



Bill Moyers



A WORLD OF
IDEAS:
WRITERS

A VIEWER'S GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION BY BILL MOYERS

As I traveled the country to tape *A World of Ideas* for public television, I thought occasionally of a letter I received years ago from an inmate at the federal prison in Marion, Ohio. He had been a faithful viewer of my series of PBS programs on *Six Great Ideas*. Now he wanted to tell all of the participants in the series of his “heartfelt gratitude that you shared your time and thoughts in so open a medium. You can understand what a truly joyous opportunity that was for an institutionalized intellectual. After several months in a cell, with nothing but a TV, it was salvation.”

For me, talking to the men and women who appear in this program was also a truly joyous opportunity. Sometimes during the 1988 election season, it had seemed to me that we were all “institutionalized” in one form or another, locked away in our separate realities, our parochial loyalties, our fixed ways of seeing ourselves and strangers. Sometimes it had seemed that depending on a TV to connect us to the outside world could only fortify our walls and wither our intellects.

But working on this series reminded me again that ideas can open our cells. They can liberate us from prisons we have ourselves built. In the laboratory of the scientist, the vision of the poet, the memory of the historian, the discipline of the scholar, the imagination of the writer, and the passion of the teacher, I went looking for what the veteran broadcast journalist Eric Sevareid has called “the news of the mind.” I found a kingdom of thought, rich in insights into our times.

Most of all, I found a love of sharing, a passion for connecting. In their own way, all of the men and women with whom I have talked are teachers. Sharing is the essence of teaching. It is, I have come to believe, the essence of civilization. The impulse to share turns politics from the mere pursuit of power and makes of journalism a public service.

It inspires art, builds cities, and spreads knowledge. Without it, the imagination is but the echo of the self, trapped in a soundproof chamber, reverberating upon itself until it is spent in exhaustion or futility. For this reason democracy, with all its risks, must be a public affair. Ideas cry out for an open hearing, and the true conversation of democracy occurs not between politicians or pundits but across the entire spectrum of American life where people take seriously the intellectual obligations of citizenship and the spiritual opportunities of freedom.

The men and women who shared their ideas in the series are public thinkers. Their ivory tower is just a mailing address; they are at home in the world. They have in common a deep caring for this country, and each in a different way tries to serve it. If we could gather them in one room, we would not get much argument about the condition of things. Running through all the conversations is the notion that change is happening so rapidly and globally that our institutions are not keeping up. No grand solution for confronting this predicament appears anywhere in the program. What emerges is a consensus that we can best negotiate the future through a multitude of shared acts in science, education, government, politics, and our local civic life.

It is a consensus these men and women already act upon in their own lives. Tom Wolfe, for example, takes seriously the presidency of his block association on the East Side of Manhattan. Joseph Heller, who registers his protest by not voting, nonetheless gives money to favored political causes because at heart he is not a cynic and still wants to save the Yossarian in each of us.

None have given up on America. Even the foreigners who appear—Chinua Achebe, Carlos Fuentes—see America critically but affectionately, and they talk hopefully about the moral leadership this country could yet exert if we began to see the world in all its intricate design. I am struck by the extent to which each person in this series believes that the life of the

mind and the life of this republic are inseparable. And I am encouraged by the realization that for every one with whom I talked, there are scores more out there, waiting to be heard. America is rich in many things, but it is especially rich in thinking men and women.

The value of listening to such people has seemed obvious to me ever since I sat at the feet of caring teachers. Because of them, my work has for me been a continuing course in adult education. The chief reward of it is the joy of learning, of coming away from each person with a wider angle of vision on the times I live in, on the issues I am expected to act upon, and the choices I can make as a father, husband, journalist, and citizen. The main reason I seek the ideas of others is for help—the diagnosis and treatment of my own isolation and the enlargement of my understanding. If you have ever hiked in the Rockies and seen the vista change as you move from one plateau to another—revealing peaks, contours, crests, clouds, colors, and vegetation previously hidden—you know what I am trying to say. I have had a career of discovery and feel compelled to share it.

