

February 21, 2026 ; Online

Books and grit can save you | GUEST COMMENTARY



*A patron reaches for a book in the Havre de Grace branch of the Harford County Public Library.
(Brian Krista/Staff)*

By [Patricia Steckler](#)

In a year of DOGE-induced precipitous job loss in my immediate family, emergency open-heart surgery for me and the discovery of colon cancer in a beloved family member just before Christmas, I've found myself grasping onto the ledge of life, looking down into an abyss.

Reading "The Correspondent," Virginia Evans' novel, transported me away from my woes and into the small Annapolis home of a 73-year-old retired law clerk named Sybil Van Antwerp. Sybil lives alone and spends her days fountain-penning personal letters and occasional emails that tell the story of her loves, losses, sorrows and deep regrets, through her alternately curmudgeonly and generous-hearted persona.

I love Sybil's quiet life, not dominated by AI, phones, computers and social media. As you read her words, you can almost hear her thoughts, the occasional honks of passing cars, the drip, drip, drip of raindrops on her windows, and the soft scratch of her fountain pen on sheets of special stock paper, piled beside her. I could "see" her peeking out her window at the nearby Severn River as if I were by her side, away from DOGE-firings, cancer and a recovering heart.

Fiction is magic. In a New Yorker article, "[Can Reading Make You Happier?](#)" the author, Ceridwen Dovey, answers that question with a resounding "Yes!"

Ten years ago, Ms. Dovey was given the gift of a session with a bibliotherapist, which she anticipated with skepticism. She feasts on books, but recoils when someone says, "You must read this." To her

surprise, she found that simply answering one of the therapist's introductory questions about what was absorbing her at the time improved her mood. "I am worried about having no spiritual resources to shore myself up against the inevitable future grief of losing somebody I love."

A list of recommended readings followed, including "The Guide" by R.K. Narayan, a novel featuring Railway Raju, a corrupt tour guide, who falls in love with a married woman, is jailed for forgery and mistaken for a sadhu, a spiritual leader, an identity he embraces and ultimately adopts as his destiny.

Reading through the list of suggested books did hearten Ms. Dovey: "Reading fiction makes me lose all sense of self, but at the same time makes me feel most uniquely myself."

Non-fiction is magic, too. One of my favorite writers, [Jennifer Szalai](#), a book critic and essayist, rhapsodizes about the glories of this genre: "Books — even bad ones — aren't simply delivering information; they are often trying to persuade readers of something, whether it's a specific argument or a way of understanding the world."

Given how transformative and pleasurable reading can be, why in the world are teachers and professors succumbing to students' pleas of distraction, poor concentration and pleas of "I'm uncomfortable" by assigning abridged books and/or woefully few, if any, entire books per semester?

No, no, please, no!

"If you read a book in 2025 — just one book — you belong to an endangered species. Like honeybees and red wolves, the population of American readers, *Lector americanus*, has been declining for decades," *The Atlantic's* Adam Kirsch [wrote](#) in response to a recent Survey of Public Participation in the Arts. The reading skills of American high school seniors are at historic lows.

What's wrong with being uncomfortable and plowing through demanding texts that challenge us to think about bygone times, far-off places and painful emotions, poignantly expressed? All kids complain that "it's sooo hard" to learn to read, ride bikes and tie their shoelaces. When they fuss, we typically respond by saying, "Stick with it. Practice, practice, practice. Be patient, you'll get the hang of it." Why do we expect less of our high schoolers and college students?

In fact, learning to tolerate discomfort is the only pathway to building a meaningful, successful and joyful life. Developing self-discipline and stick-to-itiveness in our youth should not be a choice; it is the only option!

So, read books, all the way through, and discover hidden worlds, nuanced characters and complex arguments that will enlighten you, inspire joy and ignite empathy that will endure.

Patricia Steckler (pattisteckler@gmail.com) is a retired psychologist who was in private practice for 40 years. She lives in Bethesda and is a 2019 graduate of the Johns Hopkins science writing master's degree program.