
Is the Book Dying?

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We still have the inertia of February, also the month of reading in Cuba. We mean to say so, of course, because of the International Book Fair that has been held for so many years in the San Carlos de la Cabaña fortress and attracts crowds.

This may be the cultural phenomenon with the greatest popular participation in our country, more than the film festival, and you can see the long lines outside Yara theater, for example! The book fair is not only popular because it has several spaces in Havana and travels throughout the country; it is, to a large extent, because its main headquarters in La Cabaña, is a very attractive, iconic area, which fosters enjoyment.

It's a festival that involves more than literature, it's also fun, lots of gastronomy, and the advantage of being in a open place ideal for free play, recreation away from the uproar of the city.

However, no matter how well attended the statistics of the event reflect, it's not representative. For years, reading has been losing ground. Sometimes I have believed that it's due to the lack of literary options, or that it's part of the evolution of society, of the media. Is it true? Is the book really doomed to die? I hope not.

It's undeniable that people read less and less. Libraries have gone into oblivion, and bookstores are almost forgotten places, of passionate old ladies with a need to talk, who receive the same neighbors who go around them to see if they find some relic or if they lower the price of the second-hand book they have been chasing for months. But those are the minority. People who read will always find an alternative, they will always have several books in line.

The truth is that children no longer like to read. It has been like this for a long time, which is why we can count young people who read with a magnifying glass. It's very rare now. That's a fact, it is not common to have a passion for reading in adulthood if there was no interest during childhood and youth. Miracles can happen, but it's not usual.

The abandonment of reading is a global issue, although I feel that here it's more marked by the lack of international proposals, by the labeling of topics, by poor promotion. Bookstores around the world also don't have a line of people waiting to enter outside, but on special dates, of presentations of highly sought-after books.

Times change. The entertainment competition is very marked. Technology is all around because it offers everything, including books, but there are also fewer people who use their tablets and phones to read. They are the same people who have a pile of books on their nightstand, who chase after new releases at Fayad Jamis, who know about literary events without them being announced, who are aware of the texts that are published abroad and prefer to order them even if that means eating less.

That's why, faced with imminent death, bookstores are reinventing themselves—in other destinations—and are no longer dull stores that only sell books, they offer extra appeal. From coffee and sweets, space for children to play, incidental and live music, comfortable seats for reading, an events area, sale of other items, an intimate and warm atmosphere like at home, more decoration to catch and make you feel pleasant, and, by the way, if a book interests you, the objective is already fulfilled. This, plus an intense work of literary promotion from all media because a book that is not advertised, is not known.

Why? It has been happening for a while now and the literary field strives to create mechanisms to bring reading closer, to encourage taste based on a reality: reading promises endless possibilities, a universe to which we can escape and take refuge.



Reading is not only an intellectual pleasure. It has been proven that it favors cognitive development because it stimulates the brain, increases concentration, memory and analytical capacity; as well as expands vocabulary, improves spelling, grammar, imagination and creativity. Furthermore, it's an inexhaustible source of knowledge and learning of all kinds of subjects, and therefore allows personal and emotional growth.

Reading has not a single contraindication, it is all benefit. While it cultivates, entertains, alienates. It has the capacity to relax, de-stress while connecting with the cultural past and with dreamlike universes, also with specialized information and research. It's perfect, there is something for everyone! It's inexhaustible because there are too many books to choose from, writers of all styles and tendencies.

In Cuba we started well. First reading was brought to the people with literacy and the establishment of publishing houses, libraries, and bookstores, even in the neighborhoods. Culture was diversified, tools were offered to walk out of ignorance and find other delights, also contained in the world of letters. The printing of so many books revived the desire to read, and there was an exquisite literary movement, a shared passion, a fervor for the different genres and fields of knowledge, and a closeness to texts that represented our Cuban identity thanks to local writers.

Back then it was normal to see people reading in public places. And sometimes the sidewalks were the ideal places and you had to be careful not to miss the bus or trip over a post. You looked after the books like treasures, and it was easy to argue about the fashionable one because if you couldn't buy it, someone would lend it to you or you would find it in the library.

Now everything is different and grim. If they see someone reading they look at them with pity, as if they were dying. They think they are boring people, out of fashion. They are labeled, and it is only because it's no longer an activity that we see frequently, real proof that reading is what is languishing, and we are just a bunch trying to prevent it from happening because we find in books an infinite number of benefits that we will not give up.

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