

READING AT RISK: A Survey of Literary Reading in America

How Can We Teach Them Shakespeare When They've Never Read Chaucer?

Harold Bloom

Thursday's announcement by the National Endowment for the Arts that reading is down—that fewer than half of all Americans over the age of 18 now read novels, plays, short stories or poetry, and that only 56.9% have read any book at all in the last year—is, of course, to be abhorred. But to call it news, I think, is wrong.

This country, after all, has been split into two cultures for many years. If you go back through the history of literacy in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries, you'll see that we've always been divisible into readers and nonreaders.

Who are the readers and who are the nonreaders? It's not as simple as you might think. It's not a distinction that goes by social class, and it doesn't go by income group. It isn't a male thing or a female thing or a matter of sexual orientation or so-called white or so-called black. It's a broad generic distinction between the people who have a fundamental passion for books and those who don't.

We haven't yet found an adequate way to explain it and, frankly, I'm not sure that even education can affect it.

I know the children of many faculty members at Yale, for instance, who have grown up in houses just like my own, which has about 35,000 books in it, and still they have never become readers. But I also have many students who grew up poor with few books in the house but who have developed a voracious hunger for them.

If there *is* a drop-off in reading today, it's partly because it's so much harder to become a reader than it used to be. In my generation (I'm going to celebrate my 74th birthday soon), we had radio. We had movies. But there was no television. There were no computers. So as a child, I read all the time. I read in bed and out of bed. I read whenever I could sneak off, whenever I could get to a corner by myself.

Ancient Book of the Month Clubs



Today, according to the NEA, the average American child lives in a home with 2.9 television sets, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video-game players and one computer. It's no wonder that the heads of so many Americans are stuffed with pointless information. It's no wonder that the rate of reading is steadily dropping.

Today, according to the study, only one-third of American males read "literature" (which they have defined so broadly that it includes writers like Stephen King and Danielle Steele).

Although there have always been readers and nonreaders, it is certainly true that today's students arrive at college less prepared for the study of literature than comparable students 30 years ago or 50 years ago.


I teach a course on how to read a poem. And I teach Shakespeare. Fall term: comedies, histories and poetry. Spring term: romances and tragedies.

I've learned in the last 15 years not to assume anything. Unless students are religious, I can't take the Bible for granted. I can't say "this has some relation to the Book of Job" because they might not know what that is.

I can't assume they've read Chaucer, either. And it's very hard to get started on Shakespeare if you haven't read Chaucer.

It used to be that you could be pretty sure that either on their own or in a good secondary school they would have read "The Iliad" or "The Odyssey." Not anymore. Now you have to send them to read it, along with "The Canterbury Tales" and the Book of Job.

They'll go, of course, and they'll read it. And they'll grasp it immediately. They're just as bright as always. But shouldn't they know it already?

It's going to be very difficult to change this; perhaps it will never be changed. But I do wish we could keep computers out of their secondary and primary education, and out of their libraries. It would be so much better for them and for all of us. 

*

Harold Bloom is a professor of humanities at Yale University, a literary critic and author of "The Western Canon" (Riverhead Books, 1995).



National Endowment for the Arts
A Great Nation Deserves Great Art

Literary Reading Is Declining
Faster Than Before,
Arts Endowment's New Report Says

Scott McLemee

The populace of the United States may be divided by race, age, gender, region, income, and educational level. But according to a report released on Thursday by the National Endowment for the Arts, there is at least one thing that brings us all together: No group reads as much literature as it once did. If present trends continue, our aliteracy will only deepen over the next generation. After all, the steepest decline in reading has occurred among young adults, ages 18 to 24.

"The concerned citizen in search of good news about American literary culture will study the pages of this report in vain," writes Dana Gioia, chairman of the NEA, in the preface to "Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America."

The report—an electronic copy of which is available on the endowment's Web site (requires Adobe Reader, available free) draws on interviews with more than 17,000 adults conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in August 2002 as part of its Survey on Public Participation in the Arts. Similar surveys were conducted at the request of the NEA in 1982 and 1992. Mr. Gioia calls the poll "as reliable and objective as any such survey can be" and "a comprehensive factual basis for any informed discussion of current American reading habits."

Some 300 people gathered on Thursday in an auditorium of the main branch of the New York Public Library to hear Mr. Gioia's presentation of the report's statistical data and a panel discussion of its implications.

Announcing the unhappy news at a public library would be a fitting and poignant gesture in any case. All the more so at the institution that served as a *de facto* university for the self-education of generations of immigrants and their children. It was in a reading room not far from the auditorium that, during the 1930s, Alfred Kazin wrote *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature*, first published in 1942. As more than one person in the audience at Thursday's gathering said, the cultural situation revealed by the NEA survey called to mind a very different book—Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985).

