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UNREADING AMERICA?

Taking a hard look at the NEA report and asking what it really means.

By Dean Rader

We live in a complicated age in a contradictory country. Things are changing so rapidly and to such a degree, we often are not aware of exactly what we are losing or what we are gaining. When a country's value climate is as unstable as the United States' seems to be at this point in history, people tend to hold on rather tightly to practices and belief systems that provide security. Indeed, at times, we may even find ourselves becoming nostalgic for a mode of being that never even existed in the first place but one that nonetheless makes us feel safe.

For many educated Americans, reading has always been a form of security. The ability to read and the act of reading are fundamental tenets of responsible, ethical, learned living. Literacy is the pathway not simply to knowledge but to the middle class. As a matter of fact, in the United States, reading remains one of the few non-religious, non-romantic sacred acts. Walking into a library is like entering a church, while, record stores, art museums and even movie theaters can be downright rowdy. In America, we value reading, and we remain impressed by readers.

It is no surprise, then, that teachers, journalists, publishers, and educators flew into a panic at the 2004 report commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts, entitled *Reading at Risk*, which argues, rather passionately, that readers in America have gone the way of the phonograph. According to the study, the percentage of Americans who read literature plummeted from 61 percent in 1992 to 47 percent in 2002. These numbers spooked the NEA—so much so, the report comes to the conclusion that reading will, remarkably, cease altogether: “Indeed, at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century.”

The NEA's study, and the apparent decline of literary reading in America and American academia, are the genesis

of this issue of *Conversations* and the springboard for my comments that follow. It's true that students don't seem to be reading as much as they did when you or I or were in college, and anecdotal evidence suggests a decline in Great Books program and literature majors over the last 40 years. So, what's going on? Are we experiencing a reading reduction? If so, is it related to academic programming? If our country is less literate, are the literati of the academic community to blame? And, if that is the case, what, if anything, can be done? Of course, the answers are layered and complex and require more space than I have here, but I will try, in the remainder of this piece, to unpack the NEA's report in a way that allows me to address the interrelated issues of reading, education, work, and culture.

The Intersection between “Literature” and “Reading,” or Why This Report Is Not a Red Flag

I'll begin with some intentionally provocative assertions. I believe that more literary reading is being done now than in the last 40 years; I believe that more *reading* in general is being done now than at any time in history; and, most importantly, I believe that the NEA's *Reading at Risk* is less about reading and more about economics.

Before I go further, I want to say how much I appreciate the NEA and how much I admire Dana Gioia — both do fabulous work. The NEA is one of the most valuable and one

