

## MAKE A SPACE FOR REFLECTIVE PAUSE



One of my favorite books is a mammoth volume, as big as a brick, that's rested at the top of my living room shelf and presided over my household for years, in the

quietly monumental vein of a gargoyle perched on a cathedral.

I'm talking about the complete collected essays of the British writer V.S. Pritchett, who died in 1997 at age 96. About Pritchett, you might already know. He was, at the time of his death, perhaps the last living author easily described by that old-fashioned honorific, a "man of letters."

It's a term once commonly used for geniuses who didn't merely work in literature but seemed to inhabit it, having a pitch-perfect fluency in multiple genres and an encyclopedic command of cultural knowledge. "Man of letters" more recently evolved into "person of letters," a happy acknowledgment that this kind of brilliance isn't restricted to gender. Virginia Woolf, whose fiction, memoir, and cultural criticism displayed dazzling virtuosity, proved that point well enough. She was a person of letters personified.

How does one get to be a person of letters? A curious chapter in Pritchett's



life yields a clue. After a childhood as a voracious reader, Pritchett knocked about as a foreign correspondent and travel journalist, honing his skills as a fiction writer. By the 1940s, he was back in London, earning much of his living as a literary critic. But then World War II threw him a curve. The war meant few new books were being published — no small challenge for the reviewer who depends on recent releases to supply his gristmill. Necessity forced Pritchett to create an alternative. Each week, instead of writing about a new title, Pritchett published a 2,000-word essay on a classic author, an assignment that required him to revisit the foundational writers of world literature.

Pritchett was already whip-smart, but the experience deepened him. Now grounded more firmly in the texts of the masters, Pritchett could speak with greater gravitas and authority on writers both old and new, also applying their

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lessons to his own novels and stories. That's how a book shortage helped V.S. Pritchett become a person of letters. Temporarily relieved of the obligation to chase the Next Big Thing, he could probe more fully books already in his library.

Pritchett's path to greatness intrigues me because it challenges our common assumption that with information, as with any other cherished commodity, more is invariably better. If our culture no longer seems to produce as many figures who rank as a person of letters, perhaps it's because the sheer scale and speed of new information — new books, new movies, new music, new theater — encourages breadth but not depth, reflex rather than reflection.

No reasonable person would wish for another global cataclysm like the one that forced a thoughtful pause in V.S. Pritchett's intellectual life. The trick for us is to create those pauses for ourselves on a smaller scale. It might take the form of a quiet evening with the smartphone silenced, the TV off, and an old-fashioned book resting like ballast across our lap. Maybe it's time, I've been thinking to myself, to fetch Pritchett from the shelf.

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