

November 1998

## Something About Books

Jack Walsdorf

*Blackwell's*, jack.walsdorf@blackwell.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

---

### Recommended Citation

Walsdorf, Jack (1998) "Something About Books," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 10: Iss. 5, Article 45.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.3024>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.



## Something About Books

by Jack Walsdorf (V.P., Library Relations, Blackwell's)  
<jack.walsdorf@Blackwell.com>

"Why don't you write something about books?" the caller asked. What a wonderful idea! It's a subject dear to my heart, as my life is filled with books—collecting them, writing bibliographies about them and when time permits, reading them. Next to my bed, on my night stand, I always have at least three or four titles in progress. I like reading bits and pieces before falling off to sleep. Some books never get finished, often to my regret. Some others get read right through, much to my delight.

Right now I'm reading an unusual little book, published by the **Coach House Press** in Toronto, Canada in 1994, called *Better Than Life*. It was written by **Daniel Pennac**, a teacher at a Lycee in Paris, and unfortunately out of print (although copies are readily available from any of the out of print Internet search services). In just over 200 pages the author covers such interesting topics as "The Reader's Bill of Rights," "The Necessity of Reading" and "The Gift of Reading." Here is a book, which, opened at almost any page, will provide such gems as "Once we stood before a closed book, our eyes shut. Now we are free to wander among the pages" (p.140). "Life is a per-

petual plot to keep us from reading" (p.145). "Time spent reading, like time spent loving, increases our lifetime" (p.146). "Even adults, though we'd rather not admit it, read diagonally once in a while" (p. 183) and perhaps my favorite: "...unlike good wine, good books don't age. They wait for us on our shelves while we age."(p. 185) This is a good book, one that reminds me of the lines from **Paul Engle's** poem "Library": "Libraries are alive, walls tremble, books Bounce on their shelves. In terrible times Enter, your life comforted by their lives."

Another book on my night stand is **Anna Quindlen's** *How Reading Changed My Life* (1998, Ballantine). Part of their Library of Contemporary Thought series, this equally small (84 page) work by the former *New York Times* columnist and author of the highly praised *Black and Blue*, is a wonderful combination of autobiography, hymn in praise of books and reading, and a selection of eleven reading lists at the end. Here Ms. Quindlen interjects that: "My most satisfying secondhand experiences as a reader have come through recommending books, especially to my children." Using such eye-catching titles as "The 10 Books I Would Save in a Fire (If I Could

Save Only 10)"; "10 Mystery Novels I'd Most Like to Find in a Summer Rental" and "10 Modern Novels That Made Me Proud to Be a Writer," she gives us a wonderful group of titles we all have read, or if we have not, we at least know we wanted to read at some time in the past.

I was especially excited by Ms. Quindlen's description of her encounter with Mrs. LoFurno's book-filled basement. Here she found a book, which she remembers as *I, Natalie*. "For some reason I pored over a novel about an adolescent girl...which I remember today only as being set in a grim block in Poland and including some suggestion of sex, which was always welcome." As Paul Harvey likes to say, here's the rest of the story. The author of *Natalie*, **Alexandra Orme**, was in the early 1960's my German professor at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. Orme was her pen name, we knew her as **Alice DeBarcza**, and I remember that I was most impressed when a classmate told me she was a published author. Frau DeBarcza was the first published author I had met and even then, some thirty-five years ago, I was filled with admiration for anyone who could get published. That admiration has not gone away, and in Ms. Quindlen's brief book, I find yet another reason to admire authors. 🐾

### Life in the Technology- Saturated Shallows from page 39

of a role in Birkerts' argument, which is primarily hammered out at the level of the individual reader awash in ruthless technological change. But Birkerts makes much of the comments of a certain **Robert Zichs**, in charge of special projects for the **Library of Congress**. According to Zichs, libraries will become more like "museums," and big research libraries "will go the way of the railroad stations and the movie palaces of an earlier era [when they were] really vital institutions in their time." Birkerts sees these comments, made by a high-placed official at the institution closest to a national library that the US has, as indicating that the horror of an electronic future is indeed upon us. These words may not ring true, however, to those of us actively engaged in those "big research libraries," where our mission is changing radically, precisely in order to prevent us from becoming museums. Nevertheless, the fundamental point that technology has changed the library's business, and that any library that remains solely a repository of print will indeed become a museum, remains valid.

Despite the lack of discussion of libraries, no librarian (and indeed no one who cares about books) can afford not to read **The Gutenberg Elegies**. Whether you agree with Birkerts or not—whether he strikes you as a prophet or as a blinded reactionary (as

he may well be when he states that "being online and having the subjective experience of depth, of existential coherence, are mutually exclusive situations")—his claims about our culture and the place of the book in it constitute a serious indictment of our techno-obsessed society. What librarian (now as likely to have "information manager" on his or her business card as any form of "librarian") could remain unmoved by Birkerts' "nightmare scenario" of our future: "not one of neotroglydotes grunting and wielding clubs, but of efficient and prosperous information managers living in the shallows of what it means to be human and not knowing the difference."

In his introduction, Birkerts says that "I have not yet given up on the idea that the experience literature offers is a kind of wisdom that cannot be discovered elsewhere; that there is profundity in the verbal encounter itself, never mind what further profundities the author has to offer; and that for a host of reasons the bound book is the ideal vehicle for the written word." Even if technology is not as profoundly detrimental to our culture as Birkerts fears, there is something at stake in our rapid advance into a totally wired society. For those of us who have carved out personal and professional lives built on publication of and access to both books and technology, it may take as much courage to admit this and to fully heed the book's warnings, as it did to write it. 🐾

*The soul of our  
societal body is  
encoded in print.*