Not long ago, a friend told me that her students had complained that reading masterpieces made them feel stupid. But I’ve always found that the better the book I’m reading, the smarter I feel, or, at least, the more able I am to imagine that I might, someday, become smarter. I’ve also heard fellow writers say that they cannot read while working on a book of their own for fear that Tolstoy or Shakespeare might influence them. I’ve always hoped they would influence me, and I wonder if I would have taken so happily to being a writer if it had meant that I couldn’t read for the years it might take to complete a novel.

To be truthful, there are writers who will stop you dead in your tracks by making you see your own work in the most unflattering light. Each of us will meet a different harbinger of personal failure, some innocent genius chosen by us for reasons having to do with what we see as our own inadequacies. The only remedy to this I have found is to read another writer whose work is entirely different from the first, though not necessarily more like your own—a difference that will remind you of how many rooms there are in the house of art.

AFTER my novels began to be published, I started to teach, taking a succession of jobs as a visiting writer at a series of colleges and universities. Usually, I would teach one creative writing workshop each semester, together with a literature class entitled something like “The Modern Short Story”—a course designed for undergraduates who weren’t planning to major in literature or go on to graduate school and so would not be damaged by my inability to teach literary theory. Alternately, I would conduct a reading seminar for MFA students who wanted to be writers rather than scholars, which meant that it
was all right for us to fritter away our time talking about books rather than politics or ideas.

I enjoyed the reading classes, and the opportunity to function as a sort of cheerleader for literature. I liked my students, who were often so eager, bright, and enthusiastic that it took me years to notice how much trouble they had in reading a fairly simple short story. Almost simultaneously, I was struck by how little attention they had been taught to pay to the language, to the actual words and sentences that a writer had used. Instead, they had been encouraged to form strong, critical, and often negative opinions of geniuses who had been read with delight for centuries before they were born. They had been instructed to prosecute or defend these authors, as if in a court of law, on charges having to do with the writers’ origins, their racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. They had been encouraged to rewrite the classics into the more acceptable forms that the authors might have discovered had they only shared their young critics’ level of insight, tolerance, and awareness.

No wonder my students found it so stressful to read! And possibly because of the harsh judgments they felt required to make about fictional characters and their creators, they didn’t seem to like reading, which also made me worry for them and wonder why they wanted to become writers. I asked myself how they planned to learn to write, since I had always thought that others learned, as I had, from reading.

Responding to what my students seemed to need, I began to change the way I taught.

1. No two persons ever read the same book. - Edmund Wilson
2. Whenever you read a good book, somewhere in the world a door opens to allow in more light. - Vera Nazarian
3. If we encounter a man of rare intellect, we should ask him what books he reads. - Ralph Waldo Emerson
4. If you only read the books that everyone else is reading, you can only think what everyone else is thinking. - Haruki Murakami
5. There is a great deal of difference between an eager man who wants to read a book and the tired man who wants a book to read. - Gilbert K. Chesterton
6. Keep reading books, but remember that a book is only a book, and you should learn to think for yourself. - Maxim Gorky
7. If one cannot enjoy reading a book over and over again, there is no use in reading it at all. - Oscar Wilde
8. Reading a book is like re-writing it for yourself. - Angela Carter
9. It is a good rule after reading a new book, never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. - C.S. Lewis
10. Books serve to show a man that those original thoughts of his aren’t very new after all. - Abraham Lincoln