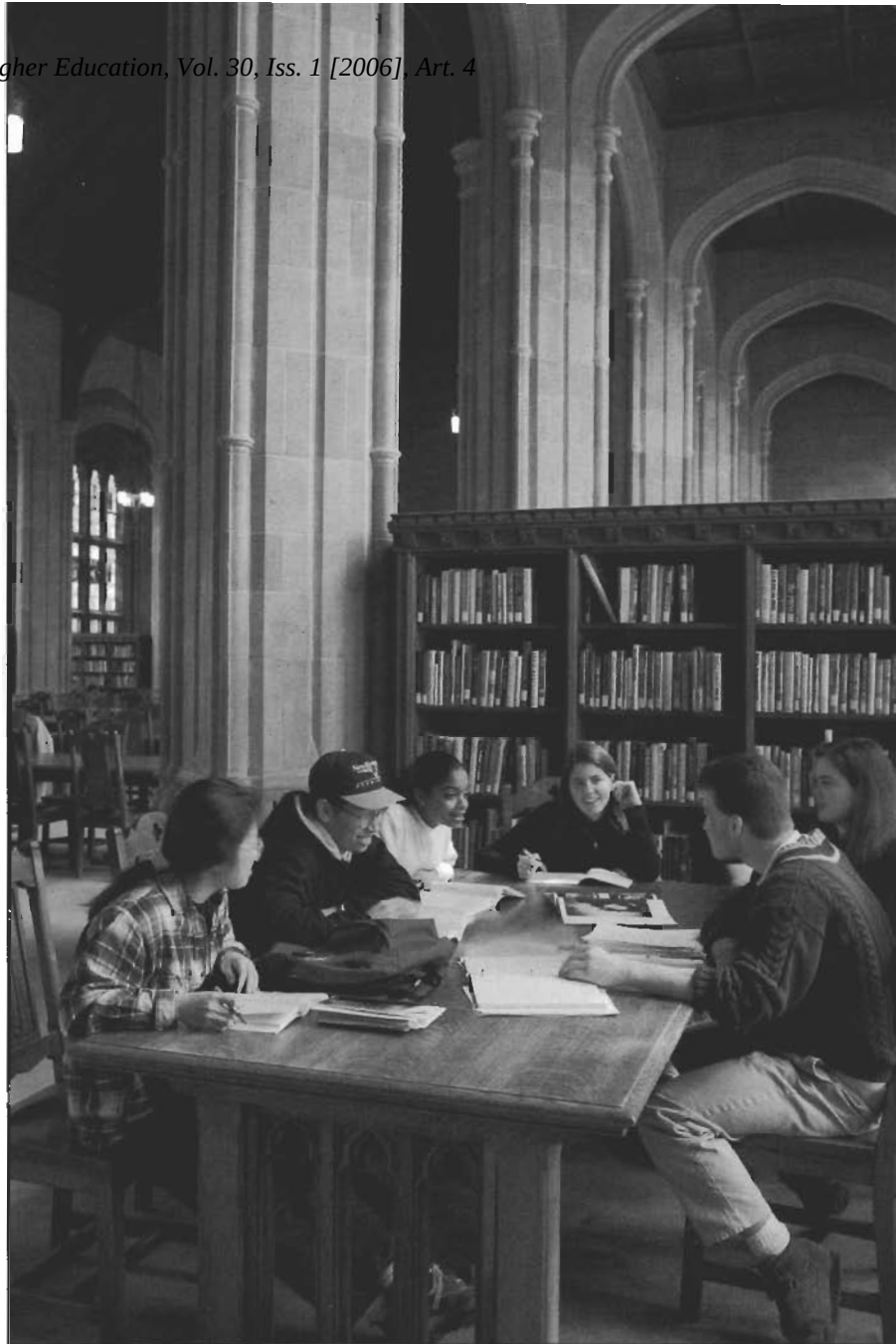
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of the best-run government programs. I knew the NEA had the best intentions when commissioning the survey, and they truly care (and worry) about American reading habits; so my criticisms are not directed toward the NEA, simply at the anxious rhetoric surrounding their survey. Let me underscore that I am, in many ways, pretty old school about reading. My graduate degrees are in comparative literature, I assign a great deal of reading in my literature and writing classes (even the whale-innard chapters of *Moby Dick*!), and I am convinced that there is no better educational foundation than a rigorous writing and reading curriculum. So, I, too, worry when I hear that my fellow colleagues and country people are trading in Will Shakespeare for *Will and Grace*.

But, is this really the case? A closer look reveals two reasons why the NEA report is no cause for alarm. First, the report only measures a certain kind of reading, and secondly, it doesn't take into account all of the reading being done outside that supplied by the publishing industry.

According to the NEA report, 76.2 million Americans managed not to read "literature" in 1992. Unhappily, their ranks grew to 89.9 million by 2002. This sounds truly dire. But if one looks at population growth, the number of readers actually increases by 11.4 million over ten years. This means that 11.4 million *more* American adults are reading writers like Toni Morrison, Phillip Roth, and Billy Collins in 2002 than in 1992. I concede that the percentage of readers of literature drops slightly, but the NEA suggests that the logical chain of events indicated by this statistic is that the 18-24 year-olds currently reading literature will just stop and that the younger generations will quit reading literature *altogether*.

