

On making an effort



Author and publishing professional Joel Miller discusses what he gets out of reading, taking 10 years to write a book, and prioritizing his favorite hobby.

March 27, 2026 -

As told to Denise S. Robbins, 2827 words.

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What was your journey into the world of books?

It started in utero. My dad was—still is—an English teacher. He’s 82! My mom was a massive reader. The house was full of books, and I read a lot growing up, but only casually. My parents never stressed it; I just did it. I followed my interests, but there was nothing programmatic about it. As I got older and books became a part of my professional life, and my personal interests developed down particular tracks, books were usually the first place I went to learn and think about things. They are a companion. When I think about fiction or spiritual titles, those are books that have been with me and have anchored me for a long time.

You worked with a Christianity-focused imprint, and have now written The Idea Machine, which goes into how books were shaped by Christianity and vice versa. Has faith always played a big role in your interest in books and literature, or do you think of those two things separately?

I grew up in a Christian household, and my faith has evolved, for lack of another word, over the years. I’m Eastern Orthodox at this point—have been since 2009. Books were a part of that journey. But I don’t really see them as separate at all. I probably tend to read everything through something of a Christian lens. I evaluate the characters I’m reading from two vantage points. I’m looking at it from what’s true to that character: why is this character acting the way that they’re acting, given how they’re presented to me? Then there’s also the sort of larger moral universe where they fit in, that is informed by my faith, for sure. Is the way that they’re acting healthy, helpful, conducive to human flourishing or whatever?

So I read a book like *Crime and Punishment*, which is explicitly Christian in a lot of ways, and I can also read a book that is not explicitly Christian, and I’m still importing a bit of that moral lens as I’m asking, “Why is this character doing what they’re doing? Would I solve that problem that way?” One of the things I think is most fascinating about fiction as an enterprise is taking and recruiting my neural synapses towards the projects of this character. I’m saying, “Don’t do that—do this instead,” or I’m puzzled by what they’re puzzled by, and I’m in the turmoil that they’re in as I’m reading. What I bring to that are the resources that I have, like any other reader, and some of that, for me, is my faith.

Do you like being challenged when you read?

Oh, yeah. I expect every book to stretch me, to one degree or another. I’m always hoping to learn something from a book, fiction or nonfiction. I’m always hoping to encounter something I hadn’t considered, or a way of thinking about the world that I hadn’t considered.

I just read Yoko Tawada’s Scattered All Over the Earth trilogy, and that was a fantastic set of books. I read her book *The Emissary* right before, and those four are in a conversation with each other. It was great to encounter

how different the experiences of the individual characters were, and how different all those individual characters were to me. Yet some of the very same concerns I have about cultural openness, and the willingness to entertain novelty and newness in people and ideas, are present in those books, including the opposite—especially in *The Emissary*, which is all about closedness. It's all about what happens when you shut yourself off from the world.

You've played so many different roles in relation to books. Do you engage with them differently depending on if you're editing, reviewing, or acquiring?

I only acquired nonfiction, so when I read nonfiction, I often read it like an editor. When I read fiction, I don't read that way exactly, but I still read pretty critically. In both fiction and nonfiction, I tend to read with a pencil in hand. I mark up my books. I try to figure out the relationship between the characters and the flyleaf for the back of the book. I'll sometimes jot down family trees if it's necessary. When I read *A History of the Island* by Eugene Vodolazkin, keeping track of all these characters and the timescale of the history required that I keep this family tree in order to keep it all straight. So I try to read critically whatever I'm reading and be engaged with it—intensely.

Even if you think you're not going to review it?

Yeah. If I know I'm going to review it, then I'm definitely going to, but I tend to read everything that way. I'm trying to get something out of each book I read, and I figure I'm only going to get as much out as I'm willing to expend in my effort.

This reminds me a lot of what your book, *The Idea Machine*, is about the fact that books have something very specific and special to give. So what do you think that books can provide to the reader that other mediums can't?

