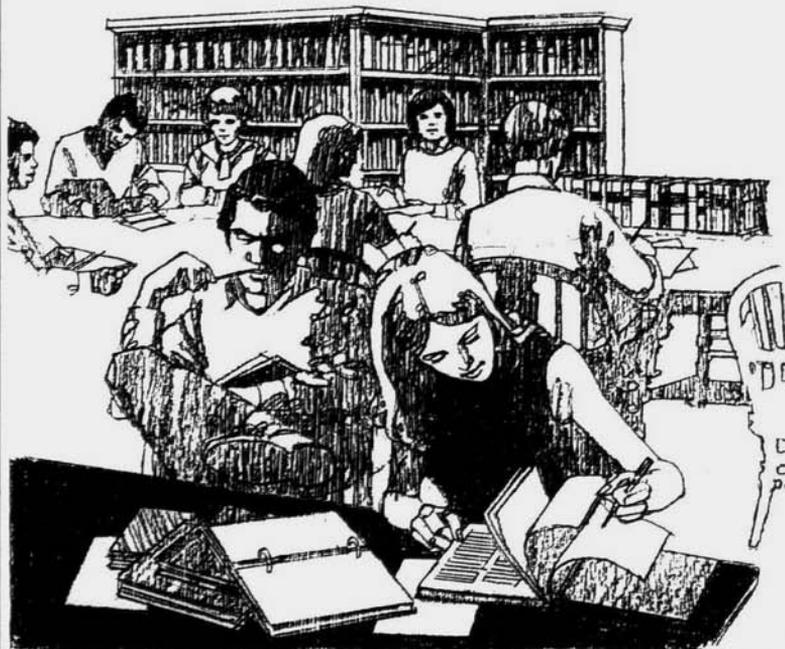


Reading: Ave Atque Vale

We will always need to know how to read, but our cozy nights before the fire with Kipling or Bronte are quickly dying embers.



ANN DONOVAN

Why are we teaching reading? Twenty years ago it was "for-survival." People in businesses and the professions agreed that their practitioners and support staff needed to read and write, preferably better than the newer entrants appeared able to do. Educators and the concerned public took up the cry. Everyone needed to read. Housewives, construction workers, truck drivers, sales persons, everyone, needed to read recipes, directions, road signs, applications, contracts, and all that makes up our daily round. Somewhat apologetically, we also admitted it could become fun, and that vicarious experiences through reading were among the pleasures some people ranked very highly.

Kenneth Goodman, in his 1982 president's address to the International Reading Association, argued urgently against the decline of reading. He pointed out that "computers have not replaced written language; rather they have created new ways of composing and storing written text."¹ He listed five functions of literacy to buttress his argument. The first was situational, the second informational, and the third occupational. In fourth position was recreational, and he hastened to assure us that "many people choose to read from the broad variety of nonfiction in their leisure."² The last function, rather a doubtful one, is called ritualistic. So much for the place of recreational reading. Still it was necessary to read, we thought, and to read pretty well.

We are still stressing this need to read, and assuming that delight will follow. I begin to suspect that this is a dangerous ploy, which may boomerang once it becomes really clear that reading

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for survival requires only minimal competence. Even those of us who love to read, who are addicted to reading, who can hardly stop reading long enough to deal with daily life, read less rather than more these days. Why? Although reading occupies a larger and larger share of the elementary curriculum, daily life seems to require less reading than ever—at least in proportion to the amount that now exists to be read. Children are being taught more words in more readers than ever before; more schools have some sort of library collection and/or reading specialist than formerly; the children's book publishing industry appears to be thriving. It would seem that children, at least, are now reading more. But are they really? What about the monumental drop-off in adolescent public library readers? Do they come back later as literate adult members of society demanding food for thought and pleasure?

