BOOK reading today is a dying art and book readers a vanishing tribe. We may blame it on any number of factors. But a love for books has been known to have guided the destiny of many scientists, inventors and innovators.

Nikola Tesla who predicted the mobile phone a hundred years ago was a maverick scientist who held about 300 patents. Tesla laid the cornerstones of alternating current and pioneered radar and X-ray. He spoke eight languages. How? His father had a huge library and encouraged the boy to read but forbade him from reading in the night, lest it spoil the young boy’s eyes. But the young boy was an insatiable reader and would read in the light of candles. Remember, Tesla’s alternating current was still far away to light up homes. The old man would fly into a rage whenever he caught Tesla in the act and so he hid the candles.

But young Tesla was ingenious; he ‘obtained tallow, made the wicking and cast the sticks into tin forms’. Every night he “would bush the keyhole and the cracks and read, often till dawn, when all others slept”. This habit of reading developed in him a photographic memory, a powerful imagination and multi-dimensional visualisation.

That brings us to the other Tesla. Tesla, Inc. is an American multinational corporation that specialises in electric vehicles, energy storage and solar panel manufacturing based in Palo Alto, California. Elon Musk is the co-founder and product architect of Tesla, Inc., and the founder, and lead designer of SpaceX, and co-founder of Neuralink and CEO of all the three. Musk actually first learned about rockets by reading books. Book reading fuelled his ambitions and made the pathways to his success.

“I was raised by books...books, and then my parents,” Musk said in an interview. By the time he was nine years old he had completed reading the entire *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and completed a six-month BASIC course in just three days. Even at a young age, he used to spend time reading for more than 10 hours a day. His father once said that his son being an introvert, whenever they went to a party, Elon would slink away into the person’s library and read books.

We often reason that computers have killed our reading habit. But did you know that Bill Gates, former Microsoft CEO reads a new book every week, that’s an impressive 50 books in a year. Even at a young age, Bill Gates started reading science fiction, novels and encyclopaedias.
When asked, “Do you think reading has been essential to your success and is it to others?” he answered, “Absolutely. You don’t really start getting old until you stop learning. Every book teaches me something new or helps me see things differently. Reading fuels a sense of curiosity about the world, which I think helped drive me forward in my career and in the work that I do now with my foundation.”

Talking about computers, can we forget John von Neumann? A polymath who laid foundations of quantum mechanics, invented game theory and a host of others. He also invented the computer architecture we use most often today.

He was an expert on the early history of Latin America and an authority on the American civil war. A professor of Byzantine history (History of Eastern Roman Empire) once said that von Neumann had greater expertise in Byzantine history than he did.

He was an avid reader. His father Max bought a complete library from an estate sale and stocked books to the ceiling. John systematically read them from beginning to end. A special attraction for him was 44 volumes of General History in its Special Phases of the German historian Wilhelm Oncken. On his deathbed, von Neumann entertained his brother by reciting, by heart and word-for-word, the first few lines of each page of Goethe’s Faust. His second wife Klari Dan says that Neumann won’t remember what he had for lunch today, but he will remember everything on a page in a book he read fifteen years ago.

There are many persons who read a book at a dinner table while eating. Many make good of their travel time whether in car, bus, train or aeroplane. Quite a few take a book to the toilet too. There are persons who read while walking.

When it comes to reading while walking, Norbert Wiener takes the cake. Wiener, a professor of mathematics at MIT and considered the originator of cybernetics was also very forgetful. While walking along a road one afternoon, as usual with his eyes on the book, a friend coming from behind casually inquired whether the professor had finished his lunch. Norbert asked his friend in which direction he was walking. He replied that he was heading east. Norbert replied, “If I am heading east, then I have eaten lunch.”

Talking of reading while travelling, Robert Oppenheimer, acclaimed as “the father of the atomic bomb”, on a train trip from San Francisco to the East Coast read Edward Gibbon’s seven-volume The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. On another such trip, he read the four volumes of Karl Marx’s Das Kapital in German. On a short summer holiday in Corsica, he read in French Marcel Proust’s massive À La Recherche du Temps Perdu.

Whether you move your lips while you read, or read the last pages of a book first, or smell your book before you start, or read a magazine from back to front, finish the book when you start it. After all, book readers are leaders.

At the age of 30, Robert Oppenheimer met the Indologist Arthur W. Ryder at Berkeley and learned Sanskrit. He read the Bhagavad Gita in the original language. Later he said that he read one of the most influential books to shape his philosophy of life and “It is the most beautiful philosophical song existing in any known tongue.”

With an astonishing appetite for books, he remembered, “I had a real chance to learn. I loved it. I almost came alive. I took more courses than I was supposed to, lived in the [library] stacks, and just raided the place intellectually.” On a hot day, he said, “It was so hot today the only thing I could do was lie on my bed and read Jeans’s Dynamical Theory of Gases.”

A study reveals that more people are switching over to electronic versions of books while old-timers are still sticking to books on paper. An avalanche of information is available today in a plethora of devices but in the running race of time people have probably hit the limits of reading. People seem to have lost the sensation of the pleasure of reading.

C.V. Raman used to read books on science at a level far ahead of his age. One book, the scientific masterpiece The Sensations of Tone by Hermann von Helmholtz, profoundly influenced his intellectual outlook. Raman recalled, “It was my great good fortune, while still a student at college, to have possessed a copy of an English translation of his great work The Sensations of Tone. As is well known, this was one of Helmholtz’s masterpieces. It treats the subject of music and musical instruments not only with profound knowledge and insight but also with extreme clarity of language and expression. I discovered the book myself and read it with the keenest interest and attention. ... For the first time, I understood, from its perusal, what scientific research really meant, and how it could be undertaken. I also gathered from it a variety of problems which were later to occupy my attention and keep me busy for many years.”

Whether you move your lips while you read, or read the last pages of a book first, or smell your book before you start, or read a magazine from back to front, finish the book when you start it. After all, book readers are leaders.

Mr. K. Krishna Murty; Address: 403 S B Enclave, 11-6-2 Rockdale Layout, Maharanipet, Visakhapatnam-530002. Email: kaykayem@gmail.com