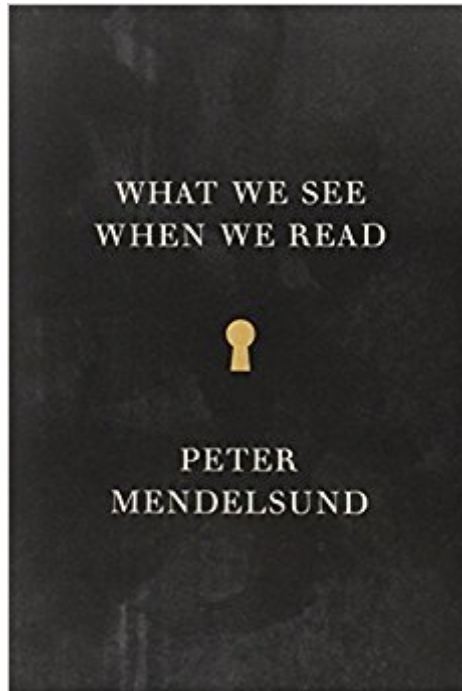




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# What We See When We Read



## Synopsis

A San Francisco Chronicle *Best Book of the Year* and Kirkus Best Book of the Year A gorgeously unique, fully illustrated exploration into the phenomenology of reading—how we visualize images from reading works of literature, from one of our very best book jacket designers, himself a passionate reader. What do we see when we read? Did Tolstoy really describe Anna Karenina? Did Melville ever really tell us what, exactly, Ishmael looked like? The collection of fragmented images on a page—a graceful ear there, a stray curl, a hat positioned just so—and other clues and signifiers helps us to create an image of a character. But in fact our sense that we know a character intimately has little to do with our ability to concretely picture our beloved—or reviled—literary figures. In this remarkable work of nonfiction, Knopf's Associate Art Director Peter Mendelsund combines his profession, as an award-winning designer; his first career, as a classically trained pianist; and his first love, literature—he considers himself first and foremost as a reader—into what is sure to be one of the most provocative and unusual investigations into how we understand the act of reading.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Praise for *What We See When We Read*: “A playful, illustrated treatise on how words give rise to mental images. . . . Mendelsund argues that reading is an act of co-creation, and that our impressions of characters and places owe as much to our own memory and experience as to the descriptive powers of authors. . . . [What We See When We Read] explore[s] the peculiar

challenges of transforming words into images, and blend[s] illustrations with philosophy, literary criticism and design theory. — Alexandra Alter, The New York Times — “Mendelsund, throughout this thought-provoking book, helps the lay reader contemplate text in ways you hadn’t thought about previously. — Los Angeles Times — “A conversation piece, created to entice repeated thumb-throughs. . . . [The author is] a highly regarded book-jacket designer. . . . Reading is often considered (especially by those who don’t love to do it) a passive activity. But Cambridge native Mendelsund . . . makes a nice case that it is, in fact, a kind of active collaboration. . . . What We See When We Read, itself a work of conceptual design, unfolds the author’s ideas about what makes reading a creative, visual act all its own on pages — some packed with text, others just a line or two — that incorporate sketches, clip art, images of classic book covers and more. — The Boston Globe — “A welcome and fascinating new book.” — The New York Review of Books — “The liveliest, most entertaining and best illustrated work of phenomenology you’ll pick up this year. An acclaimed book-jacket designer and art director, Mendelsund investigates, through words and pictures, what we see when we read text and where those images come from. His breakdown of the reading and visualizing processes yields many insights. . . . Playfully, he offers us a police composite sketch of Anna, based on the description in Tolstoy’s novel. — Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel “Wow. . . . Mendelsund has changed the way I think about reading. Like the Wizard of Oz — tornado, Mendelsund’s lucid, questing prose and his surprising, joyful visuals collide to create a similar weather system inside the reader. Not only are you carried off to Oz, but you’re aware at every moment of the cyclonic action of your reader’s mind and your reader’s imagination. It’s so smart, so totally original, so beautiful. This is the perfect gift for anyone who has ever blinked awake inside a book.” — Karen Russell, author of — Swamplandia! — “[Mendelsund] produces a kaleidoscopic, immersive experience that successfully combines text, graphics, illustrations, cover images and more into a cohesive whole. It’s a book to be read, reread, shown to perspective graphic designers and shared. — Kirkus — “[A] sort of epistemological exercise that, at its best, calls all sorts of associations to mind. It summons a mental flood. . . . Mendelsund is an adept memoirist; the personal material in this book resonates. He notes that we can read novels quickly, as if driving through them, or slowly, as if walking, and have distinct experiences. . . . [He] keeps his tone light while thinking deliberately about fundamental things. — Dwight Garner, The New York Times — “Mendelsund, one of the truly great book-cover designers, explores what we see when we read, in a volume packed with stunning visuals. It’s a fascinating

