

## The New Bibliophobes

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*by Mark Bauerlein*

English teachers have always had a hard time getting kids to read books, but in recent years the problem has spread and taken new directions. The problem was illustrated well a few years back when I appeared on a National Public Radio affiliate in the Midwest to discuss leisure reading habits of teenagers and twenty-year-olds. After fifteen minutes affirming that book reading among young adults has declined steeply, with lots of data thrown in, the host opened the phone lines and a bright young voice came through. I wrote down the exchange word for word just after the show concluded.

*Caller:* I'm a high school student, and yeah, I don't read and my friends don't read.

*Host:* Why not?

*Caller:* Because of all the boring stuff the teachers assign.

*Host:* Such as?

*Caller:* Uhh . . . that book about the guy. [Pause] You know, that guy who was great.

*Host:* Huh?

*Caller:* The great guy.

*Host:* You mean *The Great Gatsby*?

*Caller:* Yeah. Who wants to read about him?

The call ended there without follow-up on whether the young woman liked any other books. A social drama of the rich and notorious in 1920s New York bored her, yes, but she never mentioned anything else in print that amused her. No Austen and no Faulkner, certainly, but no Harry Potter, Mitch Albom, or Sophie Kinsella either. She didn't like to read, period, and she wanted to tell us just that.

We didn't laugh at the "that guy who was great" remark, though it made for lively radio. I was busy pondering a young woman's eagerness to broadcast her disdain for reading across southern Ohio. She suffered no shame for her anti-literary taste, and no cognizance of its poverty. The refusal to read seemed to her a legitimate response to a wearisome syllabus, and if the turnoff extended to her leisure time, well, so be it.

It's a new attitude, this brazen disregard of books and reading. Earlier generations resented homework assignments, of course, and only a small segment of each dove into the intellectual currents of the time, but no generation trumpeted *a-literacy* (knowing how to read, but choosing not to) as a valid behavior of their peers. An article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "How the New Generation of Well-Wired Multitaskers Is Changing Campus Culture" (January 2007) recounted a symposium in Nevada at which college students did precisely that. While the article observed that Millennials "think it's cool to be smart," it also noted, "They rarely read newspapers—or, for that matter, books." In answer to the question, "How often do you go to a library, and what do you do there?" one panelist replied:



My dad is still into the whole book thing. He has not realized that the Internet kind of took the place of that. So we go to the library almost every Sunday. I actually have a library card, but I have not rented a book for a long time, but I go to our school's library a lot because they have most of the course books.

How serenely this undergrad announces the transfer from "the whole book thing" to the Internet, as if the desertion of civilization's principal storehouse merits little more than a shrug. And note the scale of awareness. The father just doesn't "realize" how things have changed, that his world is over. The inversion is settled. It's the bookish elders who know so little, and the young ones countenance them as they would a doddering grandpa on the brink of senility.

The student speaks for herself, but behind her verdict lies the insight of a new generation. The consignment of books to the past wouldn't be so blithely assumed if it weren't backed by a poised peer consciousness. We may smile at the compliment the hubris pays to adolescence, but the rejection of books by teens and young adults is a common feature. One by one, recent studies and surveys have charted the decline.

In 2004, the National Endowment for the Arts released *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*. The survey was conducted in 2002 and it asked about voluntary reading, not reading for school or work. The questions included "Did you read any books during the last twelve months?" and "In the last twelve months, did you read any poetry?" The survey accepted any work of any quality and any length and in any medium, including online. James Patterson qualified as much as Henry James, Sue Grafton as much as Sylvia Plath, a Web site as well as a Library of America volume. Notwithstanding the low bar, only 43 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds read any work of poetry, fiction, or drama in the preceding year. Even more worrisome, the tally marked a 17 percent drop from 1982's figure. For book reading of any kind, while 59 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds read at least one in 1992, only 51 percent did so in 2002.

Other reports echo those findings. One of them compiled National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) data on reading for the past few decades to chart long-term trends in academic performance and contexts. Entitled *NAEP 2004 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Performance in Reading and Mathematics*, the study reviewed thirty-six years of academic scores and tracked them through various demographic groupings and out-of-school experiences. One of the "Contextual Factors" it tabulated

was “reading for fun.” At each extreme of reading, an astonishing shift took place. The percentage of seventeen-year-olds who “Never or hardly ever” read for fun more than doubled from 1984 to 2004, 9 percent to 19 percent. Over the same period, the percentage of seventeen-year-olds who read for fun “Almost every day” dropped by nine points. Nearly half of high school seniors (48 percent) stated that they read for fun “once or twice a month or less.”

The numbers can't be explained by an increase in in-school reading and reading homework. A few pages earlier, the NAEP report counted up homework by pages assigned. The percentage of students who had to complete more than twenty pages per day rose from 21 percent to 23 percent from 1984 to 2004, and those assigned sixteen to twenty pages jumped only one point (14 to 15 percent). Neither figure comes close to matching the leisure reading slump.

Another longitudinal study, the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research's *Changing Times of American Youth: 1981–2003*, unveils the same pattern. The questionnaire asked about leisure reading for six- to seventeen-year-olds, and a disappointing number came up for 2002–03: only one hour and seventeen minutes per week. There was an optimistic sign, we should note, because that total beat the 1981–82 total by eight minutes. The optimism disappears, however, when the group is broken down by age. On an average weekend day, while six- to eight-year-olds jumped from nine to fourteen minutes, nine- to eleven-year-olds from ten to fifteen minutes, and twelve- to fourteen-year-olds from ten to thirteen minutes, fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds reversed the gains entirely, dropping from eighteen to seven minutes.

