

WHAT DOES BOREDOM DO TO US—AND FOR US?

Humans have been getting bored for centuries, if not millennia. Now there's a whole field to study the sensation, at a time when it may be more rampant than ever.

By Margaret Talbot

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The experience of boredom has a history, a set of social determinants, and, in particular, a pungent association with modernity. Illustration by Geoff McFetridge

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Quick inventory: Among the many things you might be feeling more of these days, is boredom one of them? It might seem like something to disavow,

automatically, when the country is roiling. The American plot thickens by the hour. We need to be paying attention. But boredom, like many an inconvenient human sensation, can steal over a person at unseemly moments. And, in some ways, the psychic limbo of the pandemic has been a breeding ground for it—or at least for a restless, buzzing frustration that can feel a lot like it.

Fundamentally, boredom is, as Tolstoy defined it, “a desire for desires.” The psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, describing the feeling that sometimes drops over children like a scratchy blanket, elaborated on this notion: boredom is “that state of suspended animation in which things are started and nothing begins, the mood of diffuse restlessness which contains that most absurd and paradoxical wish, the wish for a desire.” In a new book, “Out of My Skull: The Psychology of Boredom,” James Danckert, a neuroscientist, and John D. Eastwood, a psychologist, nicely describe it as a cognitive state that has something in common with tip-of-the-tongue syndrome—a sensation that something is missing, though we can’t quite say what.

Danckert and Eastwood are hardly alone in their inquiries. In the past couple of decades, a whole field of boredom studies has flourished, complete with conferences, seminars, symposiums, workshops, and a succession of papers with such titles as “In Search of Meaningfulness: Nostalgia as an Antidote to Boredom” (been there) and “Eaten Up by Boredom: Consuming Food to Escape Awareness of the Bored Self” (definitely been there). And, of course, there’s a “Boredom Studies Reader,” which bears the suitably stolid subtitle “Frameworks and Perspectives.”

Boredom, it’s become clear, has a history, a set of social determinants, and, in particular, a pungent association with modernity. Leisure was one precondition: enough people had to be free of the demands of subsistence to have time on their hands that required filling. Modern capitalism multiplied amusements and consumables, while undermining spiritual sources of meaning that had once been conferred more or less automatically. Expectations grew that life would be, at least some of the time, amusing, and people, including oneself, interesting—and so did the disappointment when they weren’t. In the industrial city, work and leisure were cleaved in a way that they had not been in traditional communities, and work itself was often more monotonous and regimented. Moreover, as the political scientist Erik Ringmar points out in his contribution to the “Boredom Studies Reader,”

boredom often comes about when we are constrained to pay attention, and in modern, urban society there was simply so much more that human beings were expected to pay attention to—factory whistles, school bells, traffic signals, office rules, bureaucratic procedures, chalk-and-talk lectures. (Zoom meetings.)

Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard considered boredom a particular scourge of modern life. The nineteenth-century novel arose in part as an antidote to the experience of tedium, and tedium often propelled its plots. What was Emma Bovary, who arrived in 1856, if not bored—by her plodding husband, by provincial existence, by life itself when it failed to show the glittering colors of fiction? Oblomov (the eponymous novel by Ivan Goncharov appeared three years after Gustave Flaubert's) is a superfluous man on a superannuated feudal estate who passes the time with his family in thick silence and bouts of helplessly contagious yawning. Though it was possible in the English language to *be* “a bore” in the eighteenth century, one of the first documented instances of the noun boredom’s being invoked to describe a subjective feeling did not appear until 1852, in Dickens’s “Bleak House,” afflicting the aptly named Lady Dedlock.

Heidegger, one of the preeminent theorists of boredom, classified it into three kinds: the mundane boredom of, say, waiting for a train; a profound malaise he associated not with modernity or any specific experience but with the human condition itself; and an ineffable deficit of some unnameable something that sounds thoroughly familiar to us. (This third kind might have made a good additional verse for Peggy Lee in her languid “Is That All There Is?”) We are invited to a dinner party. “There we find the usual food and the usual table conversation,” Heidegger writes. “Everything is not only tasty, but very tasteful as well.” There was nothing unsatisfactory about the occasion at all, and yet, once home, the realization arrives unbidden: “I was bored after all this evening.”

