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Little Red Herrings — Reading at Risk

by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herrimgm@winthrop.edu>

The National Endowment for the Humanities released a shocking study (Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading) barely two years ago showing a rapid and sharp decline in reading over the last 20 years. Most of that decline has occurred in the last ten years. The percentage of adults who read literature has dropped in the year of the study, 2002, to 46%, down from 57% just twenty years earlier. The drop in reading among 18-24 years olds is even more dramatic. According to Dana Gioia of the NEA, "Literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated especially among the young." Gioia points out that if these trends continue it is not merely a problem of intellectual bankruptcy, it may negatively affect libraries if isn’t already obvious: "Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice." Years of education and practice. When we lose this in our culture, we lose the desire for places to house books, places in which we can engage our minds in a progressive fashion.

Some might argue that literary reading is a different kind of reading and so should not be too alarming. Who really wants to read Wuthering Heights, Browlon, Vanity Fair, or any number of other "boring" books? But it is the very interconnectedness of reading that requires this to be important. One puts down a book as too troublesome and he will later put down a newspaper that may be too challenging. With the newspaper gone, so go newsletters and any other intellectual substance that cannot be digested quickly, easily and in sound bite fashion. Indeed, the NEA survey found that "total book reading is declining significantly." Just how far is this decline? From almost 60% in 1982, to 2002's abysmal 43%, young people have all but quit reading. While one cannot say with certainty why this is, the most obvious reasons for this decline are that students simply cannot read well, combined with an increase in both television and Web surfing. Mark Bauerlein, project manager of the NEA report, blames "the proliferation of Internet, email, iPods, and Blackberries."

Meanwhile, if all of this were not bad news enough, studies of college-age students reveal similar findings: students do not read, do not want to read, and find reading a labor they have to do it. Although sure to be discounted as anecdotal, informal surveys I've conducted with faculty who teach honors students reveal the same sad findings even among the putatively more literate of students. This concurs with the honors students I have taught. Require more than 30 pages a week and one is certain to endure a riot. When combined with the now known fact that the college-aged watch more than three and a half hours of television a day, the recipe for both disaster and illiteracy is very high. When they aren’t watching television they are blogging, or at least most are. Estimates of the almost 32 million blogs on the Web contend that nearly 60% of them are run by 13-19-year olds. Read any 100 of them and literature, or even budding Jack Kerouacs (about whom, if I may remind, Truman Capote said, "[He's] not writing; [he's] typing") do not come to mind. NetGeners, Gen-Xers, students of hover news if or who could be called the news now, are a vocal, often self-assured group but they are not readers or writers in the traditional sense. Before someone argues that this is just the point — they are meant to be unconventional — bear in mind that these unconventional habits are drawing them away from literacy. We live in an age where the culture that built libraries and cherished them has been inherited by one that does not like them and does not care to learn how to use them. That some are seeing libraries as pointless should come as no surprise. Add to this Google's enterprise to put ten million books online and you have a recipe for vanishing libraries.

Nor is it just reading, or its lack, that should trouble us. Many of these same young people are not volunteering, not involved in or with anyone or anything else, and are not well-versed with the real world going on around them. For example, among high Internet users in the young adult category, only 11% use it to keep up with the news. The remaining numbers (82%) said they watch television. About 20% still read a newspaper everyday compared with their peers in 1972, of whom almost half did. Of incoming freshmen at UCLA, only 34% see keeping up with politics as important, about half what it was compared to their hell-no-we-won't-go peers in the 1970s. This might come as good news to those who call them now, as they do get is not entirely limited to The Jon Stewart Show or others like it.

Should we think that this loss in reading is not so big a deal, that same NEA report indicates that declines are present in what many would consider related activities: museum visits, visits to historic sites, or volunteer work? While 96% of the adult population surveyed watch at least one hour of television a day, (and almost half watch three hours or more) only 45% have ever read a play, 17% ever seen a play or an opera, and not even a third have seen a live performing arts activity.

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Lost in Austin — A Tribute to My Friend

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Over the past several years, and with gathering frequency it seems, we lose another friend or colleague and we remember them with tributes, scholarships, and memorials of one kind or another. Sometimes those special colleagues, and all are special in some way, have lived long, productive lives and their contributions have been duly noted and they have been celebrated publicly. Then there are the unexpected and untimely deaths of friends and colleagues still in their prime, still working, still contributing even when suffering from critical, fatal illnesses. I hope that within some private circles, those nearest to them found a way to express fondness and appreciation for them at every possible level. To celebrate in a public way those special people while they are still with us is difficult and somehow inappropriate. You don’t print someone’s obituary while he is alive. And when someone is seriously ill, your main concern is that she regains her health.