I question this assumption. It is a classic hasty generalization fallacy that I would scold any undergraduate for employing. But, even more to the point, I also question the genres the NEA chooses to foreground in its survey. For example, the NEA narrowly defines "literature" as poems, plays and narrative fiction. Newspapers, blogs, magazines, non-fiction essays, biographies, autobiographies, comics, self-help books, business studies, textbooks, history, philosophy, social criticism, religious books, and cultural criticism do not count as "literature," nor do they figure into the alarmist reaction about reading and literacy. That means that under the rubric of "literature," Joan Collins' romance novels count but Joan Didion's memoirs do not. Thomas Pynchon is in; Malcolm



Students work together on a project at Bapst Library, Boston College.

Gladwell is out. Michelle Reid yes; Michel Foucault and Michel de Montaigne no. According to the NEA, reading this very essay—in fact this entire issue devoted to reading—won't count as literary reading.

The problem is that the NEA chicken littles a decline in the reading of only three genres when they should be celebrating and facilitating all the reading already happening, most notably in non-fiction. Even if we discount self-help books and pop psychology, no one can deny the overwhelming cultural and intellectual contributions of memoirs, biographies, cultural studies, and histories. Literature is overflowing the traditional generic levees, and the NEA seems just as ill equipped to assess that situation as FEMA was in New Orleans.



Read-Aloud day. Fairfield University student, Marta Matselioukh, from Mahopac, New York reads to students in Mrs. Patricia Hassan's class at Bryant School Bridgeport.

And then there is the Internet! Who can even begin to estimate how much new reading happens online? For example, my home pages are the *New York Times* on my office computer and *Slate* on the one at my house. I try to read both every day, which was certainly not the case pre-Web; yet such reading would fly under the radar of the NEA's study. Even if we remain within the generic parameters of the NEA report, there is no question that the Internet has provided unparalleled access to literature. According to Tree Swenson of the Academy of American Poets, the AAP website (<http://poets.org>) receives 650,000 hits *per month*. That means over 6 million visits—I'll type that again: 6 million visits—to a poetry-only site per year. And <http://poets.org> is a hard URL to confuse with, say, <http://porn.org>, so you can be reasonably sure that people are not winding up there by accident. Similarly, a recent survey by the Poetry Foundation found that around 30 percent of their respondents had either received or sent a poem by email. That is a dizzying number, and to me, these are encouraging statistics.

The Opportunity Cost of Reading; or Why This is all Really about Economics

But, if so many people are reading poems, and as even the NEA report suggests, more books are being bought in the U.S. than ever before, then what accounts for the drop in the number of readers of literature? Well, on one hand, the NEA report may tell us more about the publishing industry than American readership. Are fewer people reading books, or are fewer people buying books? Interestingly, finances never really enter into the NEA's report, which I find troublesome. If we look beyond the statistics and focus on the lives of real people, it's obvious that the main reason people are not reading literature has less to do cultural forces and more to do with economic ones.

Reading is and has always been a leisure activity, mostly for the upper, the upper-middle, and the educated classes (and this is especially the case with literature). Just about every indicator—from an Economic Policy Institute study on wages to an Upjohn survey on moonlighting to a study by the Greater Boston Food Bank charting the dramatic increase in food stamps—reveals a shrinking middle class and an expanding lower class. The NEA report blames TV, video games and the Internet for a decline in literary reading, but in my mind, the real culprit is American economic policy. Fewer Americans are reading literature not because they are dumber or because of *Beavis and Butthead* but because more and more people are working longer hours for less money, and they don't have the time or the energy to read a complex novel, nor do they believe that the effort it takes to read a novel is worth what little spare time they have.