One does find intimations of boredom long before its mid-nineteenth-century flowering. Seneca, in the first century, evoked *taedium vitae*, a mood akin to nausea, set off by contemplating the relentless cyclicity of life: “How long will things be the same? Surely I will be awake, I will sleep, I will be hungry, I will be cold, I will be hot. Is there no end? Do all things go in a circle?” Medieval monks were prone to something called *acedia*—a “kind of unreasonable confusion of mind,” as the ascetic John Cassian wrote in the fifth century, in which they couldn’t do much of anything

but go in and out of their cells, sighing that “none of the brethren” came to see them, and looking up at the sun “as if it was too slow in setting.” As scholars have pointed out, *acedia* sounds a lot like boredom (depression, too), although a particular judgment was attached to it: *acedia* was sinful because it rendered a monk “idle and useless for every spiritual work.” Still, these were exceptional harbingers of a feeling that would later be distributed far more democratically. In these earlier incarnations, boredom was “a marginal phenomenon, reserved for monks and the nobility,” Lars Svendsen writes in “A Philosophy of Boredom”; indeed, it was something of a “status symbol,” since it seemed to plague only “the upper echelons of society.”

This is persuasive, though I suspect that some subjective sense of monotony is a more fundamental affect—like joy or fear or anger. Surely even medieval peasants sometimes stared into the middle distance and sighed over their barley pottage, longing for the next village fête day and a bit of carnivalesque mayhem. In recent years, something like boredom has been studied and documented in understimulated animals, which would seem to argue against its being an entirely social construction. (It certainly seems to be boredom that gets into my workaholic dog when he drags a magazine off the coffee table, always checking first that some human has seen him, and runs around the house with it so we’ll chase him.) The classicist Peter Toohey, in his book “Boredom: A Lively History,” offers a helpful resolution for the debate between those who say that boredom is a basic feature (or bug) of humanness and those who say that it’s a by-product of modernity. He argues that we need to distinguish between simple boredom—which people (and animals) have probably always experienced on occasion—and “existential boredom,” a sense of emptiness and alienation that extends beyond momentary mental weariness, and that perhaps did not come into many people’s emotional lexicon until the past couple of centuries, when philosophers, novelists, and social critics helped define it.

Historically, the diagnosis of boredom has contained an element of social critique—often of life under capitalism. The Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor Adorno argued that leisure is fundamentally shaped by “the social totality”—and is “shackled” to work, its supposed opposite: “Boredom is a function of life which is lived under the compulsion to work, and under the strict division of labor.” So-called free time—obligatory hobbies and holidays that reconcile us to the

capitalist economy's coldly regimented workday—is really a sign of our unfreedom. David Graeber, in his influential “bullshit jobs” thesis, argues that the vast expansion of administrative jobs—he cites, for example, “whole new industries,” such as financial services and telemarketing—means that “huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed.” The result can be soul-choking misery. What Adorno called “objective dullness” is at hand, although, Graeber cautions, “where for some, pointlessness exacerbates boredom, for others it exacerbates anxiety.” Punk music evoked boredom as an incitement to quasi-political rebellion—the Clash’s boredom with the U.S.A., or Fugazi’s “Waiting Room,” where time like “water down the drain” made a boy lose his patience with the world as it was.

But, while social critics can endow boredom with a certain potent charge, many people downplay or deny their own ordinary experience of it. Maybe it’s the system’s fault, but it feels like ours. Boredom is a distinctly uncharismatic state of being. It “lacks the charm of melancholy—a charm that is connected to melancholy’s traditional link to wisdom, sensitivity and beauty,” Svendsen observes. Ennui would be its chic, black-clad, Continental cousin, but you don’t often hear even the most pretentious aesthetes complain of *that*. Depression has a connection to boredom (“the opposite of depression is not happiness but vitality,” Andrew Solomon has written), but depression is perceived as clinical and chemical, and probably easier to confess to in a lot of social settings than chronic boredom would be. If you are bored, you might well *be* a bore.

