

Assess the view that reading books is, by far, the most wondrous of all pastimes.

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Reading books has traditionally been a popular pastime and hobby for many, given its portability and accessibility. Its popularity can be attributed to its ability to enthrall and captivate readers, and this is especially true of fiction books which have the potential to immerse readers in a completely different dimension in a fictional world. However, with the advent of technology and its rapid progression, newer alternatives to reading books, such as video games, have emerged and seem to pose a threat to the traditional appeal of books given the jaw-dropping sensory experiences they can provide, far outdoing those of the book. Moreover, the wonder of reading books is hardly embraced equally across all societies, as it seems to carry the stigma of being a privilege for the literate and educated, hence people in less fortunate societies find enjoyment more in other more "affordable" pastimes such as team sports. Therefore, while books do have the capacity to captivate and compel, I do not think reading books is by far, the most wondrous of all leisurely pastimes.

First and foremost, the appeal of reading books is indisputable and this applies largely to fictional books, which leverage on their other-worldliness to completely enthrall their readers. Books that belong to the fantasy genre offer an escape from the mundane reality of life by conjuring an entirely impossible yet beautiful world for the reader to indulge in, just from the power of good writing. The popularity of books like the Harry Potter series or the Hunger Games series attest to that, as they present situations so unimaginable that it hardly fails to capture and hold a reader's attention. Especially since books are relatively inexpensive and easy to acquire, the wonder of reading is even more accessible to the common man. Traditional hard-copy books are increasingly becoming available in online e-book forms, demonstrating how the concept of reading has been evolving along with society's changing needs, and shedding light on how the value of reading has not become negligible. Therefore, reading is no doubt a wondrous pastime in how it has the power to mentally and psychologically captivate its readers.

Yet, reading books can hardly be considered the absolute, "most" wondrous of all pastimes as it fails to engage all the senses of the human body. Its appeal is almost merely limited to the psychological effects on the mind and nothing else, allowing other more immersive pastimes to provide a more engaging experience at least sensorily. Music, another common pastime, is a formidable rival to reading in that it provides both an auditory, sometimes even tactile or oral experience, for example playing instruments or singing. While reading is rather passive, engaging in music requires actual participation and this sense of personal engagement is imperative to creating an immersive and even enchanting experience. This sensory overload could be a reason, perhaps, why so many artistes and musicians involuntarily shed a tear during their performances as they feel entirely, emotionally engaged in the music. Hence, reading books cannot possibly be the most wondrous of pastimes given its inability to evoke as intimate and personal a sensory experience as opposed to other pastimes that inherently, easily do so.

Moreover, with the proliferation of technology, new alternatives to conventional hobbies have been created, mainly in the form of video games and virtual reality simulators, and these greatly blunt the appeal of reading books due to their superiority in captivating its users. Even though books have been adapting with the changing times and going online, the technological progress in the gaming industry is almost impossible to rival and definitely unprecedented. Virtual reality (VR) simulators, a concept that seemed so foreign perhaps a decade ago, have come to fruition and are undoubtedly a sure-fire way to create the most amazing and wondrous experience for users. The "Oculus Rift" simply requires users to don a set of binoculars-like headgear, and they are instantaneously invited into a virtual 3-D

world. This is often utilised for first person shooter games where players navigate in a far-too-realistic environment, or even horror games, where random jump scares are even more terrifying now given that the player's view is no longer a third person's, but intentionally restricted to a first-person view. Evidently, such pastimes, that were previously so unimaginable, are no doubt a formidable rival to reading in how they literally create and emulate another awesome reality and dimension for users. Thus, reading books cannot be the most wondrous pastime of all when technology has so generously provided alternatives that far outdo the traditional book in terms of simulating a realistic, imaginary experience that never fails to enchant.

In addition, the value and wonder associated with reading is not equally recognised across all societies. Depending on the value system and affluence of a society, reading books can either be considered a luxury or an inferior pastime. In less affluent nations with a lesser emphasis on education and low literacy rates, reading is simply a luxury that they cannot afford. This explains why children in less-developed areas like India or poorer African nations enjoy more easily accessible and affordable pastimes like sports and team games. To them, these are the most wondrous and enjoyable hobbies to pass their time doing as it signifies a carefree moment away from their daily struggles of financial survival and allows them to actively participate in something fun and leisurely for themselves. Conversely in more affluent nations, the rise in incomes has led to the introduction of other pastimes that revolve around consumerism and the life of luxury. Café-hopping, a practice of "hopping" from café to café to savour a variety of dishes, is an example of an increasingly popular pastime in societies with a culture of consumerism, and small communities have even emerged for people to share the food they have eaten with each other and make recommendations on new places to visit. Such a pastime is wondrous in the sense that it is an overt social display of wealth, a reminder of how one's affluence is able to provide a never ending slew of gustatory pleasure for oneself. Its appeal is further heightened when cafe-hoppers discover new and rare foods, making each trip almost a treasure hunt filled with wonder and surprises – an example would be the "raindrop jelly", previously thought to only exist in Japan that was recently found in a small cafe in Singapore, attracting more inquisitive customers to patronise the shop. Hence, reading books may not be the most wondrous pastime across the board as the vastly differing natures of societies cause different pastimes to be better able to provide this sense of awe and enjoyment for people.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that it is rather myopic to assert that reading books is the most wondrous of all pastimes given that so many other alternatives that better and more holistically engage our senses exist and the very concept of being "wondrous" is so highly subjective and not definitive. While reading books can offer a captivating experience, the appeal of any pastime is ultimately contingent on the individual's preferences and hence, no one pastime should be regarded as the most "wondrous".

Comments:

A mature and well-considered approach to the question, taking into account various situations and conditions, as well as the alternative pastimes that appeal to people for different reasons. Explanations are adequate and well-considered, making this an insightful piece. Sentence structures could be varied further for greater reading pleasure, but language is fine otherwise.