



One for the Books

Joe Queenan

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One of America's leading humorists and author of the bestseller *Closing Time* examines his own obsession with books

Joe Queenan became a voracious reader as a means of escape from a joyless childhood in a Philadelphia housing project. In the years since then he has dedicated himself to an assortment of idiosyncratic reading challenges: spending a year reading only short books, spending a year reading books he always suspected he would hate, spending a year reading books he picked with his eyes closed.

In *One for the Books*, Queenan tries to come to terms with his own eccentric reading style. How many more books will he have time to read in his lifetime? Why does he refuse to read books hailed by reviewers as "astonishing"? Why does he refuse to lend out books? Will he ever buy an e-book? Why does he habitually read thirty to forty books simultaneously? Why are there so many people to whom the above questions do not even matter? And what do they read? Acerbically funny yet passionate and oddly affectionate, *One for the Books* is a reading experience that true book lovers will find unforgettable.

One for the Books Details

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Author : Joe Queenan

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From Reader Review One for the Books for online ebook

Diane says

3.5 stars

"When I was young and penniless, I read books in the hope of lifting myself out of the abyss, subscribing to the credo that knowledge is power."

I enjoyed this collection of essays about books, despite the fact that the author is an arrogant, curmudgeonly ass. He is cynical and grouchy and dismissive of certain types of books and readers and libraries and book clubs. And boy, does he hate e-readers -- he mentions it several times.

However, I am also a book snob and I agreed with some but not all of his bookish opinions. And Joe Queenan speaks with some authority: he reads about 200 books a year and estimates he's read about 7,000 books in his life.

"I have never squandered an opportunity to read. There are only twenty-four hours in the day, seven of which are spent sleeping, and in my view at least four of the remaining seventeen must be devoted to reading."

Well, I can't argue with that logic. Maybe if Joe hadn't insulted some of my favorite novels in the first chapter I wouldn't have called him an ass. But he would probably revel in that insult, as I am a librarian and he wrote an entire essay about "crotchety" librarians and his bad experiences in libraries and how he despises people who borrow books instead of buying them. So yeah, he's still an ass, just a well-read one.

I would advise against reading this book in one day, as I did, because I think Joe is more tolerable in small doses. The essays are in the style of long newspaper or magazine columns, and he does repeat himself a few times, as columnists tend to do. I did get several good book recommendations from him, which I always appreciate, but I would have enjoyed his writing more if there had been a bit less snark.

Meghan says

This guy is a crank. A book-reading crank, with several suspect opinions, including the complete dismissal of fantasy, science fiction, and children's books. But wait! His opinions are often outlandish, but he's hilariously clever in a Bill Bryson-esque way. His jabs at libraries and librarianship are awesome, as when he is asked to give a talk at the public library because he is a local author:

"Library events scare me, as they provide refuge for local historians, fabulists, tellers of tall tales, historical reenactors, and even dream weavers."

His talk doesn't go that well.

He also coins the phrase 'matriculated from The Beatrix Potter Academy of Small-Town Librarian Charm',

which is a perfect way to describe those effusive and theatrical children's librarians.

This book is more or less the author talking to the reader about reading, and how the act of reading over a lifetime is an ongoing dialogue or conversation with both yourself and the larger culture. But, he reminds us, we mostly read because we aren't satisfied with reality. Reading goals and plans come up often, and among other plans, he mentions spending a year reading only books he chose from library shelves at random with his eyes shut, spending a year reading an entire short novel every day, and spending a year rereading only books he'd already read twice. That's the kind of stuff that gets me excited.

Oh, and also he's casually insulting and dismissive of the books he doesn't care for, so much so that it's hard to take seriously. He says an author writes like "Nora Roberts on Robitussin DM", which made me laugh and laugh.

One last note: I kept wondering what Nancy Pearl, professional reader, would think of this. I think she would like it?

Jill Mackin says

I enjoyed One for the Books because it let me reflect on my lifelong obsession with reading. Queenan is sort of a literary snob and we have but a handful of authors in common. And his angst about Middlemarch is a bit over the top.

Kris says

Sometimes mildly interesting, sometimes quite funny, but generally too snooty for me. Queenan is frankly a snob.