The psychologist Sandi Mann, in her 2016 book, “The Science of Boredom,” argues that “boredom is the ‘new’ stress”: a condition that people are reluctant to own up to, just as they once were hesitant to admit to stress, but may be doing so more. But I doubt that boredom will ever become the same sort of sure-who-isn’t? complaint that you toss off to an acquaintance in the Starbucks line. To confess that you are stressed implies that you are needed, busy, possibly quite important; to say that you are bored suggests—as it did when you were a child, and adults got exasperated if you kvetched about having nothing to do—that you lack imagination or initiative, or the good fortune of having a job that reflects your “passions.”

“Life, friends, is boring,” John Berryman’s poem “Dream Song 14” goes. “We must not say so. / After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns, / we ourselves flash and yearn, / and moreover my mother told me as a boy / (repeatingly) ‘Ever to confess you’re bored / means you have no / Inner Resources.’ ” Though boredom no longer strikes most people as a sin, as acedia was for medieval monks, a dusting of shame still clings to it, especially when it can’t be blamed on a job endured to pay the bills. To be bored more than occasionally seems a small, peevish grievance in the scheme of things, a sort of weak-minded disengagement from a world that demands urgent action to try to set it right (while offering endlessly streaming entertainment to distract us).

The interpretation of boredom is one thing; its measurement is quite another. In the nineteen-eighties, Norman Sundberg and Richard Farmer, two psychology researchers at the University of Oregon, developed a Boredom Proneness Scale, to assess how easily a person gets bored in general. Seven years ago, John Eastwood helped come up with a scale for measuring how bored a person was in the moment. In recent years, boredom researchers have done field surveys in which, for example, they ask people to keep diaries as they go about daily life, recording instances of naturally occurring lethargy. (The result of these new methods was a boon to boredom studies—Mann refers to colleagues she runs into on “the ‘boredom’ circuit.”) But many of the studies involve researchers *inducing* boredom in a lab setting, usually with college students, in order to study how that clogged, gray lint screen of a feeling affects people.

Creating dull content is a mission they approach with some ingenuity, and the results evoke a kind of rueful, Beckettian comedy. One of James Danckert’s graduate students at the University of Waterloo, for example, directed an exceptionally drab little video that has been used to bore people for research purposes. It depicts two men desultorily hanging laundry on a metal rack in a small, bare room while mumbling banalities. (“Do you want a clothespin?”) Other researchers have had study participants watch an instructional film about fish-farm management or copy down citations from a reference article about concrete. Then the researchers might check how much the stupefied participants want to snack on unhealthy foods (a fair amount, in one such study).

Contemporary boredom researchers, for all their scales and graphs, do engage some of the same existential questions that had occupied philosophers and social critics. One camp contends that boredom stems from a deficit in meaning: we can't sustain interest in what we're doing when we don't fundamentally care about what we're doing. Another school of thought maintains that it's a problem of attention: if a task is either too hard for us or too easy, concentration dissipates and the mind stalls. Danckert and Eastwood argue that "boredom occurs when we are caught in a desire conundrum, wanting to do something but not wanting to do anything," and "when our mental capacities, our skills and talents, lay idle—when we are mentally unoccupied."

Erin Westgate, a social psychologist at the University of Florida, told me that her work suggests that both factors—a dearth of meaning and a breakdown in attention—play independent and roughly equal roles in boring us. I thought of it this way: An activity might be monotonous—the sixth time you're reading "Knuffle Bunny" to your sleep-resistant toddler, the second hour of addressing envelopes for a political campaign you really care about—but, because these things are, in different ways, meaningful to you, they're not necessarily boring. Or an activity might be engaging but not meaningful—the jigsaw puzzle you're doing during quarantine time, or the seventh episode of some random Netflix series you've been sucked into. If an activity is both meaningful and engaging, you're golden, and if it's neither you've got a one-way ticket to dullsville.

