

SPECTRUM

features.suo@lakehouse.lk / Tel: 011 2 429 429, 011 2 429 228 / Fax: 011 2 429 227
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The universal answer to travails and trials of Life



Select a book and read on...

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO RELEASE THIS TENSION AND PRESSURE IS TO READ A FEW GOOD BOOKS IN WHATEVER LANGUAGE YOU PREFER. THEY HELP YOU TO FORGET TOUGH TIMES AND TRANSPORT YOU TO OTHER WORLDS. AT LEAST FOR A FEW HOURS, YOU CAN KEEP ALL THOSE WORRIES AWAY

BY PRAMOD DE SILVA

These are tough times. We were under lockdown due to Covid for two years, more or less. Now, economic issues have come to the fore, unsettling our lives once again. We may once again be compelled to work from home due to the fuel situation. Worse, there is a tremendous pressure on all, due to the acute shortage of fuel and many other essentials. It is vital that we do not give up or give in at this stage.

One of the best ways to release this tension and pressure is to read a few good books in whatever language you prefer. They help you to forget tough times and transport you to other worlds. At least for a few hours, you can keep all those worries away.

Books are usually our first window to the outside world (some of the youngsters reading this may beg to differ, saying it is the Internet) and transport our minds to exotic destinations, both imaginary and real.

Advantages

Now, thanks to the Internet, you do not even have to go to a bookstore to buy a book. All you need is a Kindle or similar device with a reading app, and you can download thousands of books. My Kindle can probably hold around 3,000 books and I have only around 200 books in that. Electronic devices have certainly made reading more accessible and easier, but have they made it any cozier? The truth is, most of us still love to read printed or "dead tree" books - we like the smell of paper, the rustle of pages as they turn, the cover and illustrations and of course "the feel" of a physical book which no electronic reader can emulate. Besides, physical books require no batteries and no backlight, though they do take up space on your shelf or backpack.

Loss of "book smell"

A recent study by the University of Arizona found that research participants "described being more emotionally attached to physical books, saying they use physical books to establish a sense of self and belonging". Book lovers in this study lamented the loss of "book smell" that accompanies the use of e-books, and participants also touched on other important aspects of book ownership: the use of bookshelves and the ability to augment the pages of a book with marginal notes. Participants described being more emotionally attached to physical books.

They also talked about experiencing physical books through multiple senses - describing, for example, the sound, smell, and tactile experience of opening a new book. Nevertheless, there are some distinct advantages of e-books - there is a built-in dictionary, you can share your notes in social media sites and font sizes can be changed. The lit-up models can be used in total darkness as well.

In fact, in the same study, older users with fading eyesight cited these as major advantages while the younger readers just brushed them off. The par-

ticipants said, the e-book reader makers should focus on making the e-reading experience to closely emulate the experience of reading a physical book, which might require making physical changes to e-readers that make it easier to do things, such as, scribble notes in the margins. Reports now indicate that in most countries, physical book sales have overtaken e-book sales after several years of growth for the e-book sector.

Audio-book sector

And do not be put off by that "dead tree" label - most books are now printed on almost 100 percent recycled paper, certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

