**An Argument Against   
Reading Fiction**

**By T. L. Cobern**

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Reading fiction is a vile habit.  The very act of sitting down to read removes me from the daily grind, from the pressure of reaching my wordcount goal for that day, and rewards me with nothing more than empty hands and mind at the end of said reading time.  Not only that, but reading robs me of confidence in abilities I once took for granted.  While all reading does this to some extent, fictional works are, due to the creativity inherent in their foundation, the worst offenders.  Therefore, I believe all reading of fiction should be banned among writers.

Yes, I’ve heard all the arguments for the advancement of reading, even among such educated people as we.  “Reading is an essential building block” and all that.  Yes, it is.  Yes, reading is a definite prerequisite for writing, and especially for writing well.  However, once that stage is achieved, once we can write well and others believe in the excellence of our writing enough that we can make it a career, shouldn’t we toss reading out the window?  Fiction, after all, doesn’t qualify as the most necessary building block for writers.

Stop rationalizing.  Fiction reading doesn’t advance a writing career.  An editorial career, if fiction is the genre of choice, is a completely separate ball of wax, but writing concerns only the images from one’s mind making their way onto paper.  While some authors might contend their particular genres within fiction as free from this generalized statement, I believe all fictionalized writing is in the interaction of author with white page.  It’s all make-believe, in one sense or another, isn’t it?

Research, you say.  Ah, the old research excuse.  I can tell you for sure that I’ve never read a fiction novel for research, but more for the enjoyment, the beauty, and the exceptional perfection of fiction itself.  I might research a real time period, a real religion, a real geographical place, but I just don’t buy Middle Earth as a research project.  So why do we continue to read?  I’ll say again, it’s a vile habit.  I don’t mean an idle hobby, but rather an all-consuming obsession, much the way I think heroin users must feel about their particular habit.  My drug, my obsession, is reading.  If I sit down with a novel, I will finish it in that same sitting.  It offers me few choices; the pull of the words sucks me in and I’m lost, in someone else’s ideas and someone else’s universe consumes me.  Are you any different?  Can you schedule your reading time and stop on the page when the timer goes off?  I thought as much.  You, too, are an addict.

It affects my work, certainly.  If I am writing a story and take “a break,” time off to read something else, I lose the thread of my own universe for a time.  Sometimes that time is an hour, sometimes a day.  The loss of the time is vital, however, and so therefore I try to stay away from books during writing days.  It’s so hard to make up that time, and eventually all the sand runs down the hourglass.

Reading good books also hits me hard in the confidence department.  When I read Larry Niven’s aliens, I’m astounded at their solidness, their very reality that forms on the page.  Reading Holly Lisle makes me laugh and cry at her wit and at losing characters that I’ve come to love.  The beauty of language and clarity of ideas as expressed so cleanly by writers like Richard Wright, Justin Stanchfield, Carol Berg, Peter F. Hamilton, just to name a few, leaves me gaping in awe.  The prolific output of Lazette Gifford and Harry Turtledove, who maintain the quality of their magnificent stories while turning out millions of words a year—it leaves me speechless.

All of the examples listed above share one trait in common.  When I dwell on it, when I reflect on the writing talents of these authors and what they do well, I inevitably compare my own talent to his or to hers.  Every time, in the end tally, I’m found lacking.  Usually this begets a writing funk so severe that I don’t crawl out from my rock for a week.

It’s my problem.  I know that.  I know I’m insecure in my writing, that I’m not to the point where I can shrug it off.  I know, in my mind, that I’ll get there and that one day people will think the same thing about me.  However, in my heart, the part of me where my writing is a sacred eggshell, the comparisons stomp on any fledgling chicks struggling to break free.  All that is left is shattered pieces of thin shell.

Can you assure me you’re different?  Are you certain that late at night, in the moments before you fall asleep, you don’t revisit a book recently read and see your own failings in that author’s successes?  If you don’t compare, that’s wonderful.  I think you’re the exception, though.

My solution is to ban fiction.  I don’t mean to ban it for everyone, only for writers.  We just don’t need the headaches of missing time and the heartaches of missing success.  It’s hard enough to write, and to write well.  We already lose friends and family who just don’t “get it.”  We do poorly at sports and many jobs because we’re so busy scribbling story ideas on random pieces of paper.  One might think reading books and short stories of fiction would be our one salvation, our single recreational activity that we’d be good at!  It appears to be a perfect marriage, appreciating the ideas and talent of others while taking a break from our own, but unfortunately this is only an illusion.  This marriage turns messy sooner than most.

Join me, fellow writers!  End this scourge that robs us of hours and steals our hard-won egotism.  Our group, the Writers Against Reading (WAP) will be meeting later outside the library for a rally.  If I’m late, carry on without me.  Don’t worry, it’s probably just a relapse.  Memory of Fire just came out, you know.  I’ll catch you later after the high wears off.