and enlightening look at something we might not actually realize we're thinking about with every word we read. • Flavorwire "A deconstruction of the visual experience of reading, a heady mixture of philosophy and neuropsychology. . . . Peter Mendelsund is astonishingly good at what he does." • The Rumpus "Amazing. . . . Sparkling with verbal as well as visual wit and the personable exhilaration of one of the best conversations you've ever had, • What We See When We Read • opens one's eyes to that special brand of blindness which makes the vividness of fiction possible. It reads as if the ghost of Italo Calvino audited Vladimir Nabokov's literature class and wrote his final paper with the help of Alvin Lustig and the Radiolab guys." • Chris Ware, author of • Building Stories • "Quirky and fascinating. . . . Mendelsund draws our attention to things we may not be fully conscious of when we immerse ourselves in a narrative. . . . We See When We Read will make passionate readers think about things they may largely take for granted when absorbed in a book and spark further thoughts about what the pleasurable experience of reading is all about. • BookPage • "Intriguing. . . . A truly remarkable book. • Coolhunting.com • "In this brilliant amalgam of philosophy, psychology, literary theory and visual art, Knopf associate art director and cover designer Mendelsund inquires about the complex process of reading. . . . The book exemplifies the idea that reading is not a linear process. Even if readers follow consecutive words, they incorporate into reading memories, distractions, predispositions, desires and expectations. . . . In 19 brief, zesty chapters, the author considers such topics as the relationship of reading to time, skill, visual acuity, fantasy, synesthesia and belief.... Mendelsund amply attains his goal to produce a quirky, fresh and altogether delightful meditation on the miraculous act of reading. • Kirkus (starred) • "A delightful treat for the avid reader. . . . [A] topsy-turvily illustrated marvel. . . . [Mendelsund] maps the dreamscape of reading to show us how the mirage dissolves under close scrutiny but its memory still burns brilliant. What a tangible magic books are! • Shelf Awareness • "Offhandedly brilliant, witty, and fluent • in the works of Tolstoy, Melville, Joyce, and Woolf, Mendelsund guides us through an intricate and • enlivening analysis of why literature and reading are essential to our understanding of ourselves, each other, and the spinning world. • Booklist • "This examination of how words on a page become pictures in our brains is blowing my mind a little in the best possible way. • BookRiot "This is not a book, this is a sacred text. It inspires, it expands the mind, it proves that Mendelsund is a total freaking genius." • Heidi Julavits, author of The Vanishers "Brilliant. Peter Mendelsund has peered into our messy heads and produced an illuminating, kaleidoscopic meditation on reading. Also on seeing. And understanding." • Jim

Gleick, bestselling author of *The Information* "Peter Mendelsund is to the art of book design what Walter Murch is to the art of film-editing. That, of course, is the highest praise imaginable." •Geoff Dyer, author of *Another Great Day at Sea* Praise for Peter Mendelsund's work: "He's the exact visual correlative of what I think contemporary literature should be, but usually isn't doing." •Tom McCarthy "Peter Mendelsund pushes the visual and the verbal into unforeseen alliances. These alliances feel inevitable, establishing exactly the right balance between the timely and the timeless." •Jed Perl "When I first spoke with Peter, after he'd begun work on the jacket for *The Flame Alphabet*, I was struck by how carefully he'd read the book. . . . To have it from a designer is unnerving and, of course, a piece of very good luck. When he asked me if there was anything I had in mind for the jacket, I knew by that point that I did not want to get in his way or even to put my voice in his head. I wanted an original Mendelsund." •Ben Marcus "Once in a while I'm presented with design that crosses the barriers of cultural references and visual language that feels universal that feels like the perfect start to the story; design that I don't want to reader to forget, but to carry with them. These designs are Peter Mendelsund's." •Jo Nesbø "All of Peter's covers are funny, smart, and beautiful. And all of them say something about the visual nature of reading, writing, and perception. Each one is a poem. Look at them closely." •Jane Mendelsohn

Peter Mendelsund is the associate art director of Alfred A. Knopf and a recovering classical pianist. His designs have been described by *The Wall Street Journal* as being "the most instantly recognizable and iconic book covers in contemporary fiction." • He lives in New York.

This is a must...for everyone...and each will have a different response!

A great gift for anyone who likes to read. Very interesting.

This book is amazing. If you are an avid reader - take a peak.

Mr Mendelsund has given a lot of helpful insight for a writer in this book. I found I could only absorb a few pages at a sitting, but would mull over what I read for days. Some of his insight I intuitively knew ... I just didn't know I knew. I couldn't give it words like the author. Beautiful piece of work ...

This is a brilliant, innovative book full of insights about reading and the works of literature he uses as

illustration. It's unusual design, with text broken up into smaller units with creative illustrations, makes the ideas more along in a very different way from a traditional essay format.

This is a beautiful book! If I weren't so captivated by it as a personal experience, it would probably be an excellent conversation piece and coffee table book. Really fascinating, and well-presented.

Opens one's eyes and ears to effective communication.

I loved this book. I read some reviews that were negative but I don't know what their issue is. I just LOVED it! I loved the art, the creativity, the paring down of concepts. I've gone back and re-read it to just enjoy being reminded of reading. It helps me to pay more attention to reading (and writing). Definitely for the visual reader. Just lovely.

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