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From the Editor: Reading, Risk, and Freedom

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Reading, Risk, and Freedom

In his classic article in *Thought* (1955), "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," John Tracy Ellis quotes a letter from the 15-year-old John LaFarge, the 19th century painter and stained glass artist and father of John LaFarge, S.J., the interracial pioneer. Away at school, the boy asks his father to send him some books — specifically the works of Herodotus, Plautus, Catullus, Theocritus, Dryden, Goldsmith, Michelet, Moliere, Corneille, and Victor Hugo. Monsignor Ellis regrets that the modern Catholic family has not sustained that reading tradition.

In 1935 a young, would-be writer asked Ernest Hemingway what books should a writer have to read? Hemingway replies, "He should have read everything so he knows what he has to beat."

Pressed, Hemingway names about 30, including *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Dubliners*, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *Huckleberry Finn* and all of Turgenev.

We chose to build this issue around the NEA 2004 report because our experience as teachers and our discussions with faculty and students in our three annual campus visits have convinced us that the problem is real and that we in particular should respond because reading is so central to Jesuit liberal arts education. Also, for many of us who teach literature, history, theology and philosophy, a book is a moral force — a door into the human heart, a prod to the reader's conscience faced daily with decisions to tell the truth or deceive, take responsibility or flee, to love or to betray.

Recently *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, referring to the National Endowment for the Arts study, *Reading at Risk*, points out that the percentage of young men who read has plummeted over the past 14 years. The answer, he suggests, is to assign boys more "manly" authors, like Hemingway, Homer, Tolstoy, and Twain. *Times* readers answered that Brooks is stuck with "gender myths" and that when boys are old enough to read an adult book they are already addicted to video games.

With this in mind, the two most significant findings of the NEA survey, based on a sample of 17,000 adults, are: for the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature; and since readers play a more active part in their communities, their loss diminishes civic and cultural life — including

volunteerism, philanthropy and political engagement. Jesuit education, especially in America, has trained men and women for citizenship. They will not become "men and women for others" if they do not read.

Among the report's key findings: the decline in literary reading (fiction and poetry) parallels a decline in total book reading; the decline has accelerated; women read more literature than men, only one third of men read literature; the decline includes all groups, but the situation is worse among African Americans and Hispanics; the decline correlates with increased use of the electronic media. In 1999 the average household had 2.9 TV sets, 1.8 VCRs, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video game players, and 1 computer. We can imagine more today.

A few more interesting facts: about one in six literary readers (17 percent) read 12 or more books a year; literary reading is most popular in the West and least in the South; about one in 14 people (7 percent) said that they wrote creative works during the survey year.

The articles that follow, we hope, do several things: allow NEA director Dana Gioia to speak directly to us; submit the NEA report to critical analysis; describe what libraries, English departments and special programs are doing in Jesuit Colleges and universities to respond; let students tell us why they do or don't read; guide us through a familiar campus bookstore; in the forum, invite our own faculty to step into the contemporary shoes of LaFarge and Hemingway; and finally invite a Pulitzer Prize-winning alumnus of two Jesuit institutions to relate his reading to his work.

Let me close with a story from Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. When the eloquent former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass was still in captivity his second master's kindly wife taught him to read. When the master discovered this he ordered the instruction stopped. It would be unsafe to teach a slave to read he said, because it would make him discontent and unhappy, forever unfit to be a slave. In a sense, he was right. Douglass said that "learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy." It was six years before he would be free. Meanwhile he secretly learned to write. ■

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