



Viewpoints

A Conversation About “Anagnosology,” or the Science and History of Reading



I’ve been thinking a lot this school year about reading, specifically how difficult of a skill reading is, and how I take that skill for granted. It was timely then, when my sister’s favorite podcast, Ologies with Alie Ward, published an episode last week on Anagnosology, aka the science and history of reading. It’s a must listen!

The guest, Dr. Adrian Johns, discusses the origins of reading dating back thousands of years to cuneiform writing. He describes how the printing press revolutionized access to reading materials, and how scientists in the 20th century aimed to optimize reading through methods like speed reading programs and specialized texts like the “Dick and Jane” readers. Major topics include the debate over phonics versus whole-word learning for teaching reading, the challenges of dyslexia and how it was identified, and the potential impacts of reading on empathy and society. Johns provides insights into the writing of his book “The Science of Reading” and the difficulties of researching literacy inequalities during the Jim Crow era. He reflects on how modern digital culture may be reshaping reading practices and attention spans. The episode covers other intriguing reading-related subjects like banned books, fonts for dyslexia, and the rise of ebooks and audiobooks.

Spoiler Alert: Dr. Johns sides with those who say that audiobooks aren’t “reading,” they’re “having something read to you.” Agree to disagree!

According to the American Library Association from 2022 to 2023, there was a 65% surge of challenged or banned books and the number of titles censored at public libraries increased by 92% over the previous year. Most of the top challenged or banned books wound up on lists because of LGBTQIA+ content and as the late professor and sci-fi writer Isaac Asimov famously said, “Any book worth banning is a book worth reading.” So, reading what they don’t want you to read, it’s not just a nice way to enjoy an afternoon, it’s also an act of protest; very quiet, very mellow, chill protest.



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