"I'm a reader!" announced the yellow button. "How about you?" I looked at its bearer, a strapping young guy stalking my town's Festival of Books. "I'll bet you're a reader!" he volunteered, as though we were two geniuses well met. "No," I replied. "Absolutely not," I wanted to yell, and fling my Barnes & Noble bag at his feet. Instead, I mumbled something apologetic and melted into the crowd.

There's a new piety in the air: the self-congratulation of book lovers. Long considered immune to criticism by virtue of being outnumbered by channel surfers, Internet addicts, video maniacs and other armchair introverts, bookworms have developed a semi-mystical complacency about the moral and mental benefits of reading. "Books Make You a Better Person," a banner outside a Los Angeles school proclaims. Books keep kids off drugs. They keep gang members out of prison. They keep terrorists, for all we know, at the gates. This is what we hear at the 200-odd book festivals that have proliferated across America from San Francisco to New York. This, indeed, is what we hear during the N.B.A. playoffs! City dwellers vote and choose a single book for everyone to read at the same time. "Read a book, save a life," one radio ad intones; and even in the absence of charitable contributions, this is very nearly what we feel we are doing. To be a reader these days is to be a sterling member of society, a thoughtful and sensitive human being, a winner.

Without the consensus of large parts of the public on this point, a film like Mark Moskowitz's diminutive documentary, "Stone Reader," could never have provoked the hosannas it has, much less made it into the aisles of Blockbuster. Loosely organized around Moskowitz's search for a lost novelist, it shows its hero trudging from one book-lined office to another, stacking books on the desk, cooing over their covers in otherworldly delight and leading his friends in raves about the joy of reading:

Moskowitz (pulling a volume off a library shelf): All these good covers here. . . . Here's the one. . . . Johnny Goldstein, I think, read this first. And then everybody had to read it; it was so great. This is great!

Friend: Yeah, yeah, yeah. . . .

Moskowitz: You just read every day, right?

Friend: Pretty much.

Moskowitz: Every day, you just read. . . .

Friend: Do you remember this? When did you read that?

Moskowitz: "Old Man and the Sea"? Two years ago. . . .

Friend: What did you think?

Moskowitz: . . . I liked it!

The vacuousness of the conclusions, after all the windup, is breathtaking. The fact is Moskowitz has nothing whatever to say about the books he fondles in shot after lingering shot. It's not about the contents of the books. It's about their fetishization.

It is easy to fetishize things that we imagine are on their way out. In the age of Comcast and America Online, books seem quaint, whimsical, imperiled and therefore virtuous. We assume that reading requires a formidable intellect. We forget that books were the television of previous years -- by which I mean they were the source of passive entertainment as well as occasional enlightenment, of social
alienation as well as private joy, of idleness as well as inspiration. Books were a mixed bag, and they still are. Books could be used or misused, and they still can be.

Writers themselves carried on about their danger. From Seneca in the first century to Montaigne in the 16th, Samuel Johnson in the 18th and William Hazlitt and Emerson in the 19th, writers have been at pains to remind their readers not to read too much. "Our minds are swamped by too much study," Montaigne wrote, "just as plants are swamped by too much water or lamps by too much oil." By filling yourself up with too much of other folks' thought, you can lose the capacity and incentive to think for yourself. We all know people who have read everything and have nothing to say. We all know people who use a text the way others use Muzak: to stave off the silence of their minds. These people may have a comic book in the bathroom, a newspaper on the breakfast table, a novel over lunch, a magazine in the dentist's office, a biography on the kitchen counter, a political exposé in bed, a paperback on every surface of their home and a weekly in their back pocket lest they ever have an empty moment. Some will be geniuses; others will be simple text grazers: always nibbling, never digesting -- ever consuming, never creating.

"You might as well ask the paralytic to leap from his chair and throw away his crutch," Hazlitt said, "as expect the learned reader to throw down his book and think for himself. He clings to it for his intellectual support; and his dread of being left to himself is like the horror of a vacuum." Such a one is comparable to a person addicted to talk shows or sitcoms or CNN; no worse and no better, no dumber but no smarter either. It is not because something comes between two covers that it is inherently superior to what passes on a screen or arrives on the airwaves.

There is, of course, a good way of reading -- a very good way, and the thinkers of old knew it. They were all readers, though none of them were smug readers: they did not expect compliments but rather offered excuses for their book consumption. "Undoubtedly there is a right way of reading, so it be sternly subordinated," Emerson wrote. Thinking people "must not be subdued" by their "instruments" -- that is, by their library. They must be the master of it. They must measure a book's testimony against their own; they must alternate their attention to it with an even more passionate and scrupulous attention to the world around them. "Books are for the scholar's idle times," Emerson said in a statement most academics today would find surprising, if not shocking.

The point is this: There are two very different ways to use books. One is to provoke our own judgments, and the other, by far the more common, is to make such conclusions unnecessary. If we wish to embrace the first, we cannot afford to be adulatory of books in the manner of Moskowitz; we must be aggressive. Even a hint of idolatry disables the mind. "Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon have given; forgetful that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote these books," Emerson reminded us -- at a time when he was, admittedly, already a middle-aged man in a library.

Perhaps the best lesson of books is not to venerate them -- or at least never to hold them in higher esteem than our own faculties, our own experience, our own peers, our own dialogues. Books are not the pure good that the festival crowds are sometimes told: you can learn anything from a book -- or nothing. You can learn to be a suicide bomber, a religious fanatic or, indeed, a Bush supporter as easily as you can learn to be tolerant, peace-loving and wise. You can acquire unrealistic expectations of love as readily as, probably more readily than, realistic ones. You can learn to be a sexist or a feminist, a romantic or a cynic, a utopian or a skeptic. Most disturbing, you can train yourself to be nothing at all; you can float forever like driftwood on the current of text; you can be as passive as a person in an all-day movie theater, as antisocial as a kid holed up with a video game, and at the same time more conceited than both.
Those are the dangers. But there are riches. And we can find them, if only we disperse the pious fog that is gathering around book culture. At their best, books are invitations to fight, not calls to prayer. Consecration injures them. We do better to argue with them than to caress their spines. We do better to wrestle with our writers as Jacob with the angel than to worship them as saviors.