How bad is it? A 2004 study by the Economic Policy Institute shows that Americans are working harder at their jobs and at a faster pace than any time in history; yet wages have risen at the slowest pace in history, resulting in less free time and less disposable income. According to statistics from the International Labor Organization in 2002, Americans were "putting in more hours than anyone else in the industrialized world." Other studies on labor trends show that Americans have to work more hours not to get ahead but to keep afloat. These numbers may be great for productivity, but they are bad for reading—especially the reading of literature.

Even worse for reading are the changes involving women in the workforce. For decades, educated,

middle-class women have comprised the bulk of American readers, so it's no surprise that reading trends have decreased as women's work demands have increased. Women are now working as many hours as men, and since 1970, the number of women working two jobs has exploded, fast outpacing their male counterparts. According to the Bureau of Labor statistics, in 1970, 636,000 women worked two jobs; now that number is around 9,000,000. It's hard to read a play while you are in transit from one job to the next. It's hard to read a novel while you are making dinner for your kids. It's hard to read a collection of poems while you are cleaning your house, folding laundry, doing dishes, paying bills, taking your children to baseball practice and dance class, all while maintaining a relationship with your spouse or partner, who is himself probably commuting from one job to the next. The NEA report puzzles over where all of the readers are; well, according to these numbers, they are probably at Starbucks serving lattes, after which they will be at Target ringing up diapers.

Walt Whitman said that in order to have great poets you need great audiences. True, but to have great audiences you need an economic and cultural climate that allows reading to happen, one that fosters a reading populace. Reading literature is important for people who have the time and the learning to believe that reading literature is important. John Milton writes that "a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit; embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life," but for a growing number of Americans, there is no time for a life beyond this life. Getting through this one is taking everything they've got; thus the yawning reading gap.

The Worst are Full of Passionate Intensity; or Why This Essay is and is not a Call to Arms

Now, perhaps this is where academics and universities and even, say, English and Classics departments can help. Reading is our domain. We know literature, and we spend our lives reading, writing, writing about, thinking about, and ingesting texts. If anyone lives it, it is us. We have to be models for the reading life. When students look at us and see people who have made books a major aspect of their lives, they have to see vitality. Sure, we could be assigning more books, but we could also be better at delivering and shaping a culture of reading, a culture that forges connections between reading, enjoyment, success, and society.

But what does this mean?

Part of me wants to write a call to arms, a manifesto that catalyzes people into action. That part wants to type, "We have to take on the system. We have to change the current political discourse, and we have to do what we can to mitigate the economic factors inhibiting readership, because like it or not, economics and culture are connected. If economic forces are working against us, then we have to make cultural forces work for us." It's the same part that wants to urge academics, writers, and scholars to turn their attention to the commons, to remind professors that we have the ability (and the responsibility) to shape public perception through public articulation. That part of me wants to push the readers of this essay to start public literacy programs, participate in citywide reading projects, take your students into communities, write op-ed pieces and start blogs. In short, the part that was driven to write this essay in the first place wants you to change the world because it believes if anyone can, it's you.

But the other part of me knows it is zealotry that got us here, and it is painfully aware that nothing is more arrogant than telling other smart people how you think they should change the world. That part believes an impassioned narrowness of vision has enabled the power discourse of the United States—the political and social rhetoric of our government—to legitimize a culture of stupidity. Such discourse makes reading and reflection seem irrelevant while making mindless, soul-crushing work feel democratic and dutiful. It is impossible for me to lay out a plan to enable all of the overworked, underpaid people in this country to find the time and the motivation to read, but it is possible for us to rethink the cultural and educational structures that don't really do anyone any good.

Perhaps what is possible is to alter public perception by reminding people that reading is a form of civic engagement and that walking into a library *is* walking into a church of sorts—a place where people worship—and engage—lives and ideas. How amazing to be able to marry action and understanding. Because of the way intellectual work is often dissociated from public and political discourse, doing our jobs may seem in vain but, ultimately, it provides our students, their children, and our neighbors with the tools to weather the turbulent issues I opened with—the rising waters of complexity and contradiction, for which the most secure flotation device just may be the decision to keep reading. ■