



Australasian  
Association  
of Writing  
Programs

TEXT

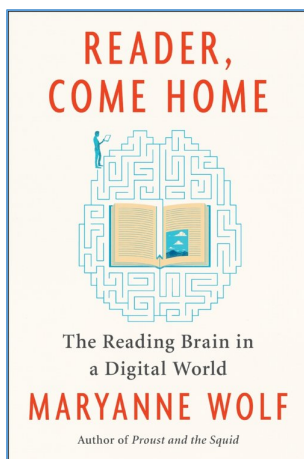
Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://www.textjournal.com.au/>

TEXT review

**The literate animal in the face of “that fertile miracle of communication effected in solitude”**

*review by JF Vernay*



Maryanne Wolf

*Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*

Harper, New York 2018

ISBN 978006238878-0

Pb 260pp AUD37.99

Digital media trains us to be high-bandwidth consumers rather than meditative thinkers. We download or stream a song, article, book or movie instantly, get through it (if we're not waylaid by the infinite inventory also offered) and advance to the next immaterial thing. (Wayne 2015)

We seem to be drawn to books for a wide range of different reasons: their alluring covers and/ or illustrations (if any), the novelty or topicality of the subject-matter, their compelling storytelling, prior and/or ongoing interest in tackled themes, garnered praise or awards, to name a few. I must admit that my vested interest in *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain*

*in a Digital World* has been strictly motivated by the fact that I have explored some aspects of the neuroscience of reading in *La séduction de la fiction* (2019), the manuscript of which was completed in 2017, probably at the same time Maryanne Wolf submitted hers to Harper. Therefore, I was eager to read Wolf's take on the digital reading brain, and especially her comparison of reading text on traditional and technological media, given that studies on this topic, which only emerged in the last decade, are still comparatively scarce.

Wolf, a cognitive neuroscientist specialised in global literacy development and neurodivergence (dyslexia, in particular), is making some headway in this murky area by discussing the reading brain within a creative epistolary framework. Her nine chapters are as many letters addressed to the reader, letters she sees as 'exchanges about what reading means' (italics mine, 3). To be sure, writing a book is a one-way communication channel, unless the reader happens to write back (like me, with the present book review) and the author gets to read the response and hopefully reacts to it. *Reader, Come Home* was precisely written in the spirit of that final phase as it is Maryanne Wolf's intersubjective response to a spate of fan letters following the publication of her *Proust and the Squid* (2007).

Because reading is a cultural invention for which our brains were not originally equipped, neuroplasticity, under the influence of external factors, has had an important part to play in enabling us to become literate animals over time:

The unnatural, cultural origin of literacy – the first deceptively simple fact about reading – means that young readers do not have a genetically based program for developing such circuits. Reading-brain circuits are shaped and developed by both natural and environmental factors, including the medium in which reading is acquired and developed. Each reading medium advantages certain cognitive processes over others. (7-8)

In short, the way we read (deep-reading/ slow-reading vs skim-reading/ speed-reading), what we read (i.e. the content as much as the writing system), and the selected medium (print-based vs digital) will be determining in the rewiring and subsequent evolution of our brains. Wolf draws on research by Stanislas Dehaene to remind readers that our basic neural networks have been recycled and repurposed to engineer the reading circuit which enables *TEXT* readers to decipher and understand the words which are building up this book review. But reading is a far more complex process which involves 'two hemispheres, four lobes in each hemisphere (frontal, temporal, parietal and occipital), and all five layers of the brain' (20). Added to the neuroplasticity are the clustering of cells into 'cell assemblies' which hyperspecialize in specific roles as well as 'sonic-speed automaticity' which activates the relevant networks in milliseconds. This energy-consuming mechanics is further detailed in terms of attention, vision, language, cognition and affect in a fascinating extended metaphor discussing the acrobatics of our neuroplastic brain.

So our brains were not initially wired for reading and a few functions had to be repurposed to adjust to a culture of literacy. With the advent of our tech-savvy world in which texts are migrating to digital screens, the literate animal has to adjust to yet another cultural revolution, one which is now imposed by the more fast-paced digital age which is hardly conducive to deep-reading and its analytical processes:

Will the quality of our attention change as we read on mediums that advantage immediacy, dart-quick task switching, and continuous monitoring of distraction, as opposed to the more deliberative focusing of our attention? (39)

Wolf's book is peppered with similar thought-provoking questions, not all of which find straightforward or immediate answers. The capacity of imagery, perspective taking, empathy, theory of mind and mirror neurons are discussed as major elements associated with the 'consciousness-changing dimension of the act of reading' (45). Deep-reading also allows more scope for critical thinking based on observation, interpretation, evaluation, deduction, prediction and conclusion which may lead to insight and, potentially, creative thought. While digital natives are well-placed to develop biliterate brains by embracing both digital and print cultures, digital immigrants are having their brains rewired to absorb scores of gigabytes through the handling of various modern devices. These new light reading habits, like skimming for instance, are said to be caused by cognitive phenomena such as '*novelty bias*' (70), '*continuous partial attention*' (71), and 'environmentally induced attentional "deficits"' (72). However, one should also mention that the indigent and indiscriminate information available on the net often deserves no more than a cursory reading. Logically, the above-mentioned cognitive phenomena impact negatively on readers' memory and sustained attention span which have atrophied over the years. These alarming changes raise important questions about the fate of our literacy-based civilisation:

