

# The Meaning of Reading: Fiction and Public Libraries

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**SUMMARY.** With the widespread advent of access to digital collections via schools, universities, public libraries, and home computers there sometimes comes a sense of a perceived dichotomy between “real” reading which involves the codex book, and “virtual” reading which takes place on a video display terminal. Reading, both basic literacy and recreational reading for experienced readers, is a significant aspect of librarians’ roles and of the public’s perception of the library’s role. Therefore, the act of reading and the role of reading in people’s lives is a topic that warrants study and reflection. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <<http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]

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Reading as a human activity engenders powerful emotions. With the widespread advent of access to digital collections via schools, universities, public libraries, and home computers there sometimes comes a sense of a perceived

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dichotomy between “real” reading which involves the codex book, and “virtual” reading which takes place on a video display terminal. In spite of the fact that human intake of words is reading, be it on a printed page or computer monitor, discussion now ensues that, to some degree, pits the vehicles of transmission (book versus monitor) against each other.

This strife is rooted in the attention and resources demanded by the computer as a vehicle for access. The sets of skills required to maintain Internet access to virtual collections has siphoned library staff from work with more traditional library activities; has meant the decision to cancel physical subscriptions in favor of electronic; and has required a seemingly never-ending succession of expensive upgrades to equipment, often times causing new hires to be delayed to pay for new hardware.

Additionally, schools of library and information science accredited by the American Library Association that educate librarians have expanded their inventories of technology-based courses to the perceived detriment of the profession’s core values.<sup>1</sup> It is seldom the act of reading that is studied in the curricula, but the act of using technology to organize and access materials which may or may not be physically located in the library or selected by a local librarian. To some extent, however, this newer emphasis on networking and mastery of the web mirrors the older activities of organizing a collection for use through cataloging and classification—the difference is that the collection is now universal rather than local. For instance, the Universal Library Project located at the Carnegie Mellon University embodies the concept of universal collection-building in its most extreme and idealistic form. Its mission, which its creators admit has many large but surmountable challenges, is “to spark a lasting movement, in which all of the institutions responsible for the collection of mankind’s works will place these works on the Internet to educate and inspire all of the world’s people.”<sup>2</sup> To make everything available to everyone via Internet access is an admirable goal, but where does that leave the public library? With the traditional role of acquisition subsumed, what and who will drive the selection process, if a process is even still necessary?

What seems to be missing, and what causes dissension, is the apparent disassociation of the current work of libraries with the content provided. Where once librarians reviewed items for acquisition and retention and were valued for their knowledge of history, literature and culture, the Internet now provides access to unevaluated resources. Position announcements are far more likely to call for experience with automated systems, knowledge of online database searching, and competency with Internet search engines than a broad and rich education in the liberal arts. Librarians now focus on *access* to the world’s documents rather than their evaluation. One of the deepest concerns expressed by the profession today is the lack of review of all that is now available.

The information literacy movement addresses this concern, but results in the teaching of evaluation to users rather than the presentation of an evaluated collection. In *Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning*, prepared by the American Association for School Librarians and the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, the standards state that the student be able to assess, evaluate and use information effectively.<sup>3</sup> Where once users could come to a library confident that a certain level of care had gone into assembling the collection therein, now the burden is on the user to evaluate the material accessed electronically.

The act of assembling any set of materials, ideas, or artifacts which results in museums, archives, libraries, concerts, or journals, sets up a relationship of trust between user and provider. People subscribe to magazines because the content and tone are congruent to their needs. Museums guarantee through the hiring of scholarly curatorial staff, that exhibits demonstrate historical verity. Libraries have meant to people a collection of quality and cultural retention. In the brave new library world, librarians are expected to provide the gateways, but are now more in charge of the directional signs than the goal. In the new world a sense of connection between the user and the librarian is disappearing. This is at the heart of the friction over what our profession should be; this is what needs to be explored.

### **READING**

The literature about reading has not moved to address reading done via computer monitor. This is not to say that the design of the video display has not been a topic of study. See for instance, Lynda and William Weinman's *Creative HTML Design*.<sup>4</sup> While the act may require the same optical engagement, the metaphors that adhere to the monitor are of a conduit to a virtual world of 3-D graphics simulating life—real or imagined. An examination of the literature about reading, critical knowledge for librarians, demonstrates a long heritage of reverence for an act much written of, but not fully understood.

It is helpful to turn to the work done on the process of reading as a foundation. For this the research reported by the International Reading Association, *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* is most useful.<sup>5</sup> Topics addressed include language acquisition, literacy development, comprehension, reader response theory, metacognition, and cognitive processes. The basis for the promotion of reading, the conceptual analysis of what brings the reader to the book, provides the librarian with the background to work with young readers and new readers of all ages.