He's so self-absorbed, so sarcastically satisfied with his own self-sanctioned reading habits, his snobbery leaks out into other realms. The second half of the book was barely about books or reading at all, but more like a biography, with Queenan going off on random tangents that I frankly don't care about. I sped-read the last 150+ pages.

I suppose it is a quick read, and it was nice to see a bunch of obscure titles I'd never have found anywhere else, but it added nothing to my to-read list.

(I really need to stop pulling random books down off the library shelves based on their back-cover commentaries. It doesn't usually turn out well.)

Carol says

Darn, darn and darn again...someone recommended this to me and I can't remember who but thank you anyway.

If you're a book lover and most of us on GR are, you should be able to find something useful and even

amusing in this laying in all out on paper, confession of sorts, or Joe Queenan, book addict. Consider that this guy is reading over 30 books at a time, not just browsing, actually reading. He reads at least 2 hours a day, 4 if you add in time for newspapers, work material and magazines. He reads everywhere and I mean everywhere. Books, not e-books, as Queenan explains and does not apologize that he marks them up. Yep, writes notes throughout.

The very first line got my attention

"The average American reads four books a year, and the average American finds this more than sufficient"

Queenan soon had me laughing right out loud, something I infrequently do when reading a book. There are some great vignettes here, why he reads, what he reads, thoughts on libraries, his book shelves, why he doesn't like to take books others try to lend him and more.

My choice of quotes from the book comes from something he overheard at a library. He was a speaker on a panel at a county library association awards ceremony. He clearly did not care for the message of the keynote speaker. This man began his talk by holding a 33 1/3 record.

"Listen up, librarians: Physical books are a thing of the past. Your delivery system is antiquated. Downloads are the wave of the future. Your business model doesn't work anymore. You should run your library more like a business. Businessmen, after all, have successful business models."

He sums up his thoughts on this statement with one a friend from his own library heard elsewhere:

A library is not a business. A library is a miracle."

There are some that would disagree about the business part but few library lovers who would challenge the miracle.

He rants a bit, I hope in jest, about cheap people who borrow their books from libraries. Actually, his words are less kind than my choice. Sorry Joe, but I interlibrary loaned your book. Hopefully someone will read my comments and feel compelled to buy your book.

One for the Books is a memoir of sorts, as reading is quite important to this humorist. I highly recommend it but be forewarned, you'll probably come away with a few additions to your own bulging book shelves as I did.

Kate says

I'm happy I read this book. Just one reason is finding permission on p.189 to not like The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, which I haven't read, and earlier in the book, Tuesdays with Morrie, which I have read. Queenan is an astonishing writer - absolutely hilarious. Never mind that he's arrogant, condescending, insulting, and he overgeneralizes. Those who love cynicism will probably love this book too. And maybe those who don't. The thinner skinned will want to stick with End of Your Life Book Club, which I loved slightly more than One for the Books. He especially hates Kindles. I can see why he would. He remembers everything he reads, so the ability to carry his entire library with him at all times is useless. Having a whole,

big house plus an office to store his books, he has no empathy for those needing to disburse in anticipation of having to move to smaller quarters in perhaps a not so distant future. I doubt it would help even if he knew about me telling my husband on our first vacation together, when he complained about the quantity of books I packed, that clean underwear for every day was expendable but the books were not. Interestingly, he values the citizen reviews on sites such as Amazon.

Diane S ? says

Book critic and contributor to many different magazines and newspapers, this is a book that is all about reading, his love for books, his experiences in libraries and bookshops. In the first chapter he actually sounded just like me and I am sure many others, reading whenever and wherever he could. He is a self avowed book snob and manages to criticize many others, which was written sarcastically, not meanly. Actually managed to make me feel guilty for reading on my kindle but since I still read a book at the same time I quickly got over my guilt. I totally agree that the hard thing in a case (E-reader) does not give me the same feel or joy that a real book does. Love his description of books, his experiences with books and his different quests undertaken with the notion that he will get through the books in his house (sound familiar)? He hopes to one day climb the mountain that is Middlemarch and though he has read many books that I have not that is one mountain I have already climbed and loved doing it.