Introduction by Bill Moyers excerpted from *A World of Ideas* by Bill Moyers (New York: Doubleday, 1989), pp. vii–viii.

THE WRITERS' LIVES

Biographical sketches of the writers interviewed in this series

Photo by Stuart C. Shapiro



Chinua Achebe (Nov. 16, 1930–) Besides writing fiction, Achebe has worked as a teacher and media executive. Born in Ogidi, Nigeria, he graduated from the University of Ibadan with a degree in English. Achebe published his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), while working for the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation in Lagos, where he became director of external broadcasting in 1961. Later, he partnered with poet Christopher Okigbo to launch a publishing company. Achebe supported independence for the breakaway nation of Biafra in 1967 and remained politically active after Nigeria retook the region in 1970. He has also served as director of two Nigerian publishing houses and taught at the University of Nigeria, Bard College, and Brown University.



Isaac Asimov (Jan. 2, 1920–April 6, 1992) One of the 20th century's most prolific and popular authors, Asimov grew up in Brooklyn, where his parents immigrated when he was three. He studied biochemistry at Columbia and earned a PhD in 1948. Although he held a faculty position at Boston University, he didn't teach much after the late 1950s, when the success of his *Foundation* trilogy led him to focus on writing. Over his career, Asimov won multiple awards, including eight Hugos and three Nebulas. Ironically for someone who wrote about space travel and had a crater on Mars named after him, he had a lifelong fear of flying.



E.L. Doctorow (Jan. 6, 1931–) Born in the Bronx, Doctorow began writing fiction while attending the High School of Science there. After majoring in philosophy at Kenyon College, studying drama in graduate school at Columbia for a year, and serving in the army, he worked as a script reader for a movie company and then as an editor for the New American Library. He eventually became editor in chief of the Dial Press, leaving in 1969 to write full time. Doctorow's many honors include awards from the National Book Critics Circle and the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as the National Book Award and a National Humanities Medal.



M.F.K. Fisher (July 3, 1908–June 22, 1992) The writer whom the world would know as M.F.K. Fisher grew up Mary Frances Kennedy in a family that prized words. Her father, a journalist, moved the Kennedys from Michigan to Whittier, California, when Mary Frances was two. She met her first husband, Alfred Fisher, at the University of California. The couple spent their first three years of marriage in France, where she discovered the art and pleasure of food. After returning to California, she wrote her first essays while working in a frame shop. Fisher left her husband in 1938 and married Dillwyn "Timothy" Parrish (called Chexbres in her writings), who died in 1941. Fisher's later works included memoirs and a children's book. In 1992, a biennial award for excellence in culinary writing was established in her name.



Carlos Fuentes (Nov. 11, 1928–) Fuentes’s bold, experimental novels belie his other career in the careful sphere of international relations. A Mexican diplomat’s son, Fuentes learned English at the age of four while living in Washington, DC. After studying law at the University of Mexico and attending the Institute of Advanced International Studies in Geneva, he embarked on a ministerial career, eventually becoming Mexico’s ambassador to France. His first novel appeared to great acclaim in 1958. Fuentes has taught at Princeton, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia, and Cambridge. Currently, he serves as professor-at-large for Hispanic studies at Brown.



Photo by Bengt Oberger

Nadine Gordimer (Nov. 20, 1923–) Educated at a Catholic convent school in her hometown of Springs, South Africa, Nadine Gordimer showed precocious literary talent, writing from the age of nine and publishing her first story at 15. She attended the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg for one year. By her early twenties, she had published pieces in *Harper’s* magazine, and in 1951, she won the attention of international readers when the *New Yorker* published her short story “A Watcher of the Dead.” Since then, her fiction, plays, and political essays have won many honors and awards, including the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991. In addition to her writing career, Gordimer has taught at several American universities as a visiting professor.