An immersive experience in the mind of an author, or another person, period—outside of a relationship with someone that's ongoing. You just don't have access to people's minds outside of something like that. In a book, you can actually reorient your thinking. In a movie, it's over in two hours and the likelihood that your thinking has been changed is pretty slim, unless it's a very profound movie. But with a novel, that might happen, because you've been with it for, say, 10 or 12 or 20 hours.

That's also true with nonfiction. In history, in philosophy, you're entering into a world of arguments or facts or both, and historical details and so on, that enable you to get oriented to a perspective on the past that you otherwise have no access to. In the world of philosophical engagement, you're entering into a pattern of thinking that you don't naturally have on your own. If you open up a philosophy book and already have those thoughts, congratulations—you don't need to read that book. But the reality is, you don't have those thoughts. That's why you opened the book. You have the privilege now of sitting with somebody who's teased through a complex set of ideas for a long time, and has spent the time to carefully present them in a digestible format that enables you to entertain new thinking that you couldn't have entertained before.

Your book makes the case that books are an extremely powerful and lasting technology. What do you think it does for a reader to change how they think about books in that way?

Reminding people—or letting them know possibly for the first time—that the book has enabled civilization to develop the way that it has is a reminder that you have access to that, and you have already benefited from all of that. We're standing on all the books that have ever been written, that have contributed to our lives right at this moment. We can reenact that same sort of discovery and engagement in our own lives by pulling out a book and reading, which is a very enriching thought.

Do you have other books planned?

The Idea Machine took me, depending on how you count it, either 10 or 13 years to write, from when I got started to when I finally finished. It was very consuming. And I've written several books. My first book came out in 2004. I wrote a second book in 2006. I wrote a biography in 2010, and then a short, sort of religious-themed book

in 2012. Every one of those books was hyper-demanding. I knew that when I got into writing *The Idea Machine*, but I had no idea it would be as demanding as it turned out to be. I figured I could knock it out in a year or two, and that turned out to be not remotely close to the truth. When I think about writing a new book, I'm like, what do I really want to give a decade to? I can think of all kinds of great ideas, but I don't want to do them right now.

Is maintaining your Substack also demanding? You're putting out two posts per week. How do you divvy up your time between writing and your other responsibilities—and, hopefully, having fun?

Well, I have one hobby, which is to read and to write. I'm pretty good at optimizing my time for that hobby. I look for chinks in my day where I can write, and I listen to audiobooks and read physical books, sometimes simultaneously. If it's a really demanding book, I'll actually listen while I'm reading, which I find is a nice way to stay engaged when I'm struggling with a book. I just use the available time I have, and I think I use it productively. Reading is my primary activity outside of work, or hanging out with my kids. Even then, I try to read to them. At night, my almost 7-year-old loves nothing more than for me to read to her.

Where do all your ideas come from? And what happens if you don't have an idea for a whole week?

A couple times I've recycled an old post, or I've gone back to an old essay and retooled it. Mostly, one of the reasons I thought writing a book review-themed Substack would be somewhat "easy" was that I had blogged off and on since before they called it blogging. I always went through periods where I was really intense, and then some periods where I'd be really lax and not have ideas for three months.

I figured the great thing about reviewing a book is that the author has done all the work about giving me what to think about. I just need to figure out what I think about what they think about. I don't tend to find times where I don't have something to say, because I'm always filling up with new stuff from the books I'm reading, and my responsibility to the audience is to deliver what I'm thinking about that particular book.

You said you like books that can change your mind a little bit. After so many years of intensive reading, how have you changed?

I am pretty introverted, and I'm one of those people that probably feels my feelings a lot later than the events that might have provoked them. But fiction actually helps me feel my feelings. I get a lot of emotional processing through the books I read, or I have access to my emotions in a way through fiction that I don't have on my own... When I read Shūsaku Endō, for instance, there's an emotional valence to the way he writes that I don't have any natural access to. That's just not how I feel or how I think. When I read him, I find myself feeling much more expansive about other people, the world, the fragility of the world, and other people in it. I don't have that sort of empathy on my own. Endō makes a really wonderful crutch for me in that way. Every one of his novels I've read, I start and I find myself completely swept away, accessing feelings that I don't have on my own, and I find that to be life-giving and really powerful.