The findings in the report show a steady drop, over two decades, in the percentage of Americans who read books of any sort—with a much steeper decline in the consumption of literature. (The report defines literature as fiction, poetry, and drama, without regard to genre or quality.) In 1992, for example, 60.9 percent of those surveyed indicated that they had read a book of some sort during the previous year. By 2002, that figure had shrunk to 56.6 percent, a decline of 7 percent.

When asked about literature in particular, the change was even more marked. In 1992, 54 percent of respondents indicated they had read a literary work of some kind. That proportion fell to 46.7 percent in 2002, a decrease of almost 14 percent. Besides declining twice as fast as book reading in general, literary reading appears to have taken an especially hard hit over the past decade. From 1982 to 1992, it decreased by a mere 5 percent—a rate that has accelerated, the report suggests, with the "cumulative presence and availability" of "an enormous array of electronic media."

The figures in the new report show considerable variation in reading habits across demographic categories. Higher income and educational levels correspond to higher percentages of literature consumption, for example. Gender made a difference, too: 55.1 percent of women reported in 2002 that they had read literature over the previous year, while only 37.6 percent of men did. And among respondents identifying themselves as white, 51.4 percent reported reading literature—nearly twice the rate among Hispanics, at 26.5 percent. The corresponding figure for African-Americans was 37.1 percent, while those tabulated as "other" came in at 43.7 percent.

A Vacuum Among the Young

More striking than any variation across demographic lines, however, is a remarkable consistency that has emerged over the last two decades. Each segment of the population is reading less than it once did.

"Due to higher overall levels of education in America over the past 20 years and the correlation between literature participation and education," the NEA report states, "one might think there would have been an increase in the popularity of literature since 1982." But analysis of the survey data shows that "literary reading rates decreased for men, women, all ethnic and racial groups, all education groups, and all age groups."

The steepest decline—and the one that the report notes with most alarm—has occurred among young adults. In 1982, respondents ages 18 to 34 were the group most likely to report the recreational reading of literature. Over the intervening decades, they have become the group least likely to do so (except for some segments of the population over 65).

The change has been particularly striking among those ages 18 to 24. The report says that, over the past two decades, the share of the adult population engaged in literary reading declined by 18 percent, from 56.9 percent in 1982 to percent in 2002. But for the 18-to-24 cohort, the drop has been faster, sinking from 59.8 percent to 42.8 percent, a decline of 28 percent.

"Reading at Risk" states that the trends among young readers (or, perhaps, nonreaders) suggest that "unless some effective solution is found, literary culture, and literacy in general, will continue to worsen."

"Indeed, at the current rate of loss," it says, "literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century."

Problems but No Solutions

Beyond noting that "arts agencies and policy makers may want to target Hispanics for programs to raise literary reading rates," the report contains no specific policy recommendations. When asked this week about that seeming oversight, Mr. Gioia responded, "That was a deliberate decision on my part. My sense is that the National Endowment for the Arts shouldn't try to tell the culture what to do, or not to do."

Mr. Gioia said that the report can have its best effect by provoking a national debate on the situation. He stressed the importance of the report's finding of high correlations between the reading of literature, on the one hand, and museum attendance, support for the performing arts, and volunteer work for charity organizations, on the other.

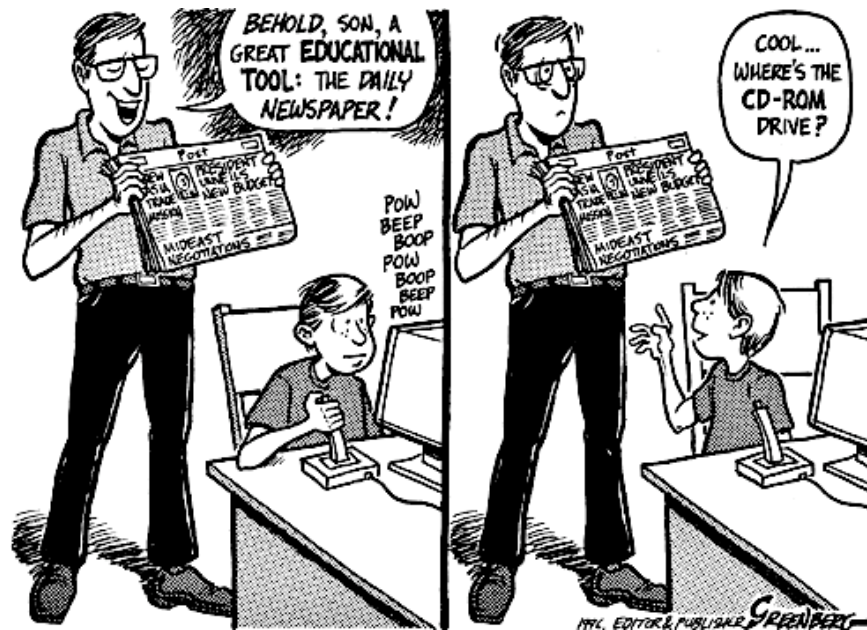
"We find that literary reading correlates—not in a rough sense but almost in an identical sense—with civic and cultural engagement," said Mr. Gioia. "So the decline that we see in reading has not only

cultural consequences, but social and civic consequences that are very frightening for a democracy."