While these frameworks of reading theory might seem outside the purview of many librarians, those working in media centers, with literacy programs or

serving populations of new readers will find this sort of theoretical understanding of reading processes to be central to their work. The "Public Library Service Responses" identified in the *Planning for Results* guidebook issued by the Public Library Association ReVision Committee in 1998 includes "Basic Literacy" as one of thirteen suggested responses of libraries to their communities.<sup>6</sup> Staff, it is noted, should have formal training in reading instruction as well as training programs for literacy volunteers.

But beyond the service response of basic literacy, for which public librarians should have formal training, comes the library role of serving the general reader. An excellent introduction to the processes that inform the general reader may be found in the writings of Louise M. Rosenblatt who discusses the "reader's stance." This, she notes, reflects the reader's purpose which falls somewhere on the "efferent-aesthetic continuum." By efferent, Rosenblatt denotes "the kind of reading in which attention is focused predominately on what is to be extracted and retained."<sup>7</sup> By aesthetic is meant "the kind of reading where the reader adopts an attitude of readiness to focus attention on what is lived through the reading event."<sup>8</sup>

When all is said and done it is service to the aesthetic reader, the fiction reader, that undergirds the larger portion of library activity relating to fiction selection and acquisition. The history of libraries and reading research has been well summarized by Stephen Karetzky who provides a solid intellectual summary of the work of Leon Carnovsky, Charles H. Compton, Gilbert Ward, and Joseph Wheeler.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge of the early investigations of reading provides an intellectual basis for public library collection development. Key works like *The Reading Interests and Habits of Adults* by Gray and Munroe,<sup>10</sup> *What People Want to Read About* by Waples and Tyler,<sup>11</sup> *Living With Books* by Haines,<sup>12</sup> and *The Geography of Reading*<sup>13</sup> by Wilson are classic studies necessary for an appreciation of the role of librarians in the promotion and support of reading.

Understanding reading as an adult activity can be enhanced by reviewing a number of recent studies. These include Graubard's *Reading in the 1980s*,<sup>14</sup> Nell's *Lost in a Book*,<sup>15</sup> Appleyard's *Becoming a Reader*,<sup>16</sup> Howell's *Beyond Literacy: The Second Gutenberg Revolution*,<sup>17</sup> Manguel's *A History of Reading*,<sup>18</sup> and Radway's *A Feeling for Books*.<sup>19</sup> These works examine reading and try to distill the meaning of the act of reading—what McCook has characterized as "the first virtual reality"<sup>20</sup> or as Manguel has observed, trying to describe the variety of mood:

We read in slow, long motions, as if drifting in space, weightless. We read full of prejudice, malignantly. We read generously, making excuses for the text, filling gaps, mending faults. And sometimes, when the stars are kind, we read with an intake of breath, with a shudder, as if someone or something had 'walked over our grave', as if a memory had

suddenly been rescued from a place deep within us—the recognition of something we never knew was there, or of something we vaguely felt as a flicker or a shadow, whose ghostly form rises and passes back into us before we can see what it is, leaving us older and wiser.<sup>21</sup>

An effort to understand the act of reading deepens and strengthens librarians' appreciation of their relationship to the reader and the book.

### **FICTION AND LIBRARIES**

The importance of reading as described above should leave little doubt that the selection and acquisition of fiction continues to be an important aspect of public library service. While today the competition for resources between cyber access and physical access seems at the forefront of concern, we should take note of the long-standing debate as to fiction's worthiness for inclusion at all. A substantive history of the debate appears in two books by Esther Jane Carrier, *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1876-1900* and *Fiction in Public Libraries, 1900-1950*.<sup>22</sup> Carrier provides a comprehensive summary of the debate between adherents of quality fiction and those who felt fiction of all types should be included in collections. This debate continues today as described by McCook in "Considerations of Theoretical Bases for Readers' Advisory Services."<sup>23</sup>

In spite of the compelling and edgy techno-hype that many posit as the new context for library service, there are frequent signals that the library as it has been provides a compelling model for continuance. In a 1998 article, "Apostles of the Faith that Books Matter," Vivian Gornick writes, "I cannot help thinking, 50 years ago in the Bronx, if the library had responded to my needs instead of shaping my needs, what sort of reader would I have become?"<sup>24</sup> To what extent should public librarians shape needs? This question is central to the future of the librarian's work. Abdication of this responsibility—the "Give 'Em What They Want" contingent<sup>25</sup>—while on its face is more responsive to the public's needs, is hardly different than dropping Internet terminals for unfettered access. The art of librarianship—the acquisition of the right materials—is at issue.

