

The Power of a Library Card  
By LeRoy Nosker Tanner  
Programming & Technology Services Librarian

September is National Library Card Signup Month, and it is no accident that it happens close to the start of school and the coming of autumn. Numerous studies have shown that when children and teens have both the freedom and opportunity to read they tend to excel in their school work too. September also marks the start of cooler weather and for many, more time indoors, although COVID-19 has given most of us at least one bout of cabin fever already. Isolation, anxiety, decreased levels of sunlight, less physical activity, and other factors can all have detrimental effects on our mental and physical health. Again, studies have shown that adults who regularly read for personal interest and enjoyment have improvements to mental health and cognitive function. What is it about reading that is good for us?

To help us answer that question, we need to ask two other questions. First, what can reading give us access to? For centuries, the ability to read has been the hallmark of the opportunity to put dreams into action and create change. There is a reason that Nazis burned books, Mao Zedong destroyed historical records, and dictators and tyrants throughout history have sought to keep the populace entertained but uneducated. If you can read, then you can access the ideas and dreams of people you have never met. You can experience the stories of people long since buried. You can begin to understand the different ways that people live and think and do so many other things. Reading grants access to the world, to the stars, and to humanity.

Libraries today are points of access that can connect readers to opportunities to read they couldn't on their own. Most people don't have rooms of space to store books. Many people do not have internet access at home, and even if they did, the internet is so full of information, some misleading and some false, it can be hard to know how to find what you are looking for without lots of practice, training, or both. Most people can't afford to purchase that many books for their personal use either. Libraries provide access to reading regardless of what kind of house you live in, the money you make, or anything else. All are welcome at the library.

Second, how do we mentally and emotionally interact with what we read? Consider the following introspections. When you turn the pages of a book or flip the pages on the screen, where does your mind go? Do you picture the action in the newest thriller, your mind full of tense expectation? Do you picture the quirks of your favorite crime detective in a mystery book? Do you chuckle at the inept and relatable actions of characters in a romantic comedy? Do you laugh? Do you cry? Do you put the book down in anger at the plot or a character's actions and have to walk away? Do you question your understanding of the world when you read the experiences of someone who doesn't look like you or lives far away? Do you catch yourself wondering what you would do if you were put in that situation? Do you see yourself differently after you finish the ending?

Reading can transform us. The American literary critic, Edmund Wilson, said, “No two persons ever read the same book.” I might add that no person ever read the same book twice. Life is different for every person, and life is also different for each of us as we live it. Each day we are a little bit different because of what we experience, what we think, what we say, and what we do. Every book we read is influenced in the way we perceive it, engage with it, wrestle with it, and question it by who we are when we read it. Reading grants us an understanding of who we are as we question ourselves and an opportunity to think about who we can become in the process. If you don’t have a library card yet, we’d love to help you gain access to our wonderful collection. The world of reading awaits.