



The Reason for Reading

Behind the current decline in literacy is the notion that it is not important to read. It is, of course, but how can this fallacy be squelched? Perhaps by convincing people that they don't know what they're missing. Reading does you good while making you feel good, too . . .

□ A whole generation has come to maturity since Hilda Neatby of the University of Saskatchewan first launched her campaign to reform the English-Canadian educational system. Her 1953 book *So Little for the Mind* drew sharp attention to a decline in literacy among schoolchildren, and recommended measures to reverse the trend. Her revelations sent a tremor of distress coursing through the country, but they aroused more talk than action. Now a new generation is in our schools; and, by Dr. Neatby's standards, its members are being given less for the mind than before she sounded her alarm.

It is thus with a weary sense of *déjà vu* that we hear today that universities must place first-year students in remedial courses to teach them to read and write proficiently, and that employers must train recruits in the fundamentals of their own born languages. Junior college teachers complain more than ever that youths come to them from high schools unable to read past the comic book level or to write a coherent line. One teacher recently reported, only half in jest, that the first completely grammatical English sentence written by a student of his institution in 10 years had been discovered on the wall of a washroom. Subject, predicate and all, it ran: "Reading stinks."

We are not talking here of the millions of Canadians who are totally illiterate because of a lack of education, social advantages, or because of learning disabilities. We are talking about young people who have at least passed out of primary schools.

How can it be that a person can reach high school — let alone university — without being able to comprehend simply written language? Critics of the educational system put it down to a de-emphasis on intellectual achievement in favour of social and physical development. They say that a fascination on the part of educational bureaucrats with technology and "pop psychology" detracts from the teaching of language skills.

Whatever the specific causes, it all seems to come down to the widespread notion that the ability to read and write past the rudimentary stage is not very important. Even less importance is attached to the cultivation of the kind of advanced literacy which enables readers to absorb and enjoy quality books and magazines.

Reading seems to have gone out of style, partly because it is not necessary to read anything beyond the literature of one's occupation in order to make a decent living. The increasing specialization of the workplace has decreased the demand for the general knowledge that arises from regularly reading books.

Even reading purely for instruction, as opposed to reading to make oneself a well-rounded human being, is no longer as necessary as it once was. The micro-computer has reduced peoples' dependence on reference books by making it possible to "access" information that used to be available only in printed form.

It might be said that reading is directly connected to writing, and that it is necessary to be

able to write properly to do many jobs effectively. But the computer seems to have started to take care of this as well. Software programs are available which correct common spelling and grammatical mistakes.

Anyway, who needs to write in order to communicate nowadays? Except for special commercial and legal purposes, people are not obliged to send each other letters anymore. In Canada and other developed countries, they can always deliver their messages over the telephone. When they must send memos, they can write them any which-ways and later clarify orally what they intended to say.

Sophisticated literacy has also taken a beating from a change in attitudes. A well-rounded education no longer confers a social cachet. No special value is attached to being articulate, which is a mark of having read widely. There is no particular incentive in terms of social acceptance for people to read books or anything else.

A broad vocabulary built up through reading was once required to express oneself without looking like a fool in the eyes of acquaintances. An easy toleration of bad grammar, vulgarities and obscenities in so-called polite discourse has lessened the need for precise speech. As soldiers and sailors have always known, two or three obscenities employed in different grammatical configurations can cover a great deal of verbal territory. These are now used freely in place of more exact words in circumstances where such language was formerly forbidden.

We seemed to have almost come to the juncture where the former social advantages of being well-read have turned into liabilities. To exercise an extensive vocabulary and display a broad knowledge of the world smacks of elitism in an age of equality. People who know how to use a language felicitously find themselves loath to do so for fear of being thought of as snobbish. At a time when university professors and advertising executives dress (and often talk) like lumberjacks, to identify oneself with the intellectual elite is at least as anti-social as it was to identify with the illiterate masses of an earlier age.