Will writing change and with it the reader, the writer, the publisher, language itself? Are we each witnessing in our different professions the beginning of a retreat from more intellectually demanding forms of language until – like the ill-fated procrustean bed – it conforms to the imperceptibly narrowing norms of reading on ever smaller screens? (87)

When examining the effect of technology on digital age adolescent readers, the evidence that these young cognitively diverse minds are more impatient, cognitive effort-shy, and therefore less likely to plow through 'syntactically demanding sentence structures in denser texts' (92), cannot be gainsaid. Paradoxically, the creative boredom which has been smothered by the multiple stimuli of digital distractions has been replaced by an unproductive one, the type which

follows too much digital stimulation. This form of boredom may de-animate children in such a fashion as to prevent them from wanting to explore and create real-world experiences for themselves, particularly outside their rooms, houses and schools. (111)

When discussing early access to digital screens, Wolf touches on another important aspect of reading which virtually goes unnoticed by readers, as Siri Hustvedt puts it in her essay entitled 'On Reading':

The act of reading takes place in human time; in the time of the body, and it partakes of the body's rhythms, of heartbeat and breath, of the movement of our eyes, and of our fingers that turn the pages, but we do not pay particular attention to any of this. (Hustvedt 2012: 134)

Let us keep in mind that reading is an embodied somatosensory act and that, in our digital age, there is precious little discussion about the sensuality of the book as object – the allure of the cover, the touch and smell of the pages, the whisper of the words – pleasures that electronic reading devices would obscure if not entirely oust. There is little doubt that the physical book with its full identity (ISBN, aesthetics, size, shape, texture and odour) remains an object crafted to trigger emotion-induced desire, an object conducive to the cognitive emancipation of toddlers:

Putting an iPad in one’s mouth is just not the same. Seeing, hearing, mouthing, and touching books helps children lay down the best of multi-sensory and linguistic connections during the time that Piaget aptly christened the sensorimotor stage of children’s cognitive development. (133)

Therefore, e-books, iPads and other screens, though they increase the possibilities of interacting fruitfully with the text, are to some extent impeding child development in the early stages of life (from 1 to 5). The useful educational insights Wolf provides into the cognitive impact of digital media endow further ground-breaking research in this specific field with a strong sense of purpose. In the next literacy stage (ie the next five years of their lives), children learn reading as part of the three Rs. This important structural phase is illuminated by Maryanne Wolf’s warm theory-driven recommendations for students and teachers alike: the stuff policymaking institutions would promote actively to save the jeopardised centuries-old print publishing industry.

Chapter 8 of *Reader, Come Home* climaxes with Wolf’s plea for ‘the development of a biliterate reading brain’ (170) based on studies examining the verbal and cognitive flexibility of dual-language learners:

The ultimate goal in this plan is the development of a truly biliterate brain with the capacity to allocate time and attention to deep-reading skills regardless of medium. Deep-reading skills not only provide critical antidotes to the negative effects of digital culture, like the diffusion of attention and the attrition of empathy, but also complement positive digital influences. (177-8)

Both reading practices seem to have virtues. One could even go as far as to talk about ‘digital wisdom’ when eager-to-upskill minds would be exposed to “a new type of literacy” such as coding.

Paucity of comparative studies on cognitive impact of print and digital publications, lack of proper training for educators and digital access inequality are non-negligible obstacles which need to be overcome. Despite these challenges, is there room to accommodate Maryanne Wolf’s cautious optimism and techno-utopianism? I would say that the jury is still out on the question.

There is no denying that *Reader, Come Home* is an engrossing read for those who wish to explore ‘that fertile miracle of communication effected in solitude’ (Proust quoted in Wolf 2018: 35). While the author mentions cerebrodiversity, she occasionally seems to take for granted that all readers share generic brain abilities. For instance, ‘our capacity to form images when we read’ is not a universal one, as I have discussed elsewhere (Vernay 2019:

73-4). Similarly, I would argue that empathy is not an automatically-generated process that comes with deep-reading. Some scenes that might touch some readers may not move other readers on the same level or elicit identical emotions: One person's empathy could be another person's dispassion. I also wanted to read more developments on 'the profound impact of books upon the lives and knowledge stores of those who read them' (54), but I was left unsatisfied on this front. What is more, perhaps that *cognitive endurance* would be a more apposite phrase than '*cognitive patience*' (46/92), but these are mere quibbles in the face of the stimulating discussions which Maryanne Wolf draws us in. *Reader, Come Home* promises to be a good conversation starter for anyone interested in what David Grossman sees as two of our primal instincts: 'the story-telling instinct' and 'the instinct to listen to stories' (Grossman 2009: 29).

### Works cited

Grossman, D 2008 *Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics*, J Cohen (trans), Bloomsbury, London.

Hustvedt, S 2012 *Living, Thinking, Looking*, Sceptre, London

Vernay, JF 2019 *La séduction de la fiction*, Hermann, Paris

Wayne, T 2015 'Our (Bare) Shelves, Our Selves,' *New York Times* (5 December). Quoted in the book under review, 190.

*Jean-François Vernay is a creative writer and scholar, author of several books, the latest of which are The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation (Palgrave), now translated into Arabic, and its sequel: La Séduction de la fiction (Hermann). He is currently working on two editing projects: Cognitive Readings of Australian Culture and International Perspectives on Australian Fiction. He blogs at <http://jean-francoisvernay.blogspot.com>*