Jeannette Haien (1920s–Sept. 23, 2008) Jeannette Haien’s talents as a musician and writer became evident while she was growing up in Michigan. Homeschooled, she won several prizes for poetry at the University of Michigan while regularly performing as a concert pianist. She married lawyer

Ernest Ballard in 1948; the couple moved to New York City, and Haien continued to perform under her maiden name. Besides teaching music privately, she served on the faculty of the Mannes College of Music and toured internationally. Her novel *The All of It* won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1987.



Photo courtesy of Miami Dale College

Joseph Heller (May 1, 1923–Dec. 12, 1999)

Born and raised in Coney Island, New York, Heller worked a variety of jobs before joining the Army Air Corps at age 19 and becoming a B-25 bombardier—an experience that later provided the basis for *Catch-22*. After World War II, he studied at the University of Southern California and NYU, earned a master’s in English from Columbia, and won a Fulbright scholarship to Oxford. Heller taught composition and worked as an advertising copywriter before devoting himself entirely to fiction. Besides novels, he wrote several plays and contributed to three screenplays, including uncredited work on the 1967 James Bond spoof *Casino Royale*. Heller’s final work was the autobiographical *Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man*, published posthumously in 2000.



Photo by Angela Radulescu

Toni Morrison (Feb. 18, 1931–) In bestselling novels exploring the African American experience, Morrison has won international acclaim for her evocative style and rich textures of fantasy and folklore. Born and raised in the Cleveland suburb of Lorain, Ohio, she began to write fiction while attending Howard University in Washington, DC, and later earned a master’s from Cornell. She married the Jamaican architect Harold Morrison in 1958; the couple later divorced. In addition to teaching at several universities, she has served as an editor, most notably at Random House. Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, the most prestigious honor in a career marked by numerous awards and accolades.



Bharati Mukherjee (July 27, 1940–) A true multicultural writer, Bharati Mukherjee captured the imaginations of readers and critics alike with her stories of strong women forging their identities, both in her native India and in North America. Born in Calcutta, she attended the University of Calcutta and the University of Baroda before studying at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa and eventually earning her PhD. While living in Canada in the 1970s with her husband, author Clark Blaise, Mukherjee published her first two novels. She has taught at several Canadian and American universities, including the University of California, Berkeley.



Photo by Usha Marieh

Derek Walcott (Jan. 23, 1930–) Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, Walcott has explored the themes of African American identity and postcolonialism in his poetry, plays, and essays. Of mixed racial and ethnic heritage, he grew up on St. Lucia in the West Indies, speaking French and English patois. He attended St. Mary's College on St. Lucia and the University of the West Indies in Jamaica before moving to Trinidad, where he worked as a theatre and art critic and founded the Trinidad Theatre Workshop. As a teacher at Boston University, he also founded the Boston Playwrights' Theatre. As of 2010, he serves as professor of poetry at the University of Essex in England.



August Wilson (April 27, 1945–Oct. 2, 2005)

Wilson won two Pulitzer Prizes and a Tony Award during his long and distinguished career as a playwright exploring the African American experience. As he explains in his interview, the Pittsburgh native left school as a teenager after a teacher accused him of plagiarism. While working a series of menial jobs, he educated himself in Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library. Following a stint in the army, he began writing plays on a \$20 typewriter and eventually founded Pittsburgh's Black Horizons Theatre. Wilson moved to Minnesota in 1978 and later to Seattle, writing and working with theatre companies in both places. Two weeks after his death, the Virginia Theatre on Broadway was renamed in his honor.



Tom Wolfe (March 2, 1931–) In essays and novels that explore American culture, Wolfe has earned a reputation for his trenchant social observations and fast-paced, exclamatory style. Born and raised in Richmond, Virginia, and educated at Washington and Lee and Yale universities, he worked as a reporter

at several newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Herald-Tribune*, and as a staff writer for *New York* magazine. In 1963, assigned to a story on California hot-rodgers for *Esquire*, Wolfe purportedly typed up his notes in a stream-of-consciousness memo to his editor, who published it almost verbatim. The resultant article—"The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby"—led to a series of bestsellers and helped define New Journalism, a highly personal reporting style that incorporated fiction techniques.