But a central activity of most public libraries will still be service to the general reader. A 1994 survey of the users of three large library systems by D'Elia and Rodger investigated patrons' ability to describe their reason for using the library in terms of the roles suggested by the Public Library Association's 1987 planning manual, *Planning and Role Setting for Public Libraries*.<sup>26</sup> Their study concluded that library customers could in fact identify which of the seven defined roles the library was filling for them. In all three systems, "Popular Materials Library" was the most selected role and the role most often designated as the most important reason for visiting the library.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1998 Public Library Association's *Planning for Results*, the library responses to efferent reading are best characterized by "General Information," "Business and Career Information," "Community Referral," "Consumer Information," and "Government Information."<sup>28</sup> Programs of education for librarians have focused on the needs of efferent readers and new librarians demonstrate an ability to develop work-styles that respond well to these needs.

The aesthetic stance is most clearly reflected in the *Planning for Results* guidebook by the response, "Current Topics and Titles," for which staff are directed to be knowledgeable about popular culture and literature. "Staff will need to spend a significant amount of time keeping current with what's *in* and what's *out*."<sup>29</sup> However, this response as described does not really grapple with the needs of the general reader beyond the reader's desire for what is popular. Other "responses"—such as "Cultural Awareness" and "Lifelong Learning,"<sup>30</sup> allude to general reading, but general reading is not a focus of these responses. Now, with the issuance of this new approach to planning by the Public Library Association, *Planning for Results*,<sup>31</sup> it is possible to use Rosenblatt's reader's stance typology to see how the needs of efferent and aesthetic readers might be met.<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately *Planning for Results* makes but passing reference to Readers' Advisory Services<sup>33</sup> though these services have been broadly and recently addressed in the professional literature.<sup>34</sup> It is through Readers' Advisory Services that librarians activate the collection for readers. As Duncan Smith has noted:

What is needed for readers' advisory work is a balanced perspective, one which focuses not only on reference sources and the contents of today's popular literature but one which focuses on the reader, the reader's experience, and the advisor's understanding of that experience. In order to achieve this balanced perspective, readers' advisors must learn to hear their readers' voices. Hearing their readers' voices means that readers' advisors must not only learn how to listen to their readers talk about reading, they must understand the context in which their readers are reading and indeed how reading fits into their lives.<sup>35</sup>

Smith's work as a consultant to Novelist, an online readers' advisory tool, is an excellent example of the use of technology to enhance a traditional service.<sup>36</sup>

At the broader levels, the importance of books and reading has been cherished by the now 20-year-old Center for the Book and State Centers. The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress works to foster understanding of the vital role of books, reading, libraries and literacy in society. The 1997 *Handbook* for State Centers identifies activities such as awards, book festi-

vals, community of the book projects, exhibits and reading promotion.<sup>37</sup> Clearly these Centers will enhance the importance of books in our society and circularly, as described by Kenneth E. Carpenter, the library:

Just as book historians are keen to capture the experience of reading, so should library historians seek to capture the library experience. The effort to capture the library experience from the angle of vision of users and others involved with libraries can make clearer the role of libraries in the life of the individual and in American intellectual, cultural, and social life. For instance, examining the library experience will further increase understanding of the extent to which librarians have attempted to mediate between the reader and the book in order to lead the reader to "high" culture.<sup>38</sup>

The transcendent meaning of carefully developed library collections, expert readers' advisory service, and the importance of books in our society has been recently reenforced by a passionate new study of the power of the humanities. In *New American Blues: A Journey Through Poverty to Democracy*, Earl Shorris presents a revolutionary idea to ameliorate poverty.<sup>39</sup> He tells the story of the poor in the United States; he shows how the poor are much like everyone else; he shows that the difference between a comfortable life and a life of poverty is often the failure of the poor to enter the political life—a life which requires reflection. Shorris observes, "human beings become political by cultivating their inborn humanity."<sup>40</sup> His call for a study of the humanities as an answer to poverty is rooted in reading. An experiment in teaching humanities to the multi-generational poor called the Clemente Course (named after the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center), demonstrates the power of reading to change lives.

### **CONCLUSION**

To read *New American Blues* is to renew a commitment to the power of libraries in concert with those who value reading. According to the Benton Report, *Buildings, Books and Bytes*, "Americans support their public libraries and hold them in high esteem. They support a combined role for libraries that links digital and traditional book and paper information resources. And they accord equal value to libraries and places where people can read or borrow books or use computers to find information and use online services."<sup>41</sup> An entire issue of *Library Trends* was devoted to discussion of the Benton Report with the general response of writers somewhat negative as to the Report's methodology and leap to conclusions. In his introduction Herbert Goldhor observes, "The future of the book has been pronounced dim

so many times in the last century that we are all advised to be skeptical of this latest threat . . . against this is the fact that the circulation of American public libraries is today at an all-time high."<sup>42</sup> The Benton Report provided a widely distributed vision of the public library future, but failed to address the needs of people at the margins of society.<sup>43</sup> For these people the acquisition of fiction well-selected and available in public libraries is a means to encourage participation in the democratic life envisioned by Shorris. Building a solid collection of real value to a community requires the informed expertise of a librarian regardless of format or means of access.

#### NOTES

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