Manfred says

At about page 83 I realized I was starting to get weary of Joe's adventures in reading. I enjoy his writing in the pelletized newspaper column format, and his sense of whimsical humor and de rigueur Irish sense of self-deprecation is ever-present. He is never sidesplittingly or wickedly funny, more a member of the same tribe as Dave Barry or Erma Bombeck. If your tastes run in that direction then you will enjoy this book. To me, it was like reading the same 5 pages over and over. Or overhearing the most well-read member of a book club holding court.

Queenan admits it is perfectly appropriate not to finish a book, or to set it aside for years; he has 138 such books on his own shelves. I soldiered on to the finish, although his lifelong voyage as a booklover didn't always speak to me. As he admits, reading is an intensely personal experience. So, apparently, is trying to read about what someone else has been reading.

I did get a good laugh when he addresses citizen reviews in forums like Amazon and GoodReads, however. Hiding in our virtual book depository and taking rifle shots at great authors as they ride by in their convertibles, we are actually providing a noble service!

Scott Rhee says

Joe Queenan and I apparently share an obsessive passion. No, it's not whining incessantly about politics (although I suppose that works, too). We are both bibliophiles.

To be a true bibliophile, one must possess certain personal quirks. First, one must OWN books. Getting

books from the library and borrowing books from friends is okay, but actually owning books---regardless of whether one actually has room in the home (which is why I have books in boxes in the basement, sitting in piles on the floor in the bedroom, piled by my favorite chair in the living room, and just about anywhere else that they shouldn't be---coffee table, dining room table, kitchen table, kid's room)---is far preferable.

Second, is the actual love of books as tangible objects. The smell of wood pulp and ink, the feel of a thick hardcover binding, the ruffle of pages as you flip through it: these are simple pleasures one will never receive from a Kindle or Nook or iPad. Which is why I refuse to own one of them. Even if someone gets one for me as a present, I will most likely never use it. So, please, save your money...

Third, and probably the one quirk that makes true bibliophiles look like lunatics, is the need to have a book with you at all times. I have taken books with me to baseball games, doctor visits, and job interviews. Any place I know that I may be waiting for more than five minutes (hey, that's 10-12 pages right there...), I have to have something to read, and the crap that most waiting rooms call reading material (People magazine---seriously?) is stuff I wouldn't wrap a fish with.

So, it was comforting to read that Queenan and I (and millions of other people) share these quirks, and more. I don't feel so alone.

Queenan and I may differ in some views---Queenan is, not to put to fine a point on it, a literary snob asshole who hates science fiction and most genre fiction in general (except mysteries, which strikes me as weirdly hypocritical, but whatever...) over "literary" fiction and nonfiction. Now, I will read just about anything, and I try not to have too many prejudices in regards to genre fiction, although I have still, to this day, only read two novels that were blatantly categorized as "romance" novels, and I thought they both kinda sucked, so I don't have any desire to rush to the next romance novel anytime soon, but, unlike Queenan, I am willing to give it a try. He won't even LOOK at a copy of Frank Herbert's "Dune". Seriously, Queenan, WTF???

I'll forgive him that because Queenan clearly has a love of reading that he has nourished since his childhood. I can relate. He humorously tells tales of strange encounters, serendipitous occurrences, and wondrous finds in bookstores all across the country: again, things that would NEVER happen on a Kindle. He also admits things that only true bibliophiles would ever admit: for example, that we have, on occasion, called in sick from work in order to read a book. We also would much rather read than, at times, do the following: spend time with family, go to a movie, go to the beach, do housework, watch TV, have sex, eat, sleep. Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating about those last three things, but not much.

Nicki Markus says

I was actually looking forward to this book, thinking it sounded like a fun and interesting read. Unfortunately, the author got in the way.

Before I continue, a little something about me. In my teens, I was a book snob. I thought classics were the only things worth reading and I sniffed at the thought of e-books. These days I have lost that snobbish side and I read a huge range of different books and own an e-reader, dividing my time 50/450 between print and electronic.

From the first chapter, the author irritated me with his conceited, snobbish attitude. He basically seemed to be saying people who read e-books don't really appreciate books and people who borrow from the library are

skinflints. To show superiority, he quoted the number of books he owns. Well, I can actually equal his tally, but I read e-books too, so that destroys that argument.

