

**Required Reading**  
Hamilton College Convocation 2008  
President Joan Hinde Stewart

In the novels of Charles Dickens, there are, as you know, a good many orphans. My favorite is Pip, the hero of *Great Expectations*. Almost everything that poor Pip knows, or thinks he knows, about his parents comes from his reading of their tombstones, for they lived and died, as he tells us, “long before the days of photographs” (Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* [London: Oxford UP, 1978], p. 2).

You may remember the opening scene in the church cemetery. From the form of the letters on his father’s tombstone, little Pip gets the notion that his father “was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair.” From the looks of the formulaic inscription, “Also Georgiana Wife of the Above,” he concludes that his mother must have been “freckled and sickly.” And from the appearance and arrangement of five tiny slabs in a row, commemorating five dead infant brothers, Pip derives the belief that they “had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers-pockets” (Dickens, p. 2). For the child Pip, the graphics on the tombstones seem to trace not just words but pictures. This striking act of reading foreshadows Pip’s entire life, for his disappointed “expectations” will be shaped by misreadings – hopeful, inept or disloyal – of families, appearances and messages.

Members of the Hamilton College Bicentennial Class, I propose to talk with you today about reading. When you looked into our curriculum and visited College Hill, you heard a good deal about our emphasis on writing and about our pride in graduating students who can write effectively, even elegantly, whatever their profession. But it occurs to me that maybe we don’t often enough talk about good reading, both for its own sake and for the role it plays in the development of good writing. I’ll say more in a few minutes about what I mean by “good” reading.

Much has been advanced about the decline of literacy among today’s youth. I don’t believe for a minute that this applies to you who sit here today. You are here because you *are* literate, because you value thinking, reading and writing. But the meaning of the word *literacy* is more expansive than it once was. I’ve been thinking about this since serving over the course of the last academic year on a national panel to consider the shape of the major in our colleges and universities; my fellow panelists and I agreed that our report should underscore literacy and its changing shapes.

I could tell you that I reread *Great Expectations* a few weeks ago, but, in fact, I listened to it on the CD player in my car. Each time I heard a passage that I wanted to savor, I tried to remember a few phrases so that I could later search for them on the web. When I had almost finished listening, I discovered that I had misplaced the fourteenth and last CD. So I got the book from the library and read the conclusion (or, rather, the conclusions, since Dickens supplies us with a couple of them). And while I had the library copy in my hands, I re-read the beginning. Later, CD number 14 turned up, and of course I listened to it.

So mine was neither a strictly linear nor a traditional reading. Back and forth I went, in several different media – CD, computer screen, library book – from Pip’s childhood to his maturity to his childhood. In the back of my mind was always Dickens’ haunting liminal scene of the boy in the cemetery, performing his own personal, imaginative reading.

This encounter with Dickens’ grand novel took place during a brief vacation last month. It wouldn’t correspond to everyone’s idea of a vacation, for I spent it in my former home in Durham, North Carolina. The weather was not especially good and I mostly just “read”: classics such as *Great Expectations* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* on CD; *Pride and Prejudice* and a bit of Proust on audio tape, thanks to a tired old walkman I found in a drawer; *L’Attentat*, a French novel about a terrorist attack, on an iPod; and two newer releases, *Africa Trek* and *Infidel*, on a borrowed Kindle. Other titles, too, which I read the old-fashioned way. I don’t know if devices such as the Kindle will change the way we read. I missed the feel of paper – slick and cool or rough and desiccated. And you can’t interrogate the opening screen of an e-book the way you can the battered spine or musty pages of an old volume, searching for its secrets. But I did like being able to tote a score of “books” in one device that is easy on the eyes.

It reminded me of our namesake, Alexander Hamilton, self-taught and a voracious reader. His biographer, Ron Chernow, evokes an endearing image of him as a young soldier in Washington’s army, slight of stature and dragging around “two ponderous, folio-sized volumes” of an almanac (Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* [NY: Penguin, 2004], p. 110). How lucky are we – Hamilton’s intellectual heirs – to have our reading available in lightweight paperbacks, as e-books, or on iPods, inventions that can not only facilitate but also enrich our reading. For those who record the books we listen to on tape, if they are good, can bring out humor or pathos that we might miss when we have only the printed page. Listening to Proust on audio tape, I sometimes laughed out loud, as I never once remember doing when turning the pages of his immense *oeuvre*.

