



How to Read a Novel: A User's Guide

John Sutherland

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"Do we still know how to read a novel?" John Sutherland, Chairman of the 2005 Booker Prize Committee, asks. His disheartened answer is an unequivocal, "No." But Sutherland has not given up hope. With acerbic wit and intellect, he traces the history of what it used to mean to be well-read and tells readers what it still means today. Using this delightful book as a means to an end, he reminds readers how the delicate charms of fiction can be at once wonderful and inspired and infuriating.

On one level this is a book about novels: how they work, what they're about, what makes them good or bad, and how to talk about them. At a deeper level, this is a book in which one of the most intimate tête-à-têtes is described—one in which a reader meets a novel. Will a great love affair begin? Will the rendezvous end in disappointment? Who can say? In order for the relationship to take its appropriate course all the details must be clearly acknowledged and understood for their complexities: plot, point of view, character, style, pace, first and last sentences, and even beauty.

Still, Sutherland knows a true understanding of fiction is more than a flirtation with text and style—it is a business. Taking his readers on a trip to the bookshop, he helps them judge a book by its cover based on design and color, wondering aloud what genre might be best, even going so far as to analyze one of the latest American bestsellers to further help the buying reader choose the novel that is right for him or her.

In a book that is as wry and humorous as it is learned and opinionated, John Sutherland tells you everything you always wanted to know about how to read fiction better than you do now (but, were afraid to ask).

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