

Little Red Herrings — Reading Is, Like, You Know, Sooooo Gross!

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“*Huge Decline in Book Reading*” ran one headline. “*Cultural Atrophy!*” read another. “*Study Links Drop in Test Scores to a Decline Spent in Reading*” ran one for the “Duh!” award. “*Americans are Closing the Book on Reading*” said one, vying for the pun-acious trophy.¹ Whether the stories reported on the first such study about the decline in reading (as do the first two headlines) or the second such study (as do the last two headlines), the news is equally depressing, lamentable and alarming: reading among young people is dreadful while reading among adults awful. Young people, like, hate to read, you know, like, it’s just so, you know like, not awesome, while older people would rather watch “*Survivor*” or “*American Idol*.” What may well be more alarming than the study, however, is the near silence of librarians about either the study, the issue, or whether this has any impact at all on what librarians do.

This should come as no surprise, though it is. Since entering the profession now almost thirty years ago, I have been dismayed by the cavalier approach to the importance of reading by our profession. It isn’t that we take it for granted. It’s that we are hell-bent on making the profession about something else entirely. We want it to be about relationships with “information-seekers” or about the next generation and what that generation wants or needs. We want it to be about data, not about knowledge or, heaven forbid, wisdom. It is as if all such notions are so horribly Western, so embarrassingly not allocentric, that the profession has endeavored to bury reading in an unmarked grave and move on quickly to something else — anything else — as rapidly as possible.

When the **National Endowment for the Arts** released its 2004 report, “*Reading at Risk*,” the data were frightening enough. Fewer than half of all Americans over 18 read novels, short stories, plays, or poetry. This year’s report is summed up by **Dana Goia**, chairman of the **Endowment**, in a short, concise sentence that most Americans cannot or will not read: the data are “simple, consistent, and alarming.” Both reports have their detractors. Some felt that reading was defined in too highbrow a

manner in the first report (that changed with the second). Another knucklehead (from academe, natch) argued that reading had not declined at all; people just read different things in different ways now, whatever that meant. **Nancy Kaplan**, executive director of the **School of Information Arts and Technologies** complains that in the current report data have been massaged and presented in an irresponsible way. Her take (read it here: http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2007/11/reading_responsibly_nancy_kaplan.html) essentially argues that the patient, while not breathing, isn’t really dead. Moreover, the vital signs from **NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress)** and **NAAL (National Assessments of Adult Literacy)**, data sets from which both reports were drawn, are just not all that bad. Of course, **Ms. Kaplan**, in a school of technologies, doesn’t want technologies to be blamed. But anyone who has worked with young people at all knows without any doubt that reading, its facility and proficiency has, well, tanked. The new report tackles these issues, defines reading as widely as **Andy Warhol** defined “art” and yet the results are the same. As one of the researchers argued, we can’t “nitpick or wrangle” about whether reading is in decline. It is, and the decline is precipitous.

So just how bad is it? While finding at least two hours a day to watch television, 15-24 years olds barely find seven minutes a day on voluntary reading on weekdays and a whopping ten on the weekends. Proficiency is also in decline no matter whether readers are (trying) to read a blog or a can of soup. Whatever Americans choose to read, they are not doing it well or often. If you think I’m being elitist, those Americans with advanced degrees read only marginally better and longer. (For those of you who work in higher education, you know this to be the case!)

Young Americans aren’t reading newspapers, newsletters, or, ostensibly, the little packing slip in a new pair of jeans. They do surf the Web, a lot, and some of them have inane, poorly written blogs. **iPods** proliferate, and every child, while not only being a winner, must also have a laptop. We have phones that connect to the Web, will make pictures, and will send msgs tht rd lk ts. We have become the most technologically advanced nation in the world. But we are also a nation of illiterates. It isn’t that there will not be books in the future. There will be many books: there just won’t be anyone who can read them.

This can’t be blamed on young people alone. Reading programs in this country, as I have written in this space before, are idiotic, mind-numbing and

gormless. When educrats aren’t touting the look-say method, they are championing **Whole Language**, two programs that have done more to destroy reading than a million bad books by poetasters or pundits. Lamentably this is not likely to change so long as education is held hostage by the **National Education Association**, but we’ll let that pass for now. Add to these abominable reading pedagogies horrific “young adult books,” and you have a recipe for disaster. But teachers aren’t the only ones to blame. The report also points to a lack of models — i.e., parents — who read well or much. Add to all this a weak-kneed **American Library Association** — which longs to call itself the **American Google** Claques — and you have our present state.

All of this is especially puzzling when one takes into account the multifarious benefits of reading: readers are more involved with the community; they are a better informed electorate (they actually vote, for example — perhaps because they can read the ballot?); they support other arts initiatives (plays, art galleries, newspapers, bookstores and so on); they are more philanthropic-minded than non-readers; and, they are likely to be much more involved in community matters, whether it’s **Habitat for Humanity** or protests for nuclear power. The point is, these are highly involved, passionately committed people representing a vast array of ideologies and concerns. Given all this, can we explain the silence of our profession? For example, why isn’t **ALA** decrying all this? I mean, as much as they decry a lack of respect for, say, **Castro**’s régime?

ALA’s silence or lack of interest in this matter (**ALA** rushed forward with **Kaplan**’s complaints but not the actual report) notwithstanding, any librarian who thinks these reports have little meaning for him or her, or for the profession, must be 65 or older. For the rest of us, this is Belshazzar-like wall-writing of reckoning. Unless we fight — and vigorously — for more awareness of these matters and for strong proposals to reverse them, there will be no “libra” in library. And sadly, it will come much sooner than those of you who can still read this think. 🍄

Endnotes

1. Sources for the headlines, respectively, are as follows **CBS News**, July 8, 2004; *The Muhlenberg Weekly* September 9, 2004 (Amy Cookson, author); *New York Times*, November 17, 2007 (**Motoko Rick**, author); *Chronicle of Higher Education* November 19, 2007, (**Jennifer Howard**, author). The latter two have been used to write this column.