When contemporary boredom researchers, in the discipline of psychology, write books for a popular audience, they often adopt a brisk, jaunty, informative tone, with a generous dollop of self-help—something quite different, in other words, from the sober phenomenology and anticapitalist critiques that philosophers tended to offer when they considered the nature of boredom. The analysis of boredom that the psychologists put forth isn't political, and the proposed solutions are mostly individual: Danckert and Eastwood urge us to resist the temptation to "just kick back on the couch with a bag of chips" and instead to find activities that impart a sense of agency and reorient us toward our goals. They can be a little judgy through their own particular cultural lens—watching TV is pretty much always an inferior activity, they suggest, seemingly regardless of what's being watched. More important, they don't have much to say about the structural difficulties people might face in establishing more control over their time or agency in their lives. And you

don't have to be Adorno to be attuned to those difficulties. As Patricia Meyer Spacks writes in "Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind," boredom, which presents itself as "a trivial emotion that can trivialize the world," speaks to "a state of affairs in which the individual is assigned ever more importance and ever less power."

Still, if you are looking for some practical ways to recast experiences that are often more tedious than they need to be, there are thoughtful, specific ideas to be found in boredom-studies research. It's particularly helpful on the phenomenon of boredom in school. In a 2012 survey of American college students, more than ninety per cent said that they used their smartphones or other devices during class, and fifty-five per cent said it was because they were bored. A 2016 paper found that, for most Americans, the activity associated with the highest rates of boredom was studying. (The least: sports or exercise.) Research conducted by Sandi Mann and Andrew Robinson in England concluded that among the most boring educational experiences were computer sessions, while the least were sturdy, old-fashioned group discussions in the context of a lecture. Mann, in "The Science of Boredom," makes worthwhile observations about two tactics that help people feel less bored while studying: listening to music and doodling. According to her, doodling (which also works in soporific meetings) "is actually a very clever strategy that our brains conjure up to allow us to get just the right level of extra stimulation we seek—but not too much that we are unable to keep an ear out for what is going on around us." The boredom trough of school may also be a matter of age: studies that have looked at boredom over the life span have found that, for most people, it peaks in their late teens, then begins to drop, hits a low for those in their fifties, and rises slightly after that (perhaps, depressingly, because people become more socially isolated or more cognitively impaired).

"Out of My Skull" devotes considerable attention to the question of what boredom makes us do—a live one in the field. It's become a bien-pensant trend in recent years to praise boredom as a spur to creativity and to prescribe more of it for all of us, but especially for kids—see, for example, Manoush Zomorodi's 2017 book, "Bored and Brilliant: How Spacing Out Can Unlock Your Most Productive and Creative Self." The idea has an intuitive appeal and an illustrious history. Even Walter Benjamin invoked boredom's imaginative potential: it was "the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience."

Danckert and Eastwood crush that particular dream bird. They say there isn't much empirical evidence that boredom unleashes creativity. One study showed that when people were made bored in a laboratory (reading numbers aloud from a telephone book was the chosen means of stultification here) they were more likely to excel at a standard task psychologists use to assess creativity—coming up with as many uses as possible for a pair of plastic cups. Pretty weak tea, in other words. When people wish that we could all be bored more often, or rue that kids are too scheduled and entertained to be, what they may really mean is that they wish we all had more free time, ideally untethered to electronic devices, to allow our minds to romp and ramble or settle into reverie—and that sort of daydreaming isn't boring at all.

Like some of the other boredom researchers I read, Danckert and Eastwood can't resist citing a few sensational stories that supposedly illustrate the dire consequences of the feeling—news accounts in which people who've committed some heinous crime claim that they did so because they were bored. But those stories don't cast much light on the general phenomenon. Boredom is a more plausible culprit in certain more common social hazards. Wijnand Van Tilburg and Eric Igou, the leading research psychologists espousing the meaning-deficit theory of boredom, have conducted studies, for example, showing that induced boredom ratchets up people's sense of group identity and their devaluation of "outgroups," as well as heightening feelings of political partisanship. But Danckert and Eastwood argue, modestly, that boredom is neither good nor bad, neither pro- nor antisocial. It's more like a pain signal that alerts you to the need to do something engaging to relieve it. Whether you go on a bender and wreck your car or volunteer at the soup kitchen is up to you.

