

Moskowitz, describes the filmmaker's quest to learn more about the author of a novel he started reading in the '70s, when it was published, and then put down for 25 years: *The Stones of Summer*, by Dow Mossman. When Moskowitz returned to and finally finished this book in the '90s, he was powerfully moved but could find nothing else Mossman had written. Moskowitz wondered who else had read the novel, who simply knew about it, and whatever became of its author. In this shaggy but fascinating film, Moskowitz interviews literary scholars, agents, authors, and publishers, with whom he talks about "one-hit wonders," first books, and how someone reviewed so favorably in *The New York Times Book Review* could go missing.

Moskowitz's journey takes him to the University of Iowa, where he finds the professor to whom Mossman's novel is dedicated. When this professor connects the obsessive reader with the elusive author, some questions are answered, but a few more are raised: Is a book a failure if it has reached and moved just one reader? What book do I now most need to read? What does it say about this documentary, mostly about male readers and writers,

that it is dedicated to two mothers "who taught us to love books"? And what does it say that the story is conveyed via film and DVD instead of print?

Recent studies show that literacy is declining and that Americans today read fewer novels and less poetry than they did 20 years ago. Have DVDs and videos really supplanted books? Have attention spans dwindled to match the length of TV news reports and the size of a Web page?

Some of today's most popularly read words are presented in ways that are visually appealing—comics, graph-

ic novels, artfully illustrated blogs, and online diaries. In her 2004 book *Goodbye Gutenberg*, Valerie Kirschenbaum imagines using today's technology to produce illuminated books full of color, aspiring to turn the "visual cemetery" of the black-and-white page into something "as visually attractive as movies and music." Kirschenbaum looks at the illustrated novels of Dickens, examines illuminated books from the Middle Ages, notes that William Faulkner

wanted his novel *The Sound and the Fury* printed with different colors of ink, and, in general, predicts a colorful future for books.

How will things unfold? In his autobiographical, *An Open Book*, Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Michael Dirda writes: "I know people will always need stories and that any era's external packaging of them hardly matters." Perhaps it doesn't matter that a library's Faulkner books are more popular today on tape than in print. What is important about books is their living legacy. Like trees and gardens, books live in hibernation, waiting for a willing reader, perpetually blossoming anew.

Somewhere another 11-year-old girl connects with Judy Blume. Somewhere a blogger notes a mind-ex-

panding book she's just read, and in doing so opens a door for one of her 40 readers. Somewhere a novelist believes the form is still alive and toils on in passionate solitude.

"Writing a book is an act of falling in love—with yourself and the audience," critic Leslie Fiedler says in *The Stone Reader*. And so can reading be an act of love. As Thoreau exults in *Walden*, "The book exists for us, perchance, which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones."

Seek that book now. Or write it yourself.

Chris Dodge is the *Utne* librarian.

#### READER'S BILL OF RIGHTS

1. *The right not to read.*
2. *The right to skip pages.*
3. *The right not to finish.*
4. *The right to reread.*
5. *The right to read anything.*
6. *The right to escapism.*
7. *The right to read anywhere.*
8. *The right to browse.*
9. *The right to read out loud.*
10. *The right to not defend your taste.*

Reprinted from Daniel Pennac's book *Better Than Life* (Coach House Press, 1996).