



One Great Book: Volume 1, Book 2
Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader
by Anne Fadiman

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume 1, Book 2: *Ex Libris Confessions of a Common Reader*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to One Great Book, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it.

[MUSIC]

One Great Book is brought to you by Libro fm audiobooks.

Libro fm is the first audiobook company to make it possible for you to purchase audiobooks through your local bookstore of choice. They partner with 600 bookstores in more than 1,000 locations. So you can find your bookstore of choice and make all of your purchases through them.

One Great Book listeners can get 3 audiobooks for the price of one when you sign up for a membership. Go to Libro.fm that's (L - I - B - R - O - DOT - F - M) and enter the code GREATBOOK. Libro fm. Listen Local.

Readers, today's book belongs to a category many readers, including myself, harbor a special fondness for. And that is books ABOUT books. *This specific* great book makes my own personal



superlatives list: because I'm pretty sure that over the years, I've purchased more copies of this book than any other title.

[01:14]

The book in question is a book *about* books, a slim essay collection called *Ex Libris*, by the American author Anne Fadiman, who you may know as the author of the excellent but quite different nonfiction work *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.

This is a book that has come to mean a lot to me over the years—so much so that I chose a quote from *Ex Libris* as the epigraph for MY bookish essay collection *I'd Rather Be Reading: The Delights and Dilemmas of the Reading Life*. Here it is:

“Books wrote our life story, and as they accumulated on our shelves (and on our windowsills, and underneath our sofa, and on top of our refrigerator), they became chapters in it themselves. How could it be otherwise?”

Ex Libris means “out of the books” or “from the books” and, in these pages, Fadiman talks about how reading was and is her birthright, and how she was and continues to be shaped in fundamental ways by the books she read and the books that continue to surround her.

The subtitle is “confessions of a common reader,” which, on the one hand, is *absurd*. Fadiman grew up surrounded by books in ways that you and I didn't: her father was a writer and scholar, the editor in chief of Simon & Schuster, and the book critic for the *New Yorker*. Fadiman says she couldn't help but to grow up and become a capital 'R' Reader. But, regardless of our backgrounds, we're all ultimately responsible for creating our *own* reading lives, and Fadiman is no exception, even if she does use a lot of big words, and her childhood experiences with books don't remotely resemble my own. She takes *her* definition of a “common reader” from Virginia Woolf: she says she doesn't read as a critic or a scholar, but *for her own pleasure*. And to *that*, I can relate.



Don't skip the preface, where she unpacks this a bit more. But the essays themselves can be read in any order at all and they don't need to be read all at once, but I would like to tell you about my favorites in the collection.

[MUSIC]

[3:14]

The first is “Marrying Libraries,” in which Fadiman writes about how despite knowing her husband for ten years, living together for six, and being married for five, they weren't really married until they merged their respective book collections. As she says, after five years of marriage and a child, they were finally ready for the more profound intimacy of library consolidation. She writes about how she and her husband endured heated debates about which books should go together and where they should go, and how divorce was only contemplated *one time* in the process.

I think of the essay “Never Do that to a book” every time I splay a paperback face down on the (possibly not entirely clean) kitchen counter, proving myself to be—at least in Fadiman's terminology—a carnal, rather than courtly, lover of literature. This means I think of her at least 5 days out of 7, and many of you have confessed that you do, too—so I know I'm in good company [HERE](#).

Whenever I'm browsing in a used bookstore I can't help but think of the essay “Words on a Flyleaf,” because Fadiman writes so intriguingly about inscriptions *she's* seen in secondhand books. In this essay, she talks about the wide and wild variety of inscriptions she's come across over the years—and of course I think of these whenever *I* am [now] inscribing books to readers myself at a signing. In this essay, she quotes one specific inscription she came across, saying “Henry Miller could have written *an entire novel* about that inscription.” *I'm* not going to read you the inscription, you're going to have to read the book for that.

I laugh out loud every time I read “Insert a Carat”, about the affliction that is: *compulsive proofreading*. I laugh, because I am one of the afflicted—and so is my son, and I know this because he'll, say, pass me the bulletin during church and mouth the words “paragraph



two”—where I know there is surely a typo for me to find. If YOU are likewise afflicted, you know it, because, as Fadiman says, for us “it is a reflex no more avoidable than a sneeze,” and if you are one of us I urge you to find a copy of *Ex Libris* and flip immediately to page 79 and start there.

[MUSIC]

[5:24]

Readers, This is an easy collection to dip in and out of, it’s fun, it’s funny, engaging but comforting at the same time. It’s the kind of book you could curl up with and read the whole thing in an afternoon, or, for a more measured dose of bibliotherapy, you could read one essay at a time for nearly three week’s worth of glorious evenings.

Ex Libris was published in 1998, but it has the feeling of being from a different and perhaps more refined era. For those who enjoy books about books, especially ones that feel gently old-fashioned, *Ex Libris* would pair wonderfully with Helene Hanff’s *84, Charing Cross Road*, and, if it isn’t too bold, I do think *I’d Rather Be Reading* would be a wonderful companion pick. For a book in a different genre, but with a similar feel, Chris Morley’s *Parnassus on Wheels* is another story about how the love of books can transform—perhaps even hijack—your entire life. But only to willing victims, and I certainly *am* one.

In short, If you are seeking intelligent comfort reading, and identify as a bibliophile who would love to spend a few hours in the company of a fellow reader who understands the power of books, reading, and writing, *Ex Libris* may be the next great book you’re looking for.

Readers, Visit modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook to learn more about *Ex Libris* and all of the great books in this volume.

You can enjoy *Ex Libris* and thousands of other great books on Libro fm, the audiobook app that let’s you buy directly from your favorite independent bookstore. Find them online at Libro.fm that’s L-I-B-R-O-DOT-F-M.



[7:01]

Readers if you need more great books we've got them for you. In conjunction with every new One Great Book episode I also record an episode about a book that's not even out yet. It wouldn't be fair to tease you with books that aren't available so I don't include those in this podcast feed. But if you want to be the first in line at the library or want to support authors by preordering you'll love this little preview. These are bonus episodes we release to our Patreon community. Both our Paperback and Hardback level supporters get extra One Great Book episodes along with behind the scenes peeks into how What Should I Read Next and One Great Book are made, an engaging community of readers to chat with, and access to our super secret spreadsheet vault with all of the books from all of the episodes of What Should I Read Next.

Become a patron today at patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext to start listening to even more One Great Book.

If you're on Twitter, let me know there @AnneBogel. That is Anne with an E. B as in books -O-G-E-L. Tag us on Instagram to tell me about your experience with *Ex Libris* and to share what YOU are reading. You can find me there @AnneBogel and @WhatShouldIReadNext. Sign up for our newsletter at wsirnpodcast.com/newsletter.

And check out our sister show What Should I Read Next, our long format show dedicated to answering the question that plagues every reader.

Readers, that's it for this episode, thanks so much for listening.

And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading."

Happy reading, everyone.