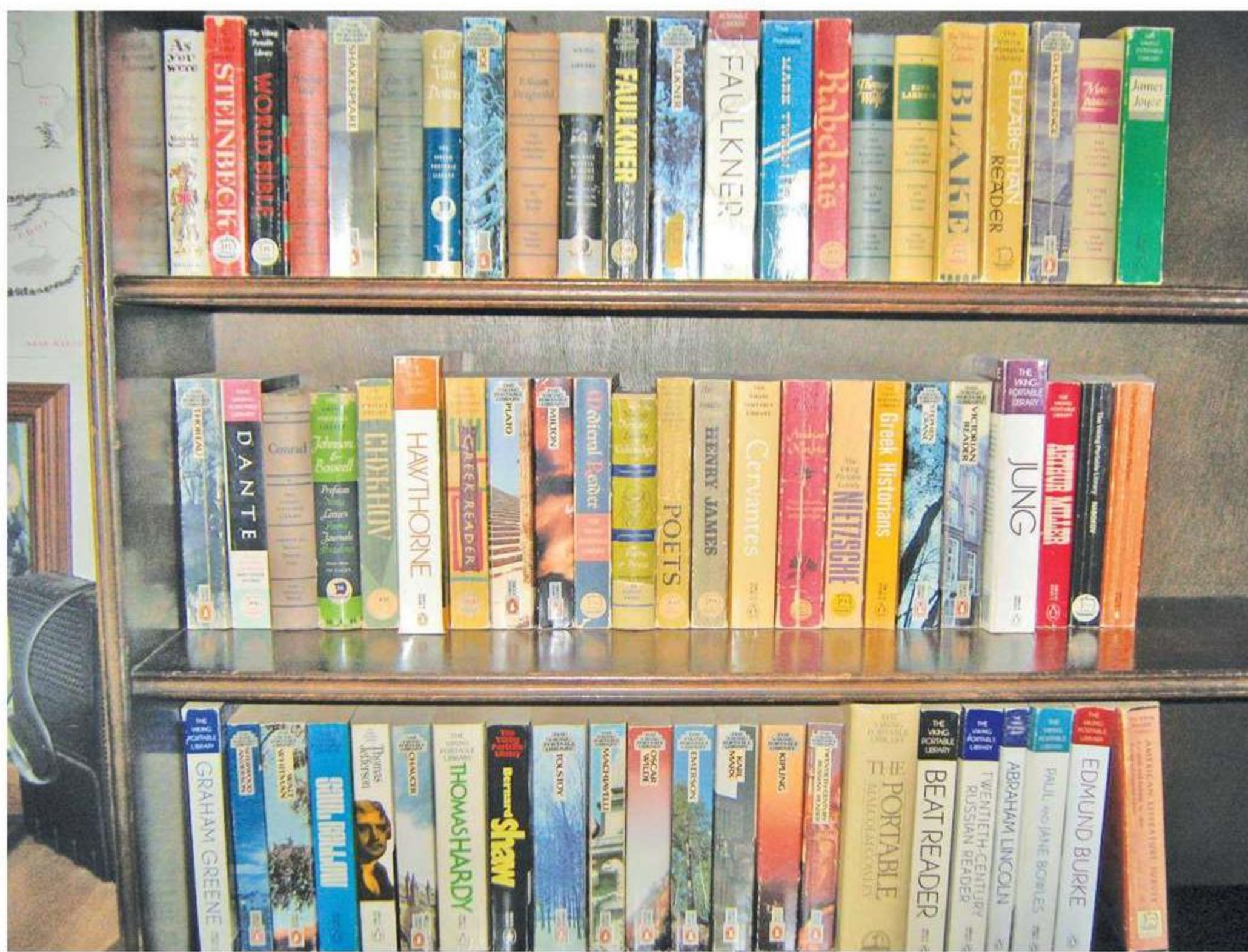
There is another alternative, though it does not involve reading per se. The audio-book sector - where books are narrated by professional voice actors - is thriving as many people do not have the time to read. They can just download an audio book of their choice from a number of audio book sites and listen to it while driving or travelling on the train and even in bed at night.

The only downside is that some books can take as much as 20 hours to finish and reading it yourself might actually be quicker. Again, audiobooks can be more expensive than their print counterparts due to the higher cost of production and professional voice actors' fees.

I do not think physical books will fade away, even though e-books and e-book readers (colour e-book readers are on the way) will get more advanced over the next few years. e-book design will also improve, with embedded audio and video.

But the humble physical book will stay on. We are an emotional species that still likes physical things. And, what finally matters is that people will continue to read for centuries to come, regardless of the medium. So go ahead, select a book, curl up and read on. With that aim in mind, we have selected a few books that everyone can enjoy.

These days, when you can't travel much even within the country due to the fuel issue, one of the best alterna-



IF YOU WOULD RATHER READ FANTASY FICTION PER SE, WHY NOT START WITH TWO REALLY BIG TOMES? THE LORD OF THE RINGS BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN (TURNED INTO A TRIO OF MOVIES BY PETER JACKSON AND AN AMAZON TV SERIES IS ON THE WAY) AND GEORGE R.R. MARTIN'S A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE, FAMOUSLY TURNED BY HBO INTO A MEGA-HIT TV SERIES AS 'THE GAME OF THRONES'. ANOTHER SIMILAR TO ME THAT YOU CAN CHECK OUT IS J.K. ROWLING'S HARRY POTTER SERIES, WHICH TOO HAS BEEN TURNED INTO MOVIES

