

# mind



## Shelf Help

New rule: Burying your nose in a good read is the healthiest thing you can do while sitting down. Tell your friends you'll meet them for yoga...but first, Kafka.

By Leslie Goldman Photographed by The Voorhes

PROP STYLING: ROBIN FINLAY

\ / Megan Prokott likes big books and she cannot lie: *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Truly Madly Guilty* by Liane Moriarty, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway—the 23-year-old Chicagoan is on track to pound through 65 this year, reviewing many of them on her Instagram page @the\_spines.

She also delights her 34,000 literary-minded followers (the vast majority of them women ages 18 to 34) with pics of her apartment, artfully strewn with stacks of thrillers, food memoirs, and dystopian sci-fi;

shelves featuring novels nestled in a bed of pink peonies; and other assorted book scenery.

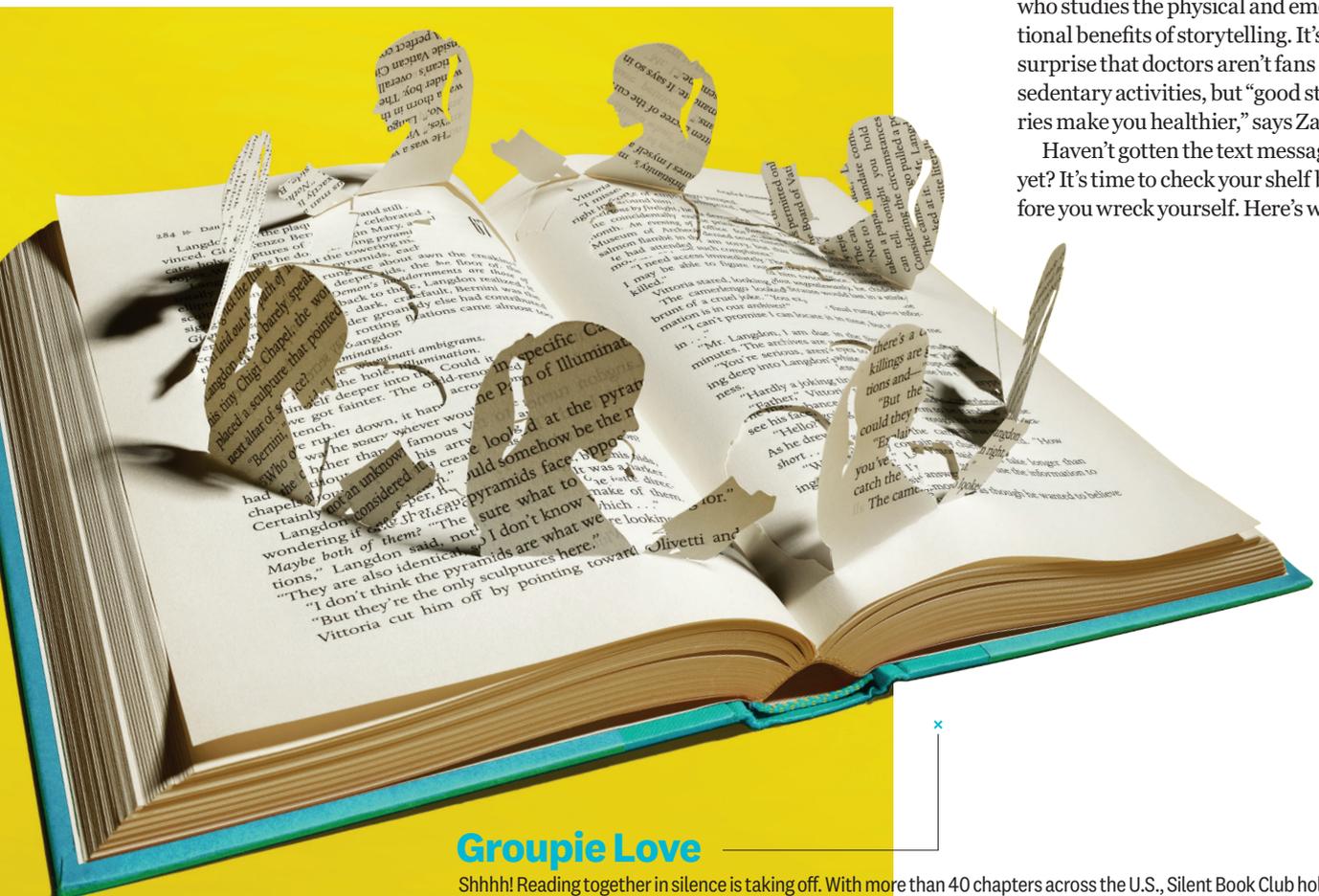
“I think people still enjoy reading physical books because in this technological age, it’s really nice to sit down with something that’s not a screen,” Prokott says. “It’s kind of a moment of self-care.”