Later he moaned at friends giving him books he doesn't want to read and took joy in describing how he shoves them in a dusty corner of the shelf. I bet his friends appreciate that! He then attacked various authors and their writing. Sometimes I agreed with his assessment, other times not, but it still seemed a little vicious.

At times, the author made some funny comments and told some enjoyable anecdotes and that makes me wonder if some of the comments I reacted so strongly to were also meant in jest. To give him the benefit of the doubt, perhaps they were. But if he was aiming at humour, he missed the mark and came across as arrogant instead.

It was a shame as the book could have been a fun read. The author's prose is clear and engaging and many of his stories were amusing. But for me, his attitude and overstated opinions got in the way.

I received this book as a free e-book ARC via NetGalley.

Ken says

Books about books. To the bibliophile, they are like candy. Ice cream. Pepperoni pizza. Hot fudge sundaes. Cold beer on a hot summer day. Yes, please, in other words. Who can resist all of those italicized titles of books the author/fellow addict has enjoyed, after all? Rhetorical question, lads and lasses. No one in this room we know.

Reading it, you, like me, will be underlining book titles for future reference, for a rainy day when you can type them into your "To-Read" shelf on Goodreads, in other words. Books you've heard of. Books you haven't heard of (even though you've been listening). Big books, brief books. American books, foreign books. Books you've read before but need to read again. Or didn't THINK you needed to read again until some author came along and reminded you that, YES, this book is worthy of reading again. And again. So what are you waiting for?

Queenan, for instance, believes James Joyce's *Dubliners* is the single best collection of short stories ever. End of (short) story. Me, I say to myself, "Holy St. Patrick! I haven't read *Dubliners* since the Jimmy Carter Administration (if you want to call it that)! What am I waiting for?"

Other Queenan favorites include books I have looked at but never bothered to open: *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, *The Snow Goose*, *Portnoy's Complaint*, for instance. He champions reading many titles at a time, taking three years or more to finish giant tomes like *Don Quixote*, and supporting local libraries and smallish bookstores.

As the book is a collection of his many newspaper and magazine pieces (amended for book form), JQ sometimes repeats himself and even contradicts himself, but you and I do, too. We just don't have the evidence in the form of our blatherings in book form (thank Odin!).

Joes loathes library readings, book clubs, discussion questions for book clubs, friends who foist books on him, best sellers, blurbs, and school summer reading lists (to name but a few). But, hey. He's a journalist. He's entitled to opinions. And to humor, which he's good at.

For instance, when ranting about historical reenactors, often hired by libraries, he writes, "Having seen many of these jokers in action--at Mount Vernon, at Colonial Williamsburg, at points west--I have come to believe that people who get dressed up in period costume, with three-cornered hats and high-buckle shoes, and who speak in archaic English, suffer from Reenactor's Autism, a malady that renders victims incapable of recognizing otherwise unmistakable visual cues indicating that most of the people in the room would like to seem them disemboweled."

Joe has some interesting bon mots, too. For example, "Good books don't make you think, because the author has already done all of the thinking for you, but a terrible book can really give your brain a workout, because you spend so much time wondering what incredibly dumb thing the author will say next."

One for the Books has a little bit of something for everyone, if you love books and (important caveat) do not easily take offense. Queenan is paid to have strong opinions by his magazine/newspaper bosses, after all, so if he takes off on your favorite author or your beloved book club habit, take a deep breath and remember, it's not personal. Opinions make horse races which sometimes pay off in the trifecta.

Want more quotes and titles from the book? I used it for further fodder here.

Happy reading about reading!

Robin says

I am ready to believe that Queenan wrote this book to prove that he could name however many titles and authors that he name-drops in here in under 250 pages. I suspect he was counting. He covers quite the spectrum, almost always at the level of the barest mention--sometimes scathing, sometimes ecstatic. Yes, he can write witty sentences, and I always award healthy points for that, I don't much appreciate the way he writes a similar sentence over and over again in a paragraph, each time substituting in the name of a different book or author. That gets tiresome.