The trend away from reading is such that it is even considered vaguely unhealthy. The current preoccupation with physical fitness has lent a touch of self-reproach to the hitherto-blameless activity of sitting and reading a book. People today are terribly concerned with what is "good" for them in their diets and other habits; is it "good" for you to be indulging in such a sedentary pastime when you could be out playing squash or jogging? Sir Richard Steele wrote that reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body; to be "with it" today is to place exercising the body ahead of exercising the mind.

If one is unconventional enough to choose to sit and relax, there are far less demanding modes of entertainment than reading. No strenuous mental effort is required to amuse oneself watching whatever happens to be on the television screen. For those with more selective tastes — plus the price of a video recorder — a great variety of tapes are available showing everything from classic silent movies to the gyrations of the latest rock stars. The advent of this new electronic equipment has led to the speculation that books may go the way of sheet music. At one time it was common for middle class people to read music and play it on the piano. The phonograph and later the radio had the effect of confining the knack of reading music to a small, mainly professional, group.

Will the same thing happen to the written word as happened to written music? The answer is "no" for precisely the same reason as literacy became general in western nations less than a century ago. Then, the industrial revolution raised a demand for workers to have sufficient command of language to follow written work orders. With automation taking over in offices, industrial plants, and even the neighbourhood store and garage, the need for literacy is greater than ever — even though the words which workers must read may appear not on paper, but on video terminal displays.

So reading clearly is here to stay, if only for practical reasons. The great question for the future of economics, politics and culture in the western world is not whether people will be able to read, but *what* they will read. If they only read enough to do their jobs, economic progress could be impeded by

poor communications and a paucity of the disciplined imagination that makes for innovative progress. Mere functional literacy will do nothing to further our quality of life.

In political terms, a public which habitually reads intelligent books, newspapers and magazines is an informed public — informed beyond the fleeting glimpses of current affairs presented on television. A reading public is a knowledgeable and thoughtful public, capable of seeing the issues before it in the perspective of history and of differing points of view.

The well-springs of education and enlightenment are in print

What Charles Dickens had to say about the role of printing in society in the mid-19th century has lost none of its validity in the post-industrial era: "The printer is the friend of intelligence, of thought; he is the friend of liberty, of freedom, of law; indeed the printer is the friend of every man who is the friend of order . . . Of all the inventions, of all the great results in the wonderful progress of mechanical energy and skill, the printer is the only product of civilization necessary to the existence of free man."

"It is an axiom in political science that unless a people are educated and enlightened, it is idle to expect the continuance of civil liberty or the capacity of self-government," stated the Texas Declaration of Independence. That axiom still holds, and the well-springs of education and enlightenment are still in pages of print.

For proof of this we need only look at places where political freedom has perished. Totalitarianism feeds on ignorance and illiteracy. Oppressive regimes invariably ban books and censor newspapers. They are able to maintain tight control over television and radio broadcasting, but not over the print media, because the printed word is portable. As books, newspapers and pamphlets are passed from hand to hand, the ideas they contain pass from mind to mind — and ideas are what tyrants most fear.

It should therefore be a matter of serious civil concern that people in the West today — and not

only young people — tend to deprecate reading anything deeper than celebrity magazines or paperback romances. Ironically, that may be because their intellectual leaders have taken too serious an approach to encouraging the public to read better works.

The message should be spread that reading offers some of the greatest pleasure in the world. Even at its best, television cannot deliver the deep satisfaction to be drawn from a good novel. At the conclusion of the superb British adaptation of Dickens's *Bleak House* shown on American Public Television, "Masterpiece Theater" host Alistair Cooke remarked on all the delightful nuances of characterization and narrative wit in the original which could not be included in the televised version. So, he said, he was reversing the standard advice: "You've seen the movie, now read the book."

