

Read and left unread

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [May 11, 2016](#) issue



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A tall stack of books on the floor in my bedroom greets me each morning. The pile, which constitutes a fraction of the titles I can't seem to find time to read, messes with me. Its very presence creates an exhausting mental condition familiar to most avid readers: guilt. Even the slightest glance at a stack of unread books can dissolve happiness in the life of a usually enthusiastic reader. "Don't forget how much more you have to read," a voice whispers from within my stack.

Last month I attacked the bedroom pile. I sat down and plowed through three books in a matter of days. One of them, *Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death, and Brain Surgery*, by British neurosurgeon Henry Marsh, was especially fascinating. With chapter titles like "Haemangioblastoma," "Neurotmesis," and "Oligodendroglioma," who would set the book down? Actually, I happen to have deep appreciation for the neurosurgeons who operated on my wife's brain after an aneurysm, and for the surgeon in my congregation who once operated on my neck.

Marsh's account of his profession is intimate, spellbinding, and frightening. He walks the reader through the compassionate attachment he has to patients, and the critical detachment from patients that he believes good surgeons need in order to operate confidently. The book is a confession of sorts, written with what he calls "reckless honesty." Marsh is wary of his own talent at times and guilt-ridden by his surgical mistakes at other times. "It's not the successes I remember," he notes, "but the failures."

As his career winds down, Marsh feels an obligation to bear witness to his operating room errors and omissions, as well as feeling responsible for some sadness in patients' lives. Yet throughout the book the reader senses Marsh's attempt to keep his guilt from crippling the joy he has for countless successful operations. Instead of languishing in guilt for what he has not read, Marsh seems to write as an act of atonement.

A *Peanuts* cartoon features Lucy with a piece of paper in her hand. She says to Linus, Peppermint Patty, and Snoopy, "Sign this; it absolves me from all blame." Her friends all sign the paper, including Charlie Brown, who is confused by the exercise. Lucy explains: "No matter what happens any place or anytime in the world, this absolves me from all blame." Charlie Brown replies, "That must be a nice document to have."

Now, to all book enthusiasts who have their own accumulating stack of unread books, and to my friend who let her *Century* subscription lapse (only momentarily, I hope) because she was frustrated with herself for not completely reading every issue, this column is for you: I hereby absolve you of all guilt for being unable to read everything you wish you had time to read.