When I reached the end and saw the disclaimer, "portions of this book appeared in different form in The New York Times, yadayadayada" I immediately recognized the sentiment that I experienced upon finishing Bill Bryson's *I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America After 20 Years Away*. It's an unsatisfying sense that you've just experienced something a bit awkwardly-cobbled-together, like watching too many episodes of a good television show back to back and realizing that there's a reason those episodes are meant to be consumed with an intervening week between each one.

Queenan, while funny, is also quite cranky. For someone who loves books and reading so much, he can be awfully nasty about other avid readers whose reading lists he deems insufficiently wide-ranging. He is as unapologetic about his opinions as he is eager to share them--almost as though he has held himself back for decades from discussing books with people in person (because it almost always goes poorly for him) and now has to let it all out, like he can't help it. The result is that the reader has to be a bit patient with him when he goes off themes like "I was reading Nordic crime fiction before everyone else" and "let me tell you how much I know about Henry de Motherlant" -- I'm paraphrasing, of course, but not by much. But then he wins me over by making all his friends fill out a detailed survey about their reading habits and digging into the psychology of their answers (can I do this? I want to!!) and says things like "People said I was insane to buy books in England and then carry them all the way back to the United States, especially if they are orange. But people like that are peasants." He speaks my mind!

I did pick up a few book ideas in here--though not as many as one might expect, given the number of books mentioned--and very much enjoyed and sympathized with his anecdotal evidence for why reading physical books and reading books on an ereader is just not the same experience. Books, as Queenan demonstrates, are not just for reading -- they are also a big cultural blanket in which you wrap all the rooms of your house. Books hold specific memories depending on where or at whose suggestion they were acquired. Books can have enigmatic notes written in the margins with different handwriting revealing your age, maturity, or mood. Books can travel from your own shelves to those of trusted friends and become shared relics of shared reading experiences. Books can be thrown across the room when the situation requires it. Books are meant to take up permanent space--this is in no way a failing of the medium. I agree with this:

"Electronic books are ideal for people who value [only] the information contained in them, or who have vision problems, or who like to read on the subway, or who do not want other people to see how they are amusing themselves, or who have storage and clutter issues, but they are useless for people who are engaged in an intense, lifelong love affair with books. Books that we can touch; books that we can smell; books that we can depend on."

Michael says

Joe Queenan is a humourist, critic and author from Philadelphia who become an avid reader as a means of escape from a young age. *One for the Books* is a memoir where Queenan tries to come to terms with his eccentric reading style. Joe Queenan is not your typical reader, and *One for the Books* is not your typical book about books.

Joe Queenan is a very odd and particular reader, he knows what he likes and this book is not really humorous but more self-deprecating. I thought I was a bitter and jaded person but Queenan puts me to shame, throughout the book it feels like he will never be satisfied and will always be a cranky reader. Even some of his opinions towards books and book collecting seem outlandish and weird for a reader like me but it works for him and you can't really argue with that.

I was looking forward to reading about someone who is a grump with a passion for book and while this was explored in this book, I think he took it too far sometimes. I know it is his personal opinions but the way he talked about hating people giving him books or even recommending books to him was just a little too far; he is old and set in his ways but I tend to think a little kindness towards others, especially when giving you a gift isn't too much to ask for.

Joe Queenan is like that weird relative that everyone has; not sure what he is thinking, always set in his ways and you don't want to get him drunk. This book is really interesting and I enjoyed his approach to this book. While his opinions differ from my own in some aspects, he really does love reading and this doesn't always come through in the book but you know it is there.

One for the Books is really different to any other book related memoir I've read and that is what makes it so interesting. If you don't want to read about a grumpy old man's opinions towards reading then you don't want to read this book. If you want something different then give it ago. I'm happy to have read this book; it makes me feel almost normal when it comes to my opinions on reading and books.

This review originally appeared on my blog; <http://literary-exploration.com/2013/...>

Bridget says

I received this book as a Christmas gift. I'm pretty sure I've heard of Joe Queenan, though I'm not sure where/when/how. This book is a set of essays he wrote - some appearing previously in other publications - where he discusses his love for books, and what they have meant in his life.

