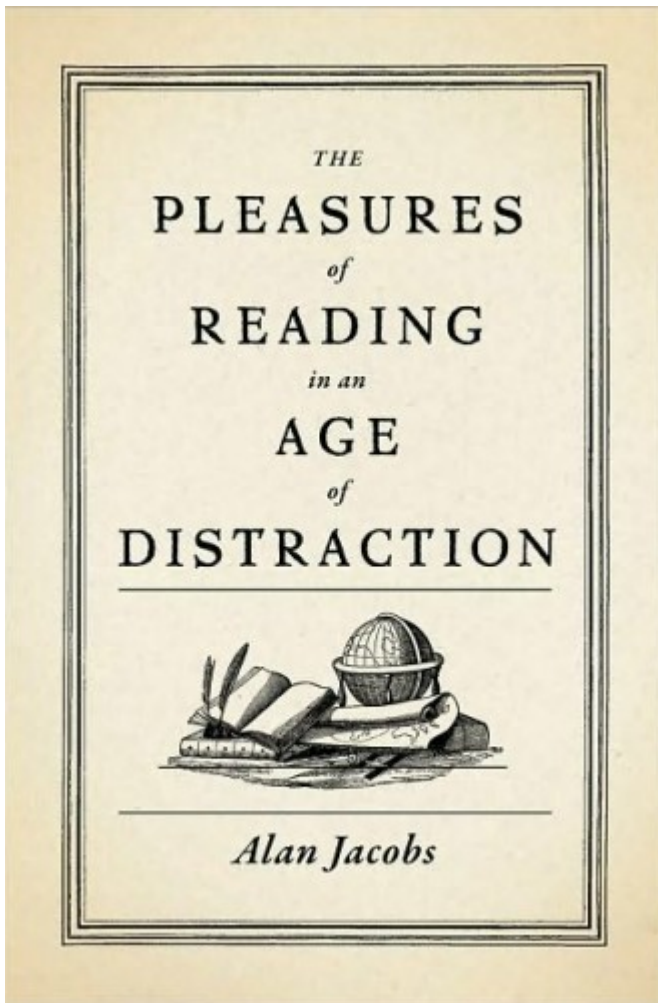


The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction, by Alan Jacobs

reviewed by [Richard A. Kauffman](#) in the [May 17, 2011](#) issue

In Review



The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction

By Alan Jacobs

Oxford University Press

If you're like me, you have a list of books in your head or on scraps of paper that you think you should read sometime. Somewhere, sometime, a teacher or a writer urged these books on me, but I haven't gotten around to reading them.

Alan Jacobs may have relieved me of the guilt for not ever having read these classics or near classics. "Read what gives you delight—at least most of the time—and do so without shame," he says. Encouraging reading at whim, he takes a swipe at Great Books programs and is impatient with lists of the most important books ever written. "*1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die* is the perfect guide for those who don't want to read but who want to *have read*."

Still, reading isn't just for pleasure. It's also for education and our formation as persons. Jacobs suggests ways that reading can actually make us better persons.

While Jacobs scoffs at the idea that no one is reading anymore, he acknowledges that people who do "long form" and "deep reading" are rare. Is that new? He wrestles with the distraction that many readers experience with ubiquitous technology and social media that demand our attention. How long can you read without checking e-mail on your computer or text messages on your smart phone?

Jacobs owns a Kindle e-reader, and his experience using it is similar to mine. E-readers are especially useful for reading narratives. But for resources that one wants to study or contemplate, a physical book is still superior. Footnotes or endnotes are clumsy on a Kindle.

Now that Jacobs has freed me from a sense of obligation toward those "must read" books, I may actually get around to reading them. The only problem is that, having read Jacobs's comments on the books he's read along the way, my own reading list has expanded.