishes that the heroine were not such a paragon of sense and virtue, and that the Bret Harte touches in the reformed drunkard and gambler were less obvious, but the edge of the main story—that of Anthony Trant—is not blurred, and the novel comes to a forceful and poignant conclusion.

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Puritan and Hedonist

THE WIND OF CIRCUMSTANCE.

By Harold Dearden. New York: Reynal & Hitchcock. 1940. 437 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH

EVEN if you are pretty fed-up with doctor books it will be a mistake to miss this one—that is if you still respond to a good yarn. For it is a mere accident of time that the author of this autobiography is a medical man. In another century he might have been a roving minstrel, or a swashbuckling privateer. Harold Dearden is one of those lucky persons who attract adventure as inevitably as a magnet draws filings. The lives of these hundred percent gland-functioning folk are always crowded with color, and when they are doubly blessed with the gift of expression they provide lively entertainment for us paler romantics. From childhood Dearden has pursued and been pursued by astonishing people. His father was the first, and he obviously conditioned his son in more ways than one. Drama and adventure were meat and drink to both, but while the elder sought his in devious ways, the younger found his in "the limitless capacity for unexpected behavior possessed by our fellow creatures"—in the quirks and irrelevancies, the pathos and dignity, the ironic obscenities, that rise to the surface when the wind of circumstance disturbs the top-soil. One glimpse of any of these and he was hot on its scent, and if his technique owed nothing to Freud, it had methods of its own for sounding human springs. So it was natural, that having decided to study medicine he should have chosen psychiatry for his specialty.

But that was later. First there was school, his boyish Puritanism, his emergence from a timid, book-loving youngster to a Cambridge athlete. And there was Anne, his first love. He fell in love with her at sight when he saw her performing very badly on a trapeze in a country fair, and his passion led him to challenge Ajax, the strong man, and then to join him and the caravan crew of performers for the weeks of his vacation. How he acquired Anne and the no less lovable terrier, Tim, is one of the most delightful episodes in the book. As a medical student and interne, adventure trots by his side in the friends he makes and the situations they plunge him into; he spends a vacation in London's slums the better to know the people and for the same reason earns his living by selling papers, unloading at the Limehouse docks, pushing a coster's cart, etc.; and he meets Kitty,