A close friend of mine for more than thirty years retired this June. His health is good and I hope that recent changes have given him a new lease on life. He has had an outstanding career and has made lasting contributions to the profession but generally in a quiet, unassuming, behind-the-scenes way. He has much to be proud of and we have many reasons to be proud of him. I want to remember him in a public way while he is able and hearty and getting accustomed to the freedom of retirement that he has worked so hard for and earned so deservedly.

I first met him in 1973 when I began my professional career as head of the Gifts & Exchange Division of the Stanford University Libraries. My division was part of the Acquisitions Department and so was his Order Division of which he was head.

We had both worked at the Bancroft Library, he as a beginning librarian, I as a library assistant and graduate student at UC Berkeley, so we had that in common, but what drew us together was that infallible something that is essential for a true friendship and a true mentor/protége relationship. I am proud to number myself among his protégés and proud to acknowledge my debt to him.

I really don’t recall how we began taking coffee and lunch breaks together but it probably stemmed from the technical services meetings that were held and that involved all unit heads. And I was new and I needed guidance. He took me under his wing and we talked shop, mostly, as often as we got together and I was able to learn a lot about library acquisitions and the importance of the bibliographic tools and records that we used. I also learned about selection tools and the importance of involvement in the American Library Association and its Resources and Technical Services Division — RTSD (now ALCTS). He had already published a couple of articles (David Weber and Allen Vener also encouraged professional activities and writing by support and by demonstration).

Soon after my arrival at Stanford, the Richard Abel Company closed its doors and Stanford, with a healthy acquisitions budget, had many outstanding orders. I was able to watch, up close and personal, how to respond to a crisis in a calm, thoughtful way. Our department head, Ralph Hansen, was unfappable and cool under fire and so was my mentor.

We got along personally and socially, exchanging dinners at each other’s homes. He got me involved in the Freshman Advisory Program at Stanford and introduced me to booksellers who called on him at the time — Fred Guillette, Don Coombs, Aaron Sati, and Phil Fectau. Fred Guillette also became a mentor of sorts when I became head of acquisitions at another western school and he would call on me and talk about publishers and prices among other things.

It was during my second year at Stanford that the Watergate hearings began and it became obvious that we were on different sides of the political spectrum, but when we discussed the pros and cons of Richard Milhous Nixon, we did so as friends and respected our conflicting opinions. He recently made it pointedly clear to me that with years and wisdom to consider his original political leanings, he now finds himself very discouraged by the direction of the United States and has not voted for a Republican for the last five elections.

He also encouraged me to attend the ALA Annual Conference and Midwinter Meeting. The first one that I attended was in 1975 in San Francisco. He and I commuted for several days running. That was the beginning of many years of joint participation in many RTSD activities and vendor hospitality suites. We roomed together, too, for many years, along with a third roommate to make ends meet. I think that one of them actually roomed with us twice. One of them quit going to ALA completely after being exposed to more single malt Scotch whiskey than he could handle. He was a reference librarian and had never been drinking with Jamie Galbreath before and never went again.

I will miss seeing my friend at conferences but I won’t forget him or his contributions. If I had my druthers, he would be recognized by ALCTS for his contributions and he would have a chance to say a few words, but I won’t forget him and would like to highlight his career while there are still a few of us left who remember

Author’s Note: This column is part of a chapter from a forthcoming book. — MH

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Some will doubtless claim that this is simply a snob factor. Only the hoytio-toity bother to do such things anyway. This is just a report indicating that people are no longer elitist, we’ll be told. This charge may well be true but it is the contention here that libraries are, for better or for worse, considered an “elitist” activity. Furthermore there is now evidence that this decline in reading and in cultural activities in general is affecting other areas. A new report from Great Britain reveals what many have long thought: children are less academically able than they used to be, especially in math skills and scientific knowledge. The report indicates that UK 11-12 year olds are now on average two or three years behind where that same age group was only 15 years ago. Does anyone need to be reminded that 15 years ago neither this country, nor the UK was routinely generating many would-be math or science geniuses? To say the picture is bleak one is an understatement.

But the picture is bleaker still. New reports indicate that while young girls may be lagging in the hard sciences, young boys are behind in nearly every subject. A national hand-wringing has occurred over the lack of young women entering the hard sciences. Deafening silence over the state of young boys, save for those arguing against the report at all. In a 100-plus page report examining academic progress by gender, we find young boys are 50% more likely than girls to repeat elementary grades, more than one-third more likely to drop out of high school, and twice as likely as girls to be identified with a learning disability. In only ten years — 1992-2002, girls have out preformed their male counterparts in reading and writing by a widening and disheartening margin. By the time they reach high school, assuming they do, they are far less likely to be considered “college material” than females. It’s too early to say what the problem is precisely, but some early studies indicate that it may well have something to do with too much time in front of the television, too much time on the Internet, and too much time with video games and iPods.

So, what has this to do with libraries? I would say everything. If you aren’t looking over your shoulder (and aren’t one or two years from retirement) it may serve you well to think more seriously about the unintended consequences of our rush to all things digital.

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