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## AN AVALANCHE OF BOOKS

So many books, so little time. Such is the lament of the poor bibliophile in a world where hundreds of thousands of books are published each year. In my younger days I felt there was ample time to peruse the great literature of the world; what I didn't have time for then could wait till tomorrow. But with the passing of years comes a growing realization that one's allotted time is a diminishing commodity; that discernment in one's reading habits is needed if one is to become acquainted with the profound thoughts of great minds.

Fifteen centuries before Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press, the philosopher Seneca offered this practical advice to a friend who enjoyed reading:

You should be extending your stay among writers whose genius is unquestionable, deriving constant nourishment from them if you wish to gain anything from your reading that will find a lasting place in your mind. To be everywhere is to be nowhere. (*Letters from a Stoic*)

That continues to be good advice. To know a little about many things is of far less value than having deep knowledge of a few essentials. In his 1858 essay entitled "Books," Ralph Waldo Emerson warned the reader "not to waste his memory on a crowd of mediocrities." Of the multitude of books published each year, how many will be worth reading twenty-five years from now? If we believe the sales and marketing pitches from the publishers, each author is a unqualified "genius," each new book an instant "classic." Emerson, however, placed great value on books that had withstood the test of Time, "who sits and weighs, and ten years hence out of a million of pages prints one. Again, it is judged, it is winnowed by all the winds of opinion, and what terrific selection has not passed on it, before it can be reprinted after twenty years, and reprinted after a century!"

This year an avalanche of books will be published. In time, a select few of them may end up being considered classics, but most will be forgotten within the span of a few years. So read the latest books, if you wish, and familiarize yourself with what contemporary writers have to say. But why not set aside a portion of your time to become acquainted with those durable works of literature, *i.e.*, the classics, which have already been vetted by previous generations of thoughtful readers, and which therefore have the proven capacity to provide nourishment and inspiration for the soul?

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