

The ChronicleHerald

JOHN DeMONT: Why can't I read a book anymore?

John DeMont

June 16, 2020



- 123RF Stock Photo

I finished a book Sunday night, which isn't as big an accomplishment as it sounds. It's 156 pages long in the trade paperback format, which, by my reckoning works out to about 45,000 words, a slim little volume, with nary a three-syllable word in the whole thing.

Plus, the writer is someone I only discovered a few years ago, but since then have read everything I can get my hands on that he's written.

So when I pick up one of his books, though the mood and content is unsettling, it is like I'm putting on my favourite hoodie.

It gives me comfort, which is what I crave in these uncomfortable times.

And yet here is the thing: *Young Once* by Patrick Modiano is precisely the third book I have finished since the world went strange.

One of the other two was even shorter, 152 pages, with lots of drawings.

Yet, I think of myself as a reader, one of those people who normally has several different books on the go at all times, with enough variety within that list to suit my mood, setting, or energy level.

Now there's a good-sized pile of books on my side of the bed. But they've been there for weeks, in some cases months.

I start reading a page that, because I love the author or the subject, or maybe both, would, under normal circumstances, hook me. Minutes later I've given up, dropping the book in my pile of reading failures, sometimes unable to even remember what I've just read.

I can't get past the first few pages. Or the bookmark stays stubbornly in the same place. Two of them I've never even opened.

I can't say exactly what it is, other than my brain just seems skittish since the pandemic has hit.

I start reading a page that, because I love the author or the subject, or maybe both, would, under normal circumstances, hook me.

Minutes later I've given up, dropping the book in my pile of reading failures, sometimes unable to even remember what I've just read.

My friends, I've tried it all: biography and history, crime novels and poetry — tomes of undeniable literary merit and modest works meant to do nothing more than entertain.

Nothing, for the most part, really works for long.

I will say that it's not just books: the "continue watching" category on my Netflix screen lists 42 shows and movies that my wife and I — well mostly me — started watching and quickly just threw up our hands.

Instead of listening to whole albums, my iTunes library is permanently on shuffle mode. Even then probably only half of the songs make it to the end before I give them the ole heave-ho.

Asking around on social media, I discovered that lots of people were enjoying the opposite experience: reading more than they ever have with all of this free time on their hands, cracking major undertakings like Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey Maturin series, using the written word to drift off into an untroubled sleep at night.

"It (reading) keeps me going," said Scott Macdonald, who is temporarily off work at a Halifax shelter because he is immunocompromised.

An old boss told me that I should try some short stories, while an editor friend suggested, perhaps generously, that it might simply be the book's fault that I can't gather any reading momentum and that now is simply not the time to finally tackle Proust or Middlemarch.

But many were right there with me. They "just can't seem to make it through anything," their focus is "off," they can read in only short stretches or, "they have been reading the same three paragraphs for the past five months."

"When anxious, our attention is focused on threat. And when we are in "threat mode" it is harder to pay attention to activities like reading."

- psychologist Simon Sherry

Despite a career spent around politics, government and now consulting in the public, private and non-profit sector, Paul Black thinks of himself mostly as a reader of fiction. Now, he finds "it harder to stay with a plot than normal," he explained Monday.

Derek Simon, a lawyer in Dartmouth, noted on Twitter that he normally reads a book a week for pleasure. But he said that, since March he's only finished one, adding "other things that I typically do for enjoyment aren't bringing me as much joy right now either."

None of this surprises Simon Sherry, a psychologist who is the director of clinical training at Dalhousie University's department of psychology and neuroscience.

"Screen time is peaking during the pandemic," he explained Tuesday. "And excessive screen time is robustly linked to distractibility."

Anxiety, which is everywhere these days, also impairs attention.

"When anxious, our attention is focused on threat. And when we are in "threat mode" it is harder to pay attention to activities like reading," Sherry said.

The additional woes that we in Nova Scotia have faced — the Portapique massacre, the Snowbirds crash — also make it hard to concentrate on something so trivial as a paragraph of prose, since grief and inattention go hand in hand.

Something else Sherry pointed out is that the self-control we use to deal with all of these sorrows is a finite resource.

"As we navigate our way through the challenges and the barriers that constitute our new normal, we exhaust our self-control, making reading and other attention engaging activities more difficult," he said.

There are ways to rehabilitate our attention. Unplug, Sherry said. Try mindfulness meditation. Get outside for a run or a walk.

Which is precisely what I will do after I hit send for this column. I want my attention back. There's a pile of books by my bed that I really want to get back to.