

# Why do we find someone reading sexy?

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Reading is a pleasure. And watching someone else read, too. Credit: [Paul Bence / Flickr](#), [CC BY-NC](#)

A few years ago the dating website eHarmony concluded that profiles that included reading in their list of hobbies were more attractive to the opposite sex. Specifically, the data revealed that men who mentioned reading as one of their personal interests received 19% more messages, while for women, those who said they read received only 3% more messages.

So, is reading sexy? The writer [Jeanette Winterson thinks so](#), because, in

her opinion, "what comes off the photo is absolute concentration, and nothing is sexier than absolute concentration."

## **Marilyn Monroe reading "Ulysses"**

It should be made clear that Winterson is referring to a specific set of photos: those of Marilyn Monroe reading "Ulysses" by James Joyce.

One summer day in 1955, Eve Arnold, a star photographer of the time, went to find her model so they could take the agreed-upon series of pictures. When they stopped in a park, Monroe became engrossed in reading "Ulysses" while Arnold inserted a roll of film into her camera. When ready, she was unable to resist photographing the actress in that trance. Another thought is that the initiative for the photos came from Marilyn herself, who was as attracted to the world of literature and the theater as she was to the spotlight. Reading was also a useful tool to combat her image as a "dumb blonde."

It is obvious that Marilyn Monroe—or Paul Newman, for that matter—is sexy with or without reading. However, what Winterson is really talking about is the fascination of the image of a reader, any reader.

## **St. Ambrose reading in silence**

This is what St. Augustine must have experienced when, toward the end of the 4th century, [he observed](#) St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, reading in silence:

"But while reading, his eyes glanced over the pages, and his heart searched out the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent. Ofttimes, when we had come (for no one was forbidden to enter, nor was it his custom that the arrival of those who came should be announced to him),

we saw him thus reading to himself, and never otherwise." (St. Augustine, "Confessions," VI, 3)

It is no wonder that St. Augustine was surprised by the silent exercise of reading, since, at that time, all readings were done aloud. Apart from this fact, [Irene Vallejo goes further](#):

"Augustine realizes that this reader is not at his side despite his great physical proximity, but has escaped to another, freer and more fluid world of his own choosing, is traveling without moving and without revealing to anyone where to find him."

## **Fascination for readers**

From St. Ambrose to Marilyn Monroe, there have been many portraits or self-portraits of people with a book in their hands. Ourit Ben-Haïm, a Moroccan photographer based in New York, was drawn by the same attraction and set up a project called "Underground New York Public Library" to collect photos of anonymous people reading on platforms or inside New York underground cars.

"Reading is sexy" continues to be a slogan that tries to draw attention, especially in specific circumstances, but it is not something new. This very expression was created in the image and likeness of the phrase "smart is the new sexy," which was used by the Newspaper Association of America to promote reading in the United States.

From a psychological point of view, perhaps there is some truth in our fascination with these images. [Cristian Vázquez tries to justify it](#) in the following manner:

"What we like about a person who reads is to see them immersed in a strange world, which has nothing to do with the environment around

them, a world of which we can only get the tiniest hints through their face, their expressions. In other words, a reader's face is a kind of window into the world created by the book."

## The mystery of reading

It seems that what is so mysterious about such pictures is the fact that reading is the most private and intimate act—"It is the lover's talk, it is the place of whispers and sighs," Winterson goes so far as to say—for it is by reading that we become inaccessible and unreachable, while the viewer is left with an infinite sense of helplessness.

A good proposal to contemplate images, portraits and photos of people reading is Bollman's book titled "[Women Who Read Are Dangerous](#)," a moving tribute to women readers, which brings together a striking selection of paintings, prints and photographs of women reading by various artists from the Middle Ages to the present day. The last photograph in this gallery is actually the one of Marilyn Monroe reading "Ulysses."

It is the perfect time for us to give ourselves the opportunity to lose ourselves in the feelings and fantasies that come from reading. Because, as Emily Dickinson said, "There is no frigate like a book to take us lands away."

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