AMERICANS' READING HABITS

From the Caribbean to Coney Island, the authors featured in this series hail from disparate locales and cultures, but would undoubtedly agree on the value that reading has added to their lives. Interviewee Maxine Hong Kingston once remarked that upon learning to read and write English, she felt as though “the black curtains rose or swung apart.” Indeed, reading and writing skills have been linked to wider vocabulary, greater employment rates, and higher wages—not to mention the incalculable benefit that exposure to a variety of people and beliefs can bring. Yet, reports show that daily reading in the United States is in decline, leading to some concerns about the future of American literacy.

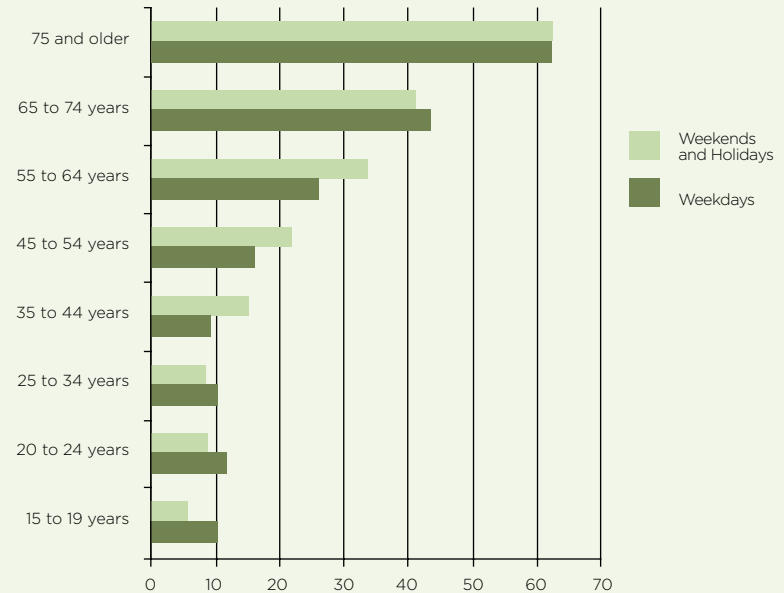
In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) published “To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence,” a comprehensive analysis of reading habits in the United States. A follow-up to the agency’s 2004 report, “Reading at Risk,” the new survey encompassed a broad swath of literary arenas, including fiction and nonfiction, books, newspapers, magazines, and websites. Drawing on data collected from national government surveys as well as academic work and private-sector polls, “To Read or Not to Read” came to some worrisome conclusions.

By and large, Americans read less than in previous decades, especially young people. Nearly half of 18- to 24-year-olds do not read books outside school or work, and from 1982 to 2002, there was a 28% drop in those reading literature. Meanwhile, similarly aged Americans watch television for nearly two hours every day. In comparison, Americans ages 25 or older devote three times as much of their leisure hours to reading, when analyzed as a group. Unsurprisingly, people who read less tend to have poorer reading comprehension, which negatively affects academic performance. The NEA’s report also linked a lack of

reading skills to professional disadvantages and poor civic engagement, including activities such as attending cultural events and volunteering.

Readership not only divides among generations, as indicated by the NEA’s report, but also along gender lines. Generally, women read more books than men; according to a 2007 survey by the Associated Press,

