THE JOY OF READING

IS READING FOR PLEASURE AN OUTDATED IDEA?

By Daniel Born, from THE COMMON REVIEW

A PLATOON OF LETHAL COMPUTER DERIVATIVES MAY FORM THE AXIS OF EVIL THAT DESTROYS LITERARY READING. THAT'S ONE CONCLUSION YOU COULD REACH AFTER PERUSING THE *READING AT RISK* STUDY PUBLISHED IN 2004 BY THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS. THE STUDY POINTS OUT THAT THE STEEPEST DECLINE IN LITERARY READING HABITS IS AMONG 18- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS AND NOTES THIS AGE group's extraordinary commitment to electronic and Internet-related forms of entertainment.

But the scapegoating of technology is hardly the point: The survey showed that serious readers watch almost as much television—about three hours a day—as nonreaders. Rather, the larger issue is whether Americans can make room for the kind of extended, sustained intellectual experience that books offer. One's brain is not similarly massaged by trawling for Web site residue, a habit familiar to the millions of Americans living in cubicle-land. Or by repetitive acts of Googling, no matter how useful such activity may be for sizing up a mutual fund portfolio. If I want to think about the things that matter, like friendship, love, or my spiritual path of enlightenment, I don't consult LexisNexis. NEA chair Dana Gioia speaks truth when he claims that "print culture affords irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation that make complex communications and insights possible. To lose such intellectual capability . . . would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment."

The main question the NEA raises is whether reading for pleasure will continue to be a major part of American life. If it is in decline (the core group of book readers has remained static at roughly 96 million people in about the past 20 years, despite a sizable jump in the overall population), does it matter, should we care, and what can be done?

It does matter, and we should care. Forget for a moment about whether it's "literary" or not. Less reading overall lowers our collective IQ. There are now more literate speakers and writers of English in India than in the United States, and our percentage of functionally illiterate adults is staggeringly high. According to a national adult literacy survey conducted in 1993, a full 48 percent of the adult population was unable to function at minimal 12th-grade reading standards.

Another reason that reading for pleasure matters is indicated in the NEA study itself: Readers participate in the life of their community, and are more likely to contribute time and ideas to its well-being. Readers also tend to vote. The link between reading and democratic participation is clear, Gioia says. Authoritarianism, as scholars of both the Reformation and of political tyranny will tell you, is always helped by large doses of ignorance, poverty, and illiteracy, so getting books into the hands of the young, and helping them learn to love these books, has strategic importance.

In other words, if you don't want Dr. Strangelove or Big Brother in the future, you could, at the very least, help kids appreciate *Hansel and Gretel*.

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