Have we succeeded in creating an appetite for the printed word, or simply a minimal skill, like do-it-yourself car repair and consumer awareness? Is reading *Harriet the Spy* more fun than playing Pac-Man? Is reading or watching *Hamlet* more rewarding than catching "Dallas"? Just where is the literary life in our own scheme of things? What do we consider "literature," anyway, when the December 1982 Literary Guild presented a choice between Harold Robbins' *Spellbinders* and Victoria Holt's *The Demon Lover*? Can we teach children to love that which we do not cherish and practice ourselves? How many reading teachers rush home and read? How many need to build ever more bookshelves in their homes?

The Rise of the Nonreading Student
Americans have never distinguished themselves en masse as literati, but things now seem to be reaching an

alarming nadir. My own experience bears this out. Lecturing to a children's literature class of elementary education majors, I showed them Rosemary Wells' *Don't Spill It Again, James* and remarked on the bedtime section entitled "Good-night, Sweet Prince." Not one of the 30-plus students could identify the source of the quotation. I now content myself with giving future teachers practical insights into children's and adolescent literature. But it is very lonely, thinking of all the beauties and delights passing from our culture. The students, of course, get younger every year, but there are also fewer to whom *Alice, Kidnapped, Winnie the Pooh* are known except as vague names or Disney creations. Frederick Crew's *The Pooh Perplex* has become indecipherable instead of hilarious. Of course, there are and always will be the few who *have* read, but they wring one's heart because one senses that they have read almost accidentally and at random—so willing, but with more and more distractions and less and less encouragement and modeling. Professors tell me many undergraduates have read almost nothing of the world's great literature, past or present. I am convinced that we are becoming a nation of nonreaders in the sense of having read something of consequence.

In a 1983 National Assessment report on reading comprehension, a panel member observed:

Students who do not read or who read non-fiction exclusively deprive themselves of those literary materials that seem critical to the education of the imagination and to higher order skills of reading. Thus it is not surprising that their performance is lower than those who read fiction or poetry or both fiction and non-fiction.¹

The report found that white females scored consistently higher on the reading comprehension exercises, although males closed the gap on expository (as

contrasted to literary) passages. That reading of fiction/literature is considered a "feminine" activity appears to be at the root of this discrepancy, causing interpreter Dorothy Stricklan to note that "Voluntary reading of a wide variety of expository and literary works enhances all aspects of reading achievement."⁴

NAEP's tests of reading progress since 1970 show overall gains for 9-year-olds, little change for 13-year-olds, and a slight downward progress for 17-year-olds. The last is most pronounced in the areas of inferential comprehension.

In 1982 SAT scores rose for the first time in 19 years, but by only two points on the verbal over 1981 scores, which were 50 points below 1963 scores: 1982-426; 1963-478.⁵ We know many socio-educational reasons for this decline, and the current rise, we hope, is the culmination at last of more equitable education. Still, the next years will have new perils to these rising levels.

In 1979 W. T. Bolton found that the typical public library user is young, college educated, and in the middle to upper income level. She constitutes about 21 percent of the population; her nonuser counterpart runs to a full 36 percent. The study linked active participation, overall, to higher library use. The only activities closely associated with nonuse were television related.⁶ I suspect this will shortly become linked to computer use and availability of information-providing equipment as well.

A 1978 American Library Association sponsored Gallup Poll supported this profile in general, but identified the "heavy" reader—21-plus books read in the preceding year—as female. Interestingly the "heavy" library user (the 9 percent who visited the library about once every two weeks on the average) proved to be male, but otherwise similar to the "heavy" reader who followed Bolton's general description.⁷ This

shows an interesting contrast in terms of sex between reading for pleasure and seeking information, which bears out the findings of the NAEP. Pleasure reading is a feminine, fourth-rate activity in our society, and our educational attitudes bear this out.

Literacy vs. Computer Literacy?

What is the remedy for this appalling situation? How can we make lovers of literature out of undergraduates and send them into school classrooms ready to light similar fires among *their* students? After worrying this question over for several years, I have concluded that we cannot do it in our present social situation, nor is it likely that the trends working to reinforce this condition will reverse themselves.

