

## Be in the Book

By Abigail Pogrebin

If there's one thing that a writer needs to always keep doing it's reading. Not just articles, essays or screeds on social media, but entire books. That's not a revelatory eureka, but lately it's become an enormous personal challenge. Every time I begin a book, something distracts me — an update on a major news story, a startling photograph that captures a peak event, an email I need to answer, a writing assignment overdue, a friend's text, bottomless podcasts. It's not that I can't focus anymore. Well, maybe I said that too fast; maybe I can't focus any more. Or maybe I can't focus for an extended period of reading time the way I did for most of my life until there was *so much content, so much connectivity, so much new stuff* coming at me all day long from every direction, that reading now feels like triage.

I miss reading books, but I when I *do actually read*, I read differently from the way I used to. I abandon books that don't rivet me in the first five pages. I forget the book I started months ago and never return to it. I have five books going at a time and don't finish any of them. Someone just asked me to recommend a great vacation novel and my mind went blank. The books I've been reading lately are for research, work projects, not just for pleasure. And when I do read just for me, I often *listen* to books instead of holding them; I've become Audible-dependent — picking up where I left off in the car or running errands. It's enjoyable to read that way, but it's not the same as seeing words on the page. And it's often an interrupted reading experience (it took me an entire summer to get through Ron Chernow's biography of George Washington.)

I'm embarrassed to admit that when I do actually start and finish a book, it's usually non-fiction. Somehow real stories motivate me more. I feel like I'm learning, adding to some pile that won't get finished before I die, that there's a clock running out so I should be learning when I'm reading. Fiction, by contrast, offers a beautiful departure, an escape, new prisms on the world. But I often feel like fiction will have to wait. There's too much I don't know, too many blanks to fill, too much history or biography I want still to understand. Non-fiction — at least in my distorted thinking — feels more productive.

So I'm a writer who misses reading. And since I learned, while writing "My Jewish Year," that the Jewish new year offers us not just a chance to look back and feel both grateful and mindful, but a chance to start afresh, I vow in this new year of 5782 to set aside the news feed, the podcasts and the screeds, and to hold a book in my hands — in the quiet of daylight (not just at bedtime, when I can barely keep my eyes open to finish a chapter), to dip into worlds that aren't necessarily true and to stay there. Without moving. Without leaving. Without abandoning one story for the next before I've finished the one I started. Just to be in the book. Be in the book.