The Periodical Observer

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

The Lost Art of Reading

A Survey of Recent Articles

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) sounded the official alarm this summer: The reading of literature has dramatically decreased, particularly among young adults. "For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature, and these trends reflect a larger decline in other sorts of reading," says NEA chairman Dana Gioia. If "a well-read citizenry is essential to a vibrant democracy," the NEA admonishes in its report, *Reading at Risk*, "the decline of literary reading calls for serious action."

Is the situation really so dire? Some commentators agree, and point to several disturbing causes. Others, finding various limitations in the NEA study, insist that there's really no great cause for alarm.

The study's authors asked 17,000 adults if they had read any novels, short stories, plays, or poetry outside of work or school during the previous 12 months. Only 47 percent said they had, down from 57 percent in 1982.

The decline in literary reading was evident in all demographic groups, but it was most pronounced among young adults. As recently as the 1980s, they were the biggest consumers of literature. Now they rank just below senior citizens as the most indifferent readers. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, for example, only 43 percent say they've recently read a work of literature on their own time, down from 60 percent in 1982.

Culture and learning are not the only things that could be hurt. Roger Kimball, managing editor of *The New Criterion*, also is "dismayed" by the NEA findings, he writes in the magazine's weblog at www.newcriterion.com (July 14, 2004). "The decline in literary reading is of special concern, not least because of the role reading plays in fostering a responsive and engaged citizenry. *Reading at Risk* reports that 43 percent of literary readers perform volunteer and charity work as against 17 percent of nonreaders."

Andrew Solomon, author of *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression* (2001), worries that literary self-starvation may even affect individuals' health. "There is a basic social divide between those for whom life is an accrual of fresh experience and knowledge, and those for whom maturity is a process of mental atrophy. The shift toward the latter category is frightening," he writes on the op-ed page of *The New York Times* (July 10, 2004). Solomon thinks that "the crisis in reading" may be contributing to "a crisis in national health," seen in the growing incidence of depression, as well as to "crises" in national politics and education.

What accounts for the public's diminished interest in literature? Writing in *The New Criterion*'s summer 2004 "web special" at www.newcriterion.com, James Bowman, a resident scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, charges that "the way [literature] is now being taught in schools and universities" is the

chief culprit. Instead of being taught to love the great works of literature for their explorations of the human spirit, students are encouraged to feel contempt for them as "examples of the various sorts of diabolical encodings with which the oppressor-cultures of their times have been able to mask a naked power lust."

That the nation's English teachers might be to blame is not even entertained as a possibility by the NEA. More surprisingly, perhaps, it gives television, the usual villain in such studies, a pass. "In 2002," according to the NEA report, "those who do read and those who do not read literature watched about the same amount of TV per day—three hours' worth." A more likely suspect: the Internet. It "could have played a role" in reading's decline, since home Internet use took off during the years that literary reading was declining.

During those same years, America's Hispanic population also rose, and this too had an impact, according to the NEA. Only 27 percent of Hispanics in the NEA survey said they read any literary works in 2002, down from 36 percent 20 years earlier. An influx of less educated immigrants no doubt accounts for some of that decline. Hispanic males have the lowest literary reading rate (18 percent in 2002), followed by black men (30 percent) and Hispanic women (34 percent). The taste for literature is about equal (just over 40 percent) among white men and black women, and most developed among white women. Sixty-one percent of them told the researchers they had read a book in one of the qualifying genres.

But Charles McGrath, former editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, writes in the newspaper (July 11, 2004) that *Reading at Risk* may take too narrow a view of what's worth reading. It excludes magazines and newspapers and implies that the Internet "steals time people used to spend with books. But when people surf the Web, what they are doing, for the most part, is reading."

And book reading may not be in such dire shape, either. As McGrath and others note, the NEA's definition of literature is expansive in that it includes everything from mysteries to pornography. But it utterly excludes nonfiction, a category full of fine writing. The latest Tom Clancy novel is "literature," but Ron Chernow's recent well-received biography of Alexander Hamilton is not. Nor is *The Education of Henry Adams* or Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Carlin Romano, critic at large for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 23, 2004), points out another problem with the NEA study: its exclusion of literary reading done for school or work. "With the relaxation of traditional course requirements and expansion of higher education generally, more young people than ever integrate their desired reading into course work," he says.

Without making the exclusions that the NEA study did, the Gallup Organization (www.gallup.com) has been conducting polls about book reading for more than 20 years. With little variation, a large majority of respondents—87 percent in a recent survey—say they have read all or part of at least one book during the past year. Five percent claim to have read 70 or more books.

But the Gallup polls, like the NEA survey, make no distinctions regarding the *quality* of the books read. The avid reader of 70 books might be ingesting thrillers or romance novels.

"Serious reading had always been a minority matter," observes Joseph Epstein, author of *Envy* (2003) and other works, writing in *The Weekly Standard* (Aug. 16, 2004). "By serious reading I mean the reading of those novels, plays, poems—also philosophies, histories, and other belletristic writing—that make the most exacting efforts to honor their subjects by treating them with the exacting complexity they deserve. Serious readers at some point make a usually accidental connection with literature, sometimes through a teacher but quite as often on their own; when young they come upon a book that blows them away by the aesthetic pleasure they derive from it, the wisdom they find in it, the point of view it provides them. . . .

"Read any amount of serious imaginative literature with care and you will be highly skeptical of the statistical style of thinking," Epstein concludes. "You will quickly grasp that, in a standard statistical report such as *Reading at Risk*, serious reading, always a minority interest, isn't at stake here. Nothing more is going on, really, than the *crise du jour*, soon to be replaced by the report on eating disorders, the harmfulness of aspirin, or the drop in high-school math scores."