My days of disjointed reading were as satisfying as any beach or mountain vacation could have been. I lived those days intensely, thanks in large measure to Dickens, Hugo, and Austen.

Thanks also to Alan Bennett, author of the book I most liked of all the new ones I read in July: *The Uncommon Reader*, a novella about reading as a way to live one’s life fully. Author of *The History Boys* and *The Madness of George III*, Bennett makes up a story this time about how Queen Elizabeth II learns to read – well, not literally, of course, but how she learns to love reading. It seems that her corgis run off one day, barking at something in the road. The Queen pursues them and discovers that the “something” is a traveling library. She strikes up a conversation with the only patron, a young man named Norman, who works in the palace kitchens but whom, of course, she has never before met. Out of politeness, she ends up borrowing a book.

Little by little, she becomes, like Alexander Hamilton and many of you here today, a voracious consumer of books. Colluding with Norman, she begins hiding paperbacks and

smaller volumes in her handbag or stashing them behind the cushions of the royal coach. When she drives out to greet her subjects, she waves distractedly with one hand, her eyes on the book in the other. She discovers that deep reading is both a great satisfaction and a learned skill, although one that can be self-taught.

Her conversations now become less scripted: she stuns the French president by asking his opinion of writer Jean Genet. Soon she begins to resent royal duties such as the opening of parliament and even to neglect her dogs. The transformation is so marked that those around her think she must be developing Alzheimer's: "Thus it was," writes Bennett, "that the dawn of sensibility was mistaken for the onset of senility." (Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader* [NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007], p. 80).

Naturally, this fanciful queen runs afoul of her handlers, and in particular her private secretary, an officious New Zealander named Sir Kevin who has been brought in to refresh the monarchy (which Bennett compares to the moldering wedding cake of the jilted Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* [Bennett, p. 26]). Sir Kevin, appalled at all the reading, suggests that her majesty must be feeling a need to "pass the time." Her majesty bristles: "'Pass the time?' said the Queen. 'Books are not about passing the time. They're about other lives. Other worlds. Far from wanting time to pass, Sir Kevin, one just wishes one had more of it. If one wanted to pass the time one could go to New Zealand'" (Bennett, p. 29).

For summer break, Elizabeth heads not to New Zealand but to Balmoral, her rainy retreat in Scotland. In her baggage is the complete Proust, whose lovely volumes appear to her "almost edible and straight out of a pâtisserie window" (Bennett, p. 62). Proust transforms her wet summer into an "idyll" – just as Dickens and Bennett did for me in Durham.

Why did I like *The Uncommon Reader* so much? Certainly for the dry humor and the carefully observed psychology of queen, secretary and skivvy; certainly too for the presence of Proust and Pip. But most of all for the suggestion that a mature, modern monarch who has, by her own account, seen everything, met everyone and been everywhere, in the end encounters real life in books: "You don't put your life into your books," she writes in her notebook, "You find it there" (Bennett, p. 101). Reading broadens the horizons of someone whose horizons are by no means narrow to begin with. It livens and liberates her. And, perhaps most importantly, it humanizes her: she begins to sympathize with people and to care about how they feel, becoming, for example, uncharacteristically concerned when she hurts her maid's feelings. "At the risk of sounding like a piece of steak," she declares, "[books] tenderise one" (Bennett, p. 105). She is saying, I think, that reading helps us to understand what it means to be variously human.

Towards the end of my vacation, I read James Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific* in an ancient paperback with cracked spine and brittle pages. I picked it up because I had tickets to the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, which is being brilliantly reprised at Lincoln Center. In the condensed dialogue of the stage adaptation, the Frenchman Émile de Becque, trying to entice the Navy nurse, Nellie Forbush, into staying on his island, can think of nothing more seductive to say than: "I have many books here." And Nellie sighs: "I'll bet you read a lot."