tives is to "travel" without even leaving your armchair. To help you get started, here are 10 classic travel books that you can easily find online: Venice by Jan Morris; Jerusalem: Chronicles from the Holy City by Guy de Lisle; Full Tilt - Ireland to India with a Bicycle by Dervla Murphy; The Crossway by Guy Stagg; Stranger on a Train: Daydreaming and Smoking around America with Interruptions by Jenny Diski; Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town by Paul Theroux; Around the World in 80 Trains: A 45,000-mile Adventure by Monisha Rajesh; A Short Walk in The Hindu Kush by Eric Newby; Down Under by Bill Bryson; In Patagonia by Bruce Chatwin; Travels with Charley by John Steinbeck and Notes from a Small Island by Bill Bryson. If you would rather stick with ancient writers, you can choose from a range of authors from Marco Polo

to Fa Hsien. If you would rather 'travel' only within Sri Lanka, there are plenty of books by both local and foreign writers.

But for travel of another kind, look no further than authors who have migrated from their home countries, yet have a sense of belonging back home. Khaled Hosseini's haunting novels on Afghanistan (And the Mountains Echoed, The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns) are worth reading in the current context of that country.

Another such diasporic writer you can discover is last year's Nobel Prize Winner for Literature, the Zanzibar-born UK novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah. The award is presented "For his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the Gulf between cultures and continents," the Swedish Academy said. Gurnah has written 10 novels, including 1994's Paradise, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

It tells the story of a boy, Yusuf, who's been pawned off by his father to a merchant to settle old debts. As Yusuf is taken through different parts of Africa, Gurnah's writing pushes back against previous Western takes on the

continent. As NPR's book critic Alan Cheuse noted at the time, "No Heart of Darkness in these pages. Gurnah gives us a more realistic mix of light and dark, of beautiful forests, dangerous vines and snakes, and a patchwork of warring fiefdoms and wily traders right out of the Middle Ages."

You can also check out books by Michael Ondaatje, many of whose books are based on his experiences in Sri Lanka; Ru Freeman; Shyam Selvadurai; Taslima Nasreen and Salman Rushdie, among others for writers looking at their home countries from afar. This is an ideal way to pass your time and provide food for thought during this once in a century pandemic.

Finest fiction

If you would rather read fantasy fiction per se, why not start with two really big tomes? The Lord of the Rings by J.R.R. Tolkien (turned into a trio of movies by Peter Jackson and an Amazon TV series is on the way) and George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice and Fire, famously turned by HBO into a mega-hit TV series as "The Game of Thrones." Another similar to me that you can check out is J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, which too has been turned into movies.

Some other great classic fiction books you can read are; 1984 (George Orwell), To Kill a Mockingbird (Harper Lee - check out the movie too); A Passage to India (E.M. Forster - check out the Merchant Ivory movie); Don Quixote (Miguel de Cervantes), Les Misérables (Victor Hugo, there are many movie versions); Jane Eyre (Charlotte Bronte, but try to read all the novels by the three Bronte sisters); Count of Monte Cristo (Alexander Dumas); Gone with the Wind (Margaret Mitchell - do check out the award-winning movie); Crime and Punishment (Fyodor Dostoyevsky); War and Peace (Leo Tolstoy); all books by Agatha Christie (Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple series) and Arthur Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes series); East of Eden (John Steinbeck); All works by William Shakespeare and Rebecca (Daphne De Maurier) - turned into a chilling movie by Alfred Hitchcock.

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Of course, these recommendations are just a drop in the ocean of fiction books out there. If you know, say, French or Spanish, try to find the original book(s) in that language to take you even closer to the heart and soul of the story. Do not forget Sinhalese or Tamil classic fiction and non-fiction books if you are conversant in both or one of the two vernacular languages. Just be aware that some books can be on the harshness of life itself - so no one can blame you if you give them a miss under the present conditions.

In that case, you can rather opt for a modern thrill-a-minute ride that will not tax your brain unnecessarily. Check out thrillers by writers such as Lee Child, Alistair Maclean, Frederick Forsyth, Clive Cussler, Dan Brown, Ken Follet, John Le Carre, Ian Fleming, Stephen King, Craig Thomas, Robert Ludlum, Sidney Sheldon, Arthur C Clarke, Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov, the latter three being science fiction writers with a wide portfolio. Science fiction is perhaps the best kind of fiction - you can travel into the past, future and worlds yet to be discovered in distant galaxies.

That might be the best cure for your wanderlust at a time you are well and truly grounded. Next week, we will look at some more good books across more categories.

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