Did anything surprise you while you were researching and writing *The Idea Machine*?

All through that book, I had one overarching realization: I might be writing literally the most obvious and boring book that has ever been written. The only way to make sure that a reader goes from page one to the end is to make sure it is full of weird and funny and fascinating stories. Whenever I would encounter anything that felt like it might go in, I would just grab it. Almost always those were things that delighted me or surprised me, and I thought that if it delights and surprises me, odds are good it's going to delight and surprise the reader. I just need to figure out how to tell it.

For instance, in the chapter on writing and editing as a type of thinking, I ran into this article about writing tablets found near Athens. They contain some of the earliest written Greek we have evidence of. The thing that made me the happiest was the detail that the poet had smudged out the line and corrected herself. Instrumentally, it supported what I was trying to argue: when we're in the process of writing, we can see what we've written, and therefore think about and rethink what we've thought, and therefore have the chance to revise what we've thought.

All productive thinking is a process of gesturing out with something and then getting feedback about it—whether we’re entertaining it in our own minds, or seeing it on a screen, or looking at the response in somebody’s face when we say it—and then knowing if that idea is worth going to the next idea with, or not. Writing is a way of objectifying our thoughts such that we can analyze them and improve them.

Do you like being surprised?

One of the great joys about research and writing is you discover stuff about yourself, and the world and what you think about it, that you just didn’t know before.

Joel Miller recommends five books by C.S. Lewis:

The Allegory of Love. For Lewis, the book that first made him famous was an academic work on the courtly love tradition in medieval poetry, published in 1936, long before his later fame as an apologist and children’s author. The book opens with a trenchant observation, which modern people (me among them) often forget: we are not so different from our forebears as we suppose. “Humanity,” says Lewis, “does not pass through phases as a train passes through stations: being alive, it has the privilege of always moving yet never leaving anything behind. Whatever we have been, in some sort we are still.” And yet we are different in important ways, and we fail to understand the past—and our present selves—if we don’t appreciate both the similarities and the differences.

The Discarded Image. Lewis positions *The Discarded Image* as a survey of medieval and Renaissance literature, but in many ways it is an introduction to the medieval mind itself, which he conceives as a complete Model harmonizing diverse philosophies, poetry, histories, homilies, and satires inherited from Christian, Jewish, Greek, Roman, and barbarian sources. As with all of Lewis’s work, he’s delightfully opinionated; he calls Isidore’s *Etymologies* “a work of very mediocre intelligence.” But he’s also willing to take the medieval world on its own terms—an exercise in the point above about appreciating the differences.

Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Literature. This book picks up the thread of *The Discarded Image*. Lewis compares reading old literature to traveling to a foreign country. You can do it as a mere visitor—or you can go deeper. “You can eat the local food and drink the local wines, you can share the foreign life, you can begin to see the foreign country as it looks, not to the tourist but to its inhabitants. You can come home modified, thinking and feeling as you did not think and feel before.”

Studies in Words. To inhabit medieval and Renaissance literature requires understanding the words its authors used. And we don’t. What linguists call false friends (words whose meaning we think we grasp but don’t) abound. “If we read an old poem with insufficient regard for change in the overtones, and even the dictionary meanings, of words since its date . . . then of course we do not read the poem the old writer intended.” He attempts to fix that by studying common terms such as nature, wit, free, world, life, and simple.

A Preface to Paradise Lost. Why does any of this matter, besides Lewis’s books are enjoyable to read? Lewis addresses that question in an attempt to salvage the reputation of John Milton’s masterwork, which his predecessors (such as the Romantics) had misunderstood and his contemporaries (especially T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis) had not only misunderstood but devalued. The problem was that readers had lost touch with Milton’s world and—unable or unwilling to find their way back into the technique of epic poetry and seventeenth-century theology—failed to understand what Milton was doing. Lewis’s contention is that we only get to judge a work if we judge it on its own terms, including the world of its creation.

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