

7 Tips for Reading Classic Literature

<http://thebookmarque.blogspot.com/2012/04/7-tips-for-reading-classic-literature.html>

A lot of people have had classic novels ruined for them by high school. Bad teachers, short attention spans and raging hormones aren't a good combo for tackling older novels. Me personally, I'm trying to block it out and have since read a lot of classics on my own terms. After a couple decades and dozens of novels, I have found some ways not only to make the books more understandable, but actually enjoyable. Yeah, really! Imagine that.

1. Read for the story - don't read a classic simply because it is one, read it because you think it would be a good story. I believe that all the books that have become classics have some merit, but they are not all equally appealing. Don't force yourself to read something you think would be boring.

2. Start small - a lot of older books are wordy and long. They're that way for a reason and if you don't have a lot of experience with them, it can be frustrating. Start with shorter works and see if you warm up to the style. A Christmas Carol is a good one for starting off with Dickens; it's short and the story is well-known so it's not likely you'll get lost.

3. Do your homework - writers in former centuries wrote about stuff that was common knowledge then, but might be unfathomable now. The internet is your friend. Find and read articles about events and people that feature in the story (take A Tale of Two Cities - if you don't know about the French revolution you might be pretty lost). Read about the leaders and revolutionaries, artists and writers, scientists and clergymen. Look at maps. Even check out readers' guides like Cliff's Notes to help you with literary themes, allegories and other obscure stuff you know you're supposed to "get", but often miss. I did that when I read Crime and Punishment and it helped A LOT. If you really get into a time period, try finding a reference book or two about that time. This is also really good for historical fiction. A good one for 19th century English lit is What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew by Daniel Pool.

4. Leave your modern attitude out of it - people change and viewing them through our current ideas and morals might really ruin things for you. No, you won't be able to help comparing the two, but try not to be judgmental in the sense that the characters would be wicked jerks in this day and age. Instead try to be sympathetic to the plights of people bound by what we now think of as unfair social rules; like the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice*. Without knowing exactly why the opening line is so painfully funny and ironic, you won't get anything else in the book and will judge the girls as being stupid and ridiculous. A simple bit of research will show you they are not. Well except Lydia.

5. Learn to love the language - yes it's flowery. Yes, it takes a long time (sometimes) to get to the point. Yes, sometimes when the point is arrived at it is worried over and restated again and again. Yes, sometimes you'll need a dictionary. If you like reading, you hopefully also like language and all the ways it can be used to effect. I find reading out loud really helps get me into the rhythm of it. And it's fun, too. Vivid descriptions, great turns of phrase, witty dialogue, skewering insults; it's all part of the feast. Savor it.

6. Stick to your guns - if you're not yet used to older prose and language, don't try reading a modern novel at the same time, it will only make things more jarring and make it harder to get used to the older style. Try to read for long periods of time at once, too, this not only helps with the language, but it immerses you more fully in the story. Seat time as my driving instructors called it; there's no substitute for seat time.

7. Give your eyes a break - try an audiobook. Unabridged of course. The right narrator can make all the difference sometimes. Like with *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins - the Recorded Books recording features several different narrators (one for each person who tells the story) and their characterizations are so great. Like Davina Porter as Miss Clack - priceless! And Patrick Tull as Betteredge is just fizzy with personality. Audio is especially perfect for stories that were originally told by bards in halls and around campfires, like *Odyssey* and other

epic poems like Beowulf. Who knows, you might find you like some of them so well you get the printed version, too.

So that's it, my top 7 tips for reading classic novels (and historical novels, too). I'd love to hear from other classic readers if you have any ideas to add.

<http://thebookmarque.blogspot.com/2012/04/7-tips-for-reading-classic-literature.html>