A knowledge of life, of the universe, and of ourselves

It may be that young people who do not see much use in reading think of all books as dull and tedious, like some of the school texts with which they must struggle. It has not been demonstrated to them that books hold a world of amusement, excitement and fascination which they can open up for themselves almost anywhere at any time. They should be made aware that, unlike other pastimes which grow boring as time goes on, the enjoyment to be drawn from reading actually grows keener the longer one practises it. Most readers acquire the habit from childrens' and comic books, then pass on to adventure, crime or romance stories. As their vocabularies expand and their tastes are refined, they progress to more difficult material — quality novels, satires, histories, biographies. The desire to move up the intellectual steps grows as each step is taken. Reading is a manifestation of Aristotle's principle that human beings enjoy using their natural powers, and that this enjoyment is expanded by challenging themselves with progressively more difficult exercises of their skills.



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"Reading maketh a full man," Francis Bacon wrote. Any reading material except the worst trash, fiction or non-fiction, helps to fill in our knowledge of life and the universe. Above all, it helps us to fill in our knowledge of ourselves. A psychological theory holds that each of us is unconsciously living out a "life story" which is affected by the stories of others. Reading gives us access to the entire range of human experience. By putting our lives in perspective, it makes us conscious of what kind of persons we can be.

"How many a man has dated a new era in his life to the reading of a book," exclaimed Henry David Thoreau. One such man was the monumental Canadian newspaper editor, M. Grattan O'Leary, who was brought up in the fishing village of Percé, Quebec. Poverty forced O'Leary to leave school at the age of 11, but the Bishop of Gaspé opened up his library to him. "Upon my soul that man gave me my life," O'Leary recalled. "Think of it! There was every kind of book: textbooks, novels frivolous and exciting; Shakespeare's sonnets, Matthew Arnold, Longfellow, and Yeats, of course. And Rider Haggard's *She*. I never had a grammar lesson, but poetry gave me a sense of the beauty and economy of words."

Literature helps us compose the stories of our own lives

The beauty of words . . . We all have a longing for beauty deep within us, and literature is one of the chief sources of its satisfaction. At its best it speaks not only to the mind and the heart, but to that indefinable thing called the soul.

This is particularly true of poetry, which is not taught in schools as much as it once was, and which has fallen out of favour among adults. For the sake of the underlying quality of our lives, that is a pity. Percy Bysshe Shelley could have been speaking of our own times and the moral confusion that surrounds us when he wrote in 1821: "the cultivation of poetry is never to be more desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature."

The poet's mission, according to Shelley, is to create new materials of knowledge, power and pleasure, and to arrange them in a certain order and rhythm "which might be called the beautiful and the good." In tying beauty and goodness together, Shelley acknowledged the philosophical concept that ethics are rooted in aesthetics — that "beauty is truth," as his friend and contemporary John Keats wrote.

The search for the true and the beautiful has at least a subliminal influence on how we compose our own "life stories," and it is largely through reading that we can find these twin values. "When literature intermingles with our thoughts, our moral faculty is nourished, and this in turn informs the decisions flowing from the logical and analytical side of our nature," Gordon M. Pradl, Professor of English Education at New York University, wrote.

This moral information need not come from books written with moral instruction in mind. "One ought to read just as inclination takes him," said Dr. Samuel Johnson, "for what he reads as a task will do him little good." Aristotle was the first but not the last to write that enjoyment within the bounds of moderation leads to human advancement.

The power to do one good while making one *feel* good is part of the magic of literature. Pity those who have never availed themselves of it — who have never been electrified by an adventure tale, puzzled by a mystery, been moved to thought by an essay or glee by a satire or tears by a poem. They have lost an opportunity to taste delight while at the same time building up their spiritual defences against the vicissitudes of life.

The real purpose of spreading the reading habit is not to equip people to better cope with their work, but to equip them to better cope with their own problems and the troublesome world around them. Reading alone will bring us neither happiness nor wisdom. What it *can* do may best be expressed in a paraphrase of a famous slogan: It can lend us mental and spiritual strength through joy.