What then will happen? In my opinion, nothing at all. School textbooks grow thicker—800 to 900 pages for social studies, 500 to 600 pages for intermediate basal readers. Library shelves are full before the newness has worn off the buildings. But more and more textbooks are written at below-grade reading level, and fewer and fewer are possible to cover by the term's end. We are told that in coming times the information elite, the possessors, will rule us all because they will have the economic means to access this information. Indeed, no one can encompass the work now published even in his or her own field, no matter how specialized. We are drowning in information that most of us do not use and probably hardly realize we might need. And this is the key.

As Carlton Rochell points out,

Everything labeled "information" today is not worth assimilating. . . . Some say the new information technologies provide "access to excess." We know, for example, that the driving force behind present home computer sales is games—war games.⁸

He quotes other sources to prove what we all increasingly feel: guilt that we are

“Rochell quotes other sources to prove what we all increasingly feel: guilt that we are not wanting to know as much as we can in our information-rich world.”

not, in fact, wanting to know as much as we can in our information-rich world. Of course, some of us do not feel guilty. Like students who have not read *Hamlet*, we are blithely unaware of any lack or lapse. If the information we need for daily life comes to us in easy ways, so much the better. As early as 1970 Ivan Illich made it very clear that schools do and teach many things, but that much learning occurs as a byproduct of some other activity.⁹ We are becoming a very busy people who enjoy an active leisure. With even more free time, we need to recharge our energies by being spectators rather than readers. Consider these relative values in our society: watching a soccer game, playing soccer, or reading about soccer (even nonfiction). Most people, and certainly most parents, would say that doing is preferable to either of the other options, and watching better than reading.

Surely it is clear that electronic information will short-circuit reading. Dial up the news, go to a movie, program your oven, phone your library. No

need, really, to phone. Just hook up your terminal. For example,

OCLC, Inc., is developing a prototype of a computer-based library service in which computerized data bases of encyclopedias and reference information on a variety of subjects will be available for public use.

Or, at "Maggie's Place" in Colorado,

Home users dial 471-CALL, get the carrier (a whistle), put in their identification number (library card number), and select from a menu . . . INVENTORY is PPLD's {Pike's Peak Library District} online catalog of over 400,000 books. . . .¹¹

More simple still is the Evanston, Illinois, Public Library's catalog, which apparently is so interesting to access that some young patrons prefer searching to reading.

Since October 6, 1980 they {patrons} have been locating library material through . . . a touch-sensitive on-line alternative to the card catalog. . . .¹²

When the reporter doing the story asked an 8-year-old at the terminal why he had been there for an hour, he replied, "It's fun." Reading skills acquired, yes. But reading? A slow and cumbersome activity.

Word processors now correct our misspellings in a dozen languages. Computers look up citations for our research. Homes are secured and run by computers. A fine example of this was reported by the *80-U.S. Journal* in 1981. One Walt Bolden achieved the home of his dreams, which was indeed an ambitious project.

Some of the things he wanted were automatic wake-up alarm with a human-sounding voice, lights that came on and turned off again as he walked through a room, and a water overflow alarm system . . . also full security against unauthorized entry and an automatic sprinkling system . . . {and} the very latest in solar heating, and this too, was to be computer controlled.¹³

Audio, video, and CAI teach us more patiently than any text or human. Videodisc technology is being embraced

by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, National Geographic, The Children's Television Workshop, World Book, Houghton Mifflin, University of Nebraska, ABC's Wide World of Learning in cooperation with the NEA, and Encyclopedia Britannica.¹⁴

The light pen records our transactions, a monitor diagnoses and records our ills, and a finger touch on the CRT screen plots our graphs and produces our art. We listen to novels as we drive to work,¹⁵ and the reading machine for the visually disabled will talk to anyone. Road and building signs which once said "no parking," "men," and so on are now little pictographs worthy of ancient peoples before the advent of alphabets. Need I speak of the poaching of film and T.V. on the printed word, resulting in that final insult, the novel made from the movie?