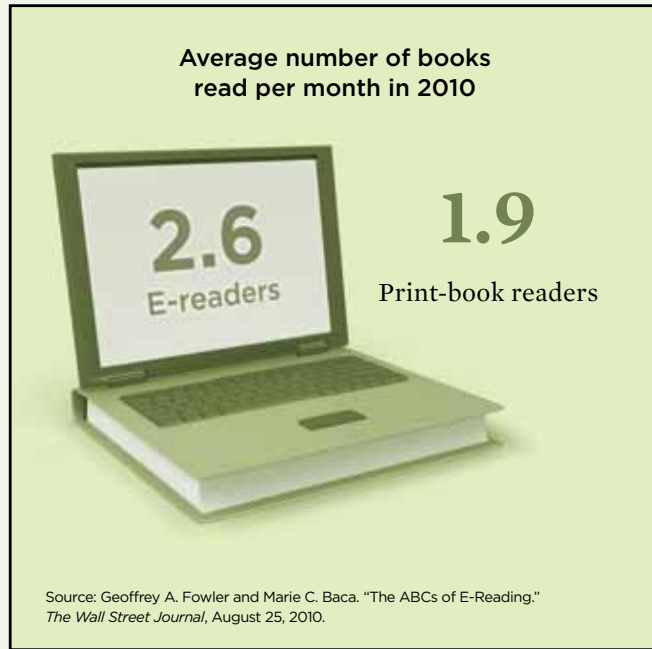
AVERAGE DAILY TIME (IN MIN.) SPENT READING IN 2009



Source: “American Time Use Survey,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor

among avid readers, women go through nine books a year, but men read just five. In addition, women account for 58% of print book sales. The gap is even more pronounced when looking at literary genres: men make up only one-fifth of the fiction-buying market, and women out-read men in all areas except history and biography.

Overall, book sales have been relatively consistent since 2003, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. In 2009, the Association of

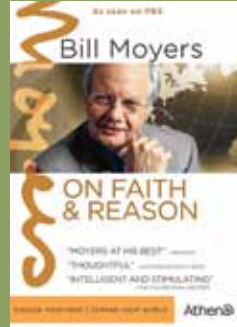
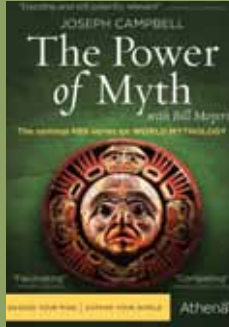
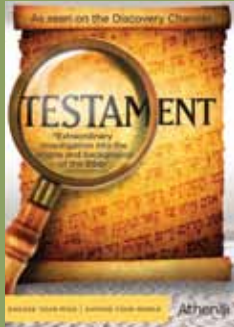
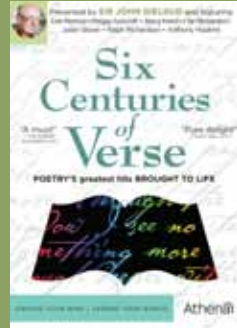
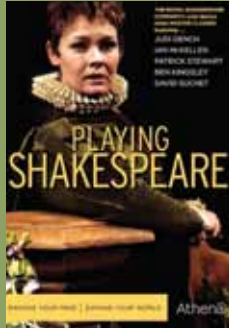
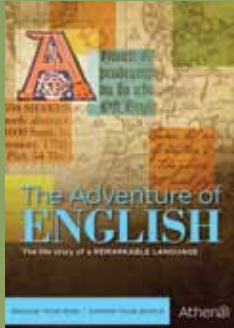


American Publishers estimated that total book sales in the United States amounted to about \$23.9 billion, a 1.8% decrease from the previous year.

Despite these numbers, it's too soon to sound the death knell for American readership. New technologies such as smart phones and e-readers have given consumers convenient ways to read almost anywhere. A 2010 *Wall Street Journal* article noted that 40% of e-reader owners read more after purchasing the devices, while only 2% read less often. E-readers may also provide a means to hook the elusive male market: in contrast to print books, slightly more men than women read e-books (51% to 49%, respectively). While only about 11 million Americans currently own e-readers, sales numbers continue to grow as the devices become more affordable and accessible. In addition, library use has risen substantially during the economic downturn. More people in the United States applied for library cards in 2008 than at any time since record keeping began in 1990.

Although it seems that *how* Americans consume books is changing, there's hope that the practice itself—which Toni Morrison once described as “sometimes . . . profound, harrowing, beautiful; other times enraging, contemptible, unrewarding”—will remain a viable and valuable part of everyday life.

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