We may live in a world of Internet listicles and memes, but books (yep, paper ones) are making a comeback, in a major way. Sales of print books were actually up last year, according to multiple industry reports. Celebrities like Oprah, Emma Watson,

Reese Witherspoon, Emma Roberts, and indie rocker Florence Welch are inviting legions of voracious readers to join their book clubs. Women across the country are gathering in cafés, bars, and each other’s homes to share their favorite reads. And bookstagram, the Instagram subculture dedicated to all things lit, currently has more than 64 million posts featuring the hashtags #bookworm, #bookaddict, #bibliophile, #bookstagram, or #bookish, Books are a *thing* now.

But experts maintain that reading isn’t just good for the soul (or your social life)—it has volumes of research-backed wellness benefits too. “Reading for the brain is like exercise for the body: It stretches our abilities and keeps us fit,” says Paul Zak, PhD, a neuroscience professor at Claremont Graduate University who studies the physical and emotional benefits of storytelling. It’s no surprise that doctors aren’t fans of sedentary activities, but “good stories make you healthier,” says Zak.

Haven’t gotten the text message yet? It’s time to check your shelf before you wreck yourself. Here’s why.



## Groupie Love

Shhhh! Reading together in silence is taking off. With more than 40 chapters across the U.S., Silent Book Club holds monthly meet-ups in bars, coffee shops, and parks, where an hour of quiet reading is bracketed by 30 minutes of socializing. (The first rule of Silent Book Club? BYOB: Bring Your Own Book.) Gathering in a public space offers the time-starved and tech-obsessed permission to unplug and relax among kindred spirits, says Silent Book Club co-founder Guinevere de la Mare. Devotees agree: “I’ve tried writing ‘Read’ on my to-do list, but it’s not quite enough. When I’m sitting at home reading, I feel like I should be answering emails or doing work,” says Javacia Harris Bowser, 38, a teacher and journalist based in Birmingham, Alabama, who attends her local club to experience the magic.

## You'll completely skim over stress.

Just six minutes of reading has been shown to reduce heart rate and ease muscle tension. In fact, that brief period of flipping the pages proved more relaxing than listening to music, going for a walk, or sipping a cup of tea, according to one study. The authors believe that losing yourself in a book offers a sense of escapism, of being apart from the worries of the world. And by actively engaging your imagination, you enter what is more or less an altered state of consciousness, one in which your body totally relaxes. Say *ahhhh*.

## Your brain will function better.

All that plot following and character investment preserves memory and critical thinking skills too. Reading throughout one's life—along with frequenting libraries and writing letters—is associated with less cognitive decline, according to research from the Alzheimer's Disease Center at Rush University Medical Center. Engaging in these mentally stimulating tasks "might increase the efficiency of the brain and how it

processes information—or even help build new connections," says study author Patricia Boyle, PhD. Those connections, she adds, are protective enough to possibly help counteract brain damage caused by aging, or even Alzheimer's disease.

## You'll build your empathy muscle.

Losing yourself in someone else's story, be it a memoir of homelessness or a love-conquers-all beach read, may foster empathy IRL, says Raymond Mar, PhD, an associate professor of

psychology at York University in Toronto. "We learn to take the perspective of these different characters and to understand their emotions, a practice which might extend to the real world." What's more, the brain region responsible for story comprehension has some overlap with the part devoted to social cognition, where we figure out what makes other people tick. Genres such as fiction, memoir, and biography, in which the story is organized around a character and their attempt to achieve a goal, are especially powerful in this way.

## The 411 on Misery Porn

*Why we read the haunting, horrific stuff*

What makes a reader reach for a book that spares no gut-wrenching detail and delves into tough topics like eating disorders or abuse? Likely the same reason we ride roller coasters, says Ramani Durvasula, PhD, a professor of psychology at California State University at Los Angeles: "to experience something that pushes our buttons vis-à-vis fear and anxiety, but in a controlled manner."

If we're lucky, she says, we won't have personally experienced the traumatic situations being recounted. But we've all suffered in some way, or are perhaps suffering right now, and "it's a comfort to know there are others out there stumbling in the darkness too." Plus, much like other forms of reading, these books help us cultivate compassion and empathy by expanding our worlds...even if in a more extreme way.



## Read This Way

*Five books we're stashing in our bags this summer*

**How to Stay Human in a F\*cked Up World: Mindfulness Practices for Real Life, by Tim Desmond**  
A Buddhist scholar on tapping into the ancient tradition of mindfulness as a means of remaining calm.

**Maybe You Should Talk to Someone: A Therapist, Her Therapist, and Our Lives Revealed, by Lori Gottlieb**  
What it's like to be a shrink—and what it's like to see a shrink, in the best possible combo.

**Look Alive Out There, by Sloane Crosley**  
Crosley's laugh-out-loud wit and collection of real-life essays, like the one about breaking into a neighbor's hot tub with a pair of swingers (#5), will have you grinning.

**An Anonymous Girl, by Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen**  
A 28-year-old makeup artist is invited to participate in a psychology study that ends up bleeding into her everyday life. Creepy and twisted, in a good way.

**The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World, by Melinda Gates**  
Lessons learned from the inspiring people Gates has met during her global travels, backed by startling data.