An article by Nicholas Carr in the July-August 2008 issue of the *Atlantic* tells us that our brains, “almost infinitely malleable,” are being modified by use of the internet and that we are no longer comfortable with – maybe not even capable of – reading in a sustained manner (“Is Google Making Us Stupid?” *The Atlantic.com* [<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>, accessed June 20, 2008]). I’m not so sure. It seems to me that the new technologies, far from lessening the impulse to read, may abet it, for e-book, iPod and CD make it more convenient to read for long periods in almost any circumstances and a happy experience with a book on tape may incline one to return to the book in other forms, and to take in film and stage adaptations.

You may think that my message today is that you should read only good books. Not really, although I do hope that you will become a good reader – which should not be hard to do. Let me quote Nabokov here: “the good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary, and some artistic sense” (Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature* [NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980], ed. Fredson Bowers, p. 3). You demonstrably have the first, second, and fourth of those qualifications, and I recommend that you equip yourself as soon as possible with an excellent dictionary, in whatever medium suits you.

Daniel Pennac, author of a book about young people and reading, reminds us that there is no obligation to finish every book we begin, or even to read the pages in order. He recommends that we exercise our license to pick books up when we feel like it and to put them down when we weary of them; also our right to skip pages and “edit” our reading in any way that will sustain our motivation (Daniel Pennac, *Comme un Roman* [Paris: Gallimard, 1992]). Although you are not free to disregard the required readings of the courses in which you enroll, you *are* free to read whatever else you choose and however much of it you choose. You are free to ponder or to skim, just as you like.

I hope, of course, that you will read and re-read some of the classics of the modern and ancient world, of the East and the West. I hope that you will make use both of your digital skills and of your old-fashioned reading skills, and that you will read not only texts that speak readily to you, but also more difficult books, making a quiet and patient effort to tease out their secrets. In other words, I hope that you will practice not only speed reading but also slow reading. But I mainly just hope that you will consider reading as one of your most important activities and that you will make time and space in your lives to read for pleasure and profit.

Outside of one’s major, there are no required courses at Hamilton: you are free to choose, as it suits your curiosity and your ideas about yourself, about the person you are and the person you want to become. Perhaps you will approach your reading in a similar spirit, choosing titles somewhat as you choose your courses: sometimes because they have always appealed, sometimes because they’ve always frightened you and the moment seems right to put yourself to the test, sometimes because they deal with an unfamiliar subject, sometimes because you have a slot to fill, and sometimes because you just feel yourself unaccountably so inclined. You are entitled to draw your own conclusions about what you read,

independently of every reader who has gone before you. As the fictional Elizabeth II notes: all readers are equal, “herself included” (Bennett, p. 30).

Now I am not a queen, I quite assure you, but I do have some constraints on my time that often compete with reading for pleasure. That is why the recent interlude I described was so restorative. Attentive reading, you see, is a way of sharpening our faculties and making connections: emotional, esthetic, intellectual; literary, historical, scientific, and every other kind. It’s a way of thinking. Nicholas Carr, in the article in the *Atlantic* I mentioned a few minutes ago, notes that “deep reading” sets off “intellectual vibrations...within our own minds.” He continues: “In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book, or by any other act of contemplation, for that matter, we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas. Deep reading, as Maryanne Wolf argues, is indistinguishable from deep thinking” (<http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google>).

This is not a new idea. French critic Émile Faguet said much the same thing about a century ago: “The art of reading is the art of thinking with a little help” (“L’art de lire, c’est l’art de penser avec un peu d’aide” [<http://users.skynet.be/typographie/Citations.html>, accessed August 25, 2008]).

Members of the Class of 2012, welcome again to Hamilton. Here, I hope, you will get whatever little help you need, from teachers and books and friends, and will thrive in every possible way, reading, writing, thinking, imagining and connecting more grandly and more profoundly than your greatest expectations.