Sven Birkerts, the author of *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (1994), cautioned against interpreting the decline in purely quantitative terms, "as in, time given to the screen is time away from books." He cited the pervasive cultural changes wrought by "the great momentum that underlies our turn to all things digital," as he put it in an e-mail message.

"If it's perceptibly harder for me, a dedicated humanist type, to decelerate into a thick book I'm interested in—harder because I, too, want my results more quickly, in less linear form—I try to imagine the average 17-year-old who has just been assigned some brick of a novel by her sadistic senior English teacher."

Mr. Gioia said that the NEA would be holding meetings around the country to discuss the report with groups such as the Modern Language Association, the American Booksellers Association, and professional organizations for librarians.



"If literary intellectuals—writers, scholars, librarians, book people in general—don't take charge of the situation, our culture will be impoverished," Mr. Gioia said, describing that situation as a crisis. "When you look at the figures for young readers, that says to me that we don't have a lot of time."

Seeking a Call to Arms

The gathering at the New York Public Library was an early taste of what such a national discussion might be like. "Each of us has anecdotes" about the current state of literary culture, said Mr. Gioia in his presentation. "But quantifying it shows that the trends are worse than you imagined."

Mr. Gioia, a poet and literary critic, mentioned that for 15 years of his literary career he had "kept body and soul together" as a business executive—and that he knew his way around a statistical analysis of trends. Armed with a laser pointer, he went through the major graphs and tables from the report. Figures that seemed dismal enough on the printed page looked positively alarming when projected upon a giant screen.

In the audience, one could hear the occasional gasp—especially at seeing the downward slope of literary readership among young adults from 1982 to 1992, followed by a much sharper dip from 1992 to 2002. "This," Mr. Gioia said, "is the visual trend of an activity that is going out of existence."

But not everyone listening to the presentation responded with alarm. During an intermission, Andrew Delbanco, a professor of humanities at Columbia University, called the event "a jeremiad," referring to a genre of sermon regularly practiced by the Puritans, in which the sins of the community were recited and lamented.

"Traditionally," Mr. Delbanco said, "the form ends with a moral call to arms, rousing the congregation to put things right." He said that it sounded as if Mr. Gioia might have some notion of what would be required to correct the situation, and that he was curious to hear what this might entail. (Mr. Delbanco, who is writing a book about Herman Melville, did not deny that the statistics were depressing, but his sardonic manner implied that devotion to literature in the United States today requires an Ishmael-like acceptance that the ship has already sunk.)

After the intermission, a panel discussion that Mr. Gioia led suggested some of the directions that public discussion of the report might take. One consequence may be that people already enamored of literature will want to proclaim that fact all the more clearly, in defiance of the prevailing trend.


Paula Dietz, editor of *The Hudson Review*, recalled her own experience of reading as a child and quoted Henry David Thoreau as saying, "How many a man has dated a new era in his life from the reading of a book!" Similarly, the novelist Andrew Solomon quoted Franz Kafka on how a book should serve as "an ax that breaks up the frozen sea inside us."

It was not clear from such remarks just how to persuade people not already wielding a literary ice-ax that the frozen sea required them to do so.

Other panelists offered remarks that were somewhat more practical, occasionally verging on the political. Mitchell Kaplan, president of the American Booksellers Association, proposed finding ways to get writers on book tours to visit public schools. Young people, he said, need to grow up "seeing that books and literary authors are *alive*."

James McBride, author of the best-selling memoir *The Color of Water*, said that the public must "demand that government give librarians—who are the last line of the defense of reason in this society—more money and more freedom." That remark drew a warm response from the audience, which Mr. McBride acknowledged: "I see the librarians out there going, 'Yeah.'"

Richard Reyes-Gavilan, a supervising librarian at the New York Public Library, pointed out that the electronic media have become a basic part of the menu of information sources that libraries offer to the public—which, in turn, can make them an attractive place for young people. He quoted an e-mail message from a colleague who said that a "teen center" at one library was attracting adolescents who "eventually get bored with the technology, so they take a look at the books."

It might be discouraging to think of literature as the distraction of last resort, Mr. Reyes-Gavilan said. "But if we have to trick people into reading, we're happy to do that." 

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