I am not sure if I liked or hated this book. Queenan seems like a person who is very busy making sure that you know he came from a difficult, poor childhood in Philadelphia, but that he has risen far above it by becoming literary. My problem is that he seems like someone who I would consider a literary snob. Anyone who knows me knows that I am incredibly judgemental, and tend to think that many people are annoying or even stupid. However, I also realize that I am incredibly judgemental, and that my opinions are not necessarily based on any provable evidence. I wish everyone would read "good" books and enjoy them. I wish reading and writing were as important to society overall as science and math are. In reality, I am glad when people just read. I am glad there are public libraries and people who patronize them. I am glad that there are still brick-and-mortar bookstores so that I can purchase a book in person. And I'm even glad there are e-readers, because when you walk back and forth to work every single day, carrying your lunch, your water bottle, sometimes an extra pair of shoes and who knows what else, it's nice not to have to carry a heavy book as well, or worry that it will be ruined by the other crap.

Joe Queenan is not like me in any of those ways. As a matter of fact, he spends a lot of the book telling the reader how much he is a purist, an intellectual. He is like me in that he reads A LOT, wishes everyone did, and loves the worlds that books provide.

There are parts of this book that made me laugh out loud, and parts that made me want to go to his house and punch him in the face. I can say that the best thing about it was that it made me consciously think about myself, reading, and how I see it in the universe at large.

So - maybe you should read it. Who knows?

Melki says

"I once read *Tortilla Flats* from cover to cover during a Jerry Garcia solo on 'Truckin'' at Philadelphia's Spectrum; by the time he'd wrapped things up, I could have read 'As I Lay Dying.'"

"I have never squandered an opportunity to read."

Oh, boy - did I ever LOVE this book!!! How could anyone NOT swoon over such an exuberant and irreverent love letter to books and reading?

I can't think of any better way to review this one other than to just make a list of the reasons why this book *instantly* made the jump to my list of nonfiction favorites.

1) Queenan estimates that he has read six to seven thousand books in his lifetime. He knows what he's

talking about.

- 2) Though we don't agree on everything, he has read several of the same wonderful and obscure authors and books that I have, like *The House of Paper*.
- 3) Like me, he has books on his shelves that he NEVER plans to read, but as he says, *It would be pointless to get rid of them now.*
- 4) Queenan has quirky book habits. He has no qualms about writing in his books, but will not read in the bathroom, as it is *unspeakably vulgar and disrespectful to the person whose work one is reading, unless one is reading someone appalling.*
- 5) He has an aversion to book clubs. (The longer I stay in the two that I've joined, the more I'm inclined to agree.) In response to the "Questions for Discussion" that are now included in the backs of many books, Queenan has come up with a few of his own, like these from *Wuthering Heights*:
 - 1. *Did you see the movie based on this book? Didn't you think Laurence Olivier was too old to play the part? Boy, I sure did. I never thought he was all that good-looking, did you?*
 - 2. *If Heathcliff had fallen in love with someone like Jane Eyre instead of Cathy, do you think his house would have burned down?*
 - 3. *If Heathcliff were alive today, would he mention Cathy's death on his Facebook page and say that he was no longer in a relationship?*
- 6) Queenan embarks on many different reading "projects" like *Spending a year reading books I had always suspected I would hate* and *Spending a year reading books I picked off the library shelf with my eyes closed.*
- 7) He has a tendency to reject authors based on which sports teams they root for. (I TOTALLY GET this! I got rid of ALL my Kinky Friedman books after he threw his support behind Texas Governor Rick Perry in the 2012 Republican Primary.)
- 8) He recognizes the joy of occasionally reading BAD books, saying, *Shockingly bad books have an important place in our lives, because they keep our brains active. Good books don't make you think, because the author has already done the thinking for you, but a terrible book can give your brain a real workout, because you spend so much time wondering what incredibly dumb thing the author will say next.*
- 9) I added at least a dozen titles mentioned in this book to my "must-read" list.

Queenan is now 61, so he spends a lot of time talking about his dwindling time left for reading. He discusses books he will NEVER finish and books he would love to read again. And he brought me up short with the question of "What will be the LAST book you read?"

Reading is the way mankind delays the inevitable. Reading is the way we shake our fist at the sky. As long as we have these epic, improbable reading projects arrayed before us, we cannot breathe our last: Tell the Angel of Death to come back later; I haven't quite finished Villette.