They strike a similarly mild and commonsensical note when they wade into the discussion of whether boredom might be increasing in this particular stage of late capitalism. Are we more bored since the advent of ubiquitous consumer technology started messing around with our attention spans? Are we less able to tolerate the sensation of being bored now that fewer of us often find ourselves in classically boring situations—the D.M.V. line or a doctor's waiting room—without a smartphone and all its swiipeable amusements? A study published in 2014, and later replicated in similar form, demonstrated how hard people can find it to sit alone in a room and just think, even for fifteen minutes or less. Two-thirds of the men and a quarter of the women opted to shock themselves rather than do nothing at all, even

though they'd been allowed to test out how the shock felt earlier, and most said they'd pay money not to experience that particular sensation again. (When the experiment was conducted at home, a third of the participants admitted that they cheated, by, for example, sneaking looks at their cell phone or listening to music.) I wonder if research subjects in an earlier era, before we were so seldom left to our own devices without our devices, would have been quite so quick with the zapper. Erin Westgate, who was one of the authors of the study, developed a deeper interest in how people can be encouraged to enjoy thinking, which sounded to me like a poignant quest, but she said her research showed that it was possible—by, for instance, encouraging people to plan what they would think about when they found themselves alone to do so.

Since, in Danckert and Eastwood's view, boredom is largely a matter of insufficient attention, anything that makes it more difficult to concentrate, anything that keeps us only shallowly or fragmentarily engaged, would tend to increase it. "Put another way, technology is unrivaled in its capability to capture and hold our attention," they write, "and it seems plausible that our capacity to willfully control our attention just might wither in response to underuse." Yet they also say that we don't have the sort of longitudinal studies that would tell us whether people are more or less bored than they used to be. In a 1969 Gallup poll they cite, a striking fifty per cent of respondents said that their lives were "routine or even pretty dull." Their *lives*, not their day at work. Unfortunately, the pollsters didn't ask the question on later surveys.

In a study that investigated emotional responses to the COVID-19 quarantine in Italy, people cited boredom as the second-most-negative aspect of being required to stay home, just after a lack of freedom and just before a lack of fresh air. In March, an article in the *Washington Post* explored the upside of the pandemic for researchers in the field of boredom studies. Would boredom be an opportunity for a creative reset, as people are forever hoping it will be, or would ordinary monotony, and its new co-conspirator, quarantine fatigue, lead to risky, self-defeating, or antisocial behavior? Westgate, who has begun an online study of self-reported boredom and people's responses to it during the shutdown, told me that she thought the COVID-19 pandemic did constitute something of a natural experiment. Ordinarily, people cop to being bored for about a half hour a day, so it was hard to

catch them in the throes of it, but it might be easier now.

If boredom arises in the absence of meaning, though, the constraints that the pandemic imposes on us may not feel boring, exactly. (Anxiety-inducing, emotionally depleting, fraught with uncertainty, yes.) If you're leading a more circumscribed existence these days, at least you are likely doing so with the goal of trying to bring the pandemic under control and save lives. And the little kindnesses that we show to the people we're hunkered down with, and that they show to us, have a certain consequential new hum to them.

Yet there is also something restorative and humane about asserting the right to complain of boredom in a harsh time—an unbridled yearning after the ordinary vividness and variety of life. In a new book called "Square Haunting: Five Writers in London Between the Wars," Francesca Wade quotes the historian Eileen Power, in 1939. "Oh! That this blasted war were over," she wrote. "The boredom of it is incredible. My mind has been blown out like a candle. I am nothing but an embodied grumble, like everyone else." Sometimes it's the grumbling that keeps us alive.



Margaret Talbot joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2004. She is the author, with David Talbot, of By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American Revolution.