Surely it is fairly clear that reading to survive is no longer a viable argument for reading facility. But I would not want you to think that I believe reading will die away altogether. No indeed! It will remain alive and well, cherished by a few, among whom will be old and young alike. Perhaps an analogy will explain. At one time, a knowledge of Latin was the mark of a civilized individual. Especially in England, from whence we draw the larger share of our institutionalized culture, the children of anyone with pretensions to class status, culture, learning, or even professional aspirations went to schools where Latin was a standard of the curriculum. No one spoke Latin, and few needed to read it, although there was the odd general, doctor, lawyer, or even farmer who took to it for pleasure and continued a lifetime of reading classical literature. But it was considered a cultural lingua franca, with Greek thrown in for the really enthusiastic or serious. Years of reading, writing, and Latin produced a polished if seriously irrelevant graduate whose

memoirs read beautifully even when dull. In the name of a proper education and status even the intellectually slow made an effort or were forced to do so.

For some time this emphasis was also found in the schools in the United States. But our pragmatic society soon began to see the role of schools as social elevator rather than social separator. The curriculum changed; Latin has dwindled with no great loss to anyone. It still exists, to be sure. After all, we still have many students and teachers of Latin. They have conferences, issue publications, and recruit with cyclical success among the young. We all know what Latin was, that it forms a large part of our present language, and we probably even know a few words—ergo, etcetera, quid pro quo, habeas corpus, and so on—but we manage just fine without much more.

Such will be the fate of reading, and even more, of literature. Beyond the minimum necessary to daily life, decreasing as we have seen, reading as a pleasure or as a study, will go the way of Latin—acknowledged, respected, vaguely a part of our lives, but essentially of interest to academics and those aspiring to intellectual elitism. It may grieve us living now, but we can console ourselves that those who have lost it will never miss it as our society makes increasing information more immediately relevant and more variously accessible. For my own part, I shall pass the time with a good book—Gibbon maybe. But perhaps some of you prefer to light the proverbial candle. You are convinced one only needs to know, to experience, the joys of literature to become a reader. You bridle at my accusations and predictions and point to the successful converts you have made over the years. I salute your efforts and hope you are right, but twilight comes and I have grave doubts. Thus, I will only wish you good luck and say, in the

words of a learned academic, "O lente, lente currite noctis equi."¹⁶ □

¹⁴Kenneth S. Goodman, *Celebrate Literacy* (Newark: International Reading Association, 1982), p. 1.

¹⁵Goodman, p. 3.

¹⁶National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Reading Comprehension of American Youth*, Education Commission of the States, Report No. 11-R-02, July 1982, p. 3.

¹⁷*Reading Comprehension of American Youth*, p. 25.

¹⁸*Facts on File*, October 15, 1982, p. 762 A 2.

¹⁹W. Theodore Bolton, "Life Style Research," *Library Journal* (May 15, 1982): 965.

²⁰Gallup Organization, Inc., *Book Reading and Library Usage: A Study of Habits and Perceptions* (Princeton: The American Library Association, 1978), p. 5.

²¹Carlton Rochell, "Telematics—2001 A.D.," *Library Journal* (October 1, 1982): 1810.

²²Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970). In addition, Vincent Giuliano observes, "Reading is not now, and never was, the way most people get information that counts to them," in "A Manifesto for Librarians," *Library Journal* (September 15, 1979): 1839.

²³OCLC and Arctis Company Develop Computer Aid," *School Library Journal* (January 1981): 17.

²⁴Carol E. Emmens, "About Maggie's Place," *School Library Journal* (September 1982): 53.

²⁵Susan Spaeth Cherry, "The Moving Finger 'Accesses,'" *American Libraries* (January 1981): 184.

²⁶"The Computerized Home," 80-U.S. *Journal* (November/December 1981): 20.

²⁷Carol E. Emmens, "Videodisc Software: Current Developments," *School Library Journal* (1982): 39.

²⁸Certainly a better idea than what one recent *Times* of London correspondent reported seeing among the rush hour traffic: a number of drivers reading en route to work! But more about the British anon.

²⁹See Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, edited by John D. Jump (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 100.

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