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Culture

Why We Read What We Read: A Delightfully Opinionated Journey Through Contemporary Bestsellers

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Americans are a lazy group who remain stubbornly optimistic. At least, that's what Heath and Adams indicate in their book, *Why We Read What We Read*—a discussion of modern bestsellers, an analysis of said literature, and a generally humorous commentary on the conclusions.

The book explores the most popular of the best-selling genres, Self-Help (mechanical), Self-Help (mind and body), Political Nonfiction, Romance, Spirituality and, Literary Fiction. Each section then contains a detailed analysis of four or so of the most popular books from the genre, and an exploration of what the books say about the American personality. For example, after examining the glut of Diet and Self-Help books published in the last sixteen years, the authors muse, "Does reading really make us happier? Ironically, reading about self-help can become a proxy for effective doing." Per Political Nonfiction, they point out that it would be more productive to "go out for tacos" than to try to "gain true insight from any modern political pundit"—a possible explanation for the lack of informed voters in America.

Memorable side bars such as "Chicken Soups We'd Like to See" (including …for the Indicted CEO Soul, for the Killer Albino Soul, and Empty Bowl for the Anorexic Soul) pull somewhat dissimilar topics together, making the transition between genres seamless.

John Heath is the author of *Bonfire of the Humanities: Rescuing the Classics in an Impoverished Age*. His writings have also appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Co-author Lisa Adams is the recipient of the Woodall Essay Prize and the McCann Short Fiction Award and works as a freelance writer and editor.

Overall, the book provides some fine and cheeky analysis of popular culture, and the work is entirely suitable for the average reader interested in culture and psychology. Together, Heath and Adams reveal the stubborn, hopeful, harried self-conscious American reader.

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