More recent findings tell the same story.

- On the 2005 *High School Survey of Student Engagement*, fully 77 percent of high school students reported that they spend three hours or less per week on “personal reading.” On the 2006 version, about one in six students logged zero hours of “Reading for self” per week, while 40 percent came up at less than an hour. When asked how important leisure reading is, 45 percent rated it “a little” or “not at all.”
- On the 2005 *American Freshman Survey*, a survey of first-year college students about their last year in high school, 24.8 respondents tallied zero hours “reading for pleasure” in an average week, while 26.1 percent put in less than one hour and 23.8 percent reported one to two hours. In 1994, only 19.6 percent read for zero hours.
- On the 2005 *National Survey of Student Engagement*, 24 percent of first-year students in college read no books at all in

the previous year “for personal enjoyment or academic enrichment.” More than half, 56 percent, read one to four books—that’s all.

- On the 2007 Noel-Levitz *National Freshman Attitudes Report*, fully 53.3 percent disagreed with the statement “I get a great deal of satisfaction from reading.” On the statement, “Over the years, books have broadened my horizons and stimulated my imagination,” 42.9 percent disagreed. Thirty-six percent of them admitted that “Books have never gotten me very excited.”

It isn’t hard to identify one of the reasons for the slide. With the advent of the Digital Age, teens have more diversions at hand than they did before. Leisure time is a finite number, making leisure behavior a zero-sum game. The laptop, iPhone, video game, and Photoshop pull eyes and ears away from other diversions. The National School Boards Association estimates social networking time at nine hours per week, and Nielsen reports that teens average 2,272 text messages per month. Television time remains high (the American Time Use Survey rates it as still the most popular activity for fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds), so digital tools take minutes from elsewhere. Books and reading inevitably go down.

What is less hard to identify, or at least to understand, is the brash and contrary attitude that has sprung up along with the withdrawal from books. It’s as if the rise of digital devices has put books in their place, limiting them to but one (lesser) form of literacy. In a 2005 column in *Council Chronicle*, Randy Bomer, then-president of the National Council of Teachers of English, contended that adolescents already possess an advanced and creative literacy, just not the kind that book-oriented educators appreciate:

An ample and growing body of research shows us that adolescents are expert users of many and varied forms and technologies of literacy. Their practices are purposeful and sophisticated, and they use literacy to do the kinds of things people have always done with literacy. As most parents of adolescents know very well, kids are more likely to be expert at emerging information and communications technologies than their parents or their teachers are. They have sophisticated viewer literacies—understandings about how video, TV, and film work and vast reserves of knowledge about how what they are watching now exists in dialogue with older stories, characters, and forms.

This statement may sound absurd in its claim that thirteen-year-olds are “experts” in communications and that they possess “vast

reserves of knowledge” about “older stories, characters, and forms.” But the recourse to “viewer literacy” is an ominous new maneuver in the field. It says that the import of books and the practice of literacy themselves have changed, and we should recognize a new order of reading and text in the world. Kids don’t read books? Well, they read other things. They don’t know much history? Well, maybe not the history in textbooks, but they know other kinds.

That’s the contention, and it resounds everywhere. In a report on video games by the American Federation of Scientists, former Deputy Secretary of Education Eugene Hickok proclaims of the MTV generation: “They think differently, they act differently, they want to be engaged, they’re more engaged than ever before, their attention span is quicker, they are not inclined to sit down and spend hours quietly reading a book. They’re more inclined to be reading three or four books at a time while they multi-task on their Palm Pilots.” Apart from the silly belief in reading four books while texting, this assertion accepts digital literacy as a full-fledged intellectual practice, a mode of reading and learning a lot more exciting and promising than the old kinds. In spite of the confidence, though, there is no “ample and growing body of research” on the digital facility of adolescents, only the commonplace reiteration of their techno-aptitudes. The unmistakable sign of its spread comes from the young practitioners themselves, who evoke digital catchphrases with the coolness of veteran users. Here a twenty-something contributor to a *USA Today* blog on “Generation Next” pronounces one as neatly as the professionals:

Today’s young people don’t suffer from illiteracy; they just suffer from e-literacy. We can’t spell and we don’t know synonyms because there’s less need to know. What smart person would devote hours to learning words that can be accessed at the click of a button? Spell-check can spell. Shift+F7 produces synonyms. What is wrong with relying on something that is perfectly reliable?

E-literacy—that’s the new virtue, the intellectual feat of the rising generation. Alarmists and traditionalists interpret it as ignorance and a-literacy, but, the e-literacy fans retort, they only display their antiquarianism. In a June 2007 op-ed in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* entitled “With Prodigious Leaps, Children Move to the Technological Forefront,” President Jonathan Fanton of the MacArthur Foundation claims that “today’s digital youth are in the process of creating a new kind of literacy, which extends beyond the traditions of reading and writing into an evolving community of expression and problem-solving that is changing not only their world, but ours, as well.” Young

people shirk books, maybe so, but not because they're lazy and stupid. The twenty-first-century economy requires rapid communications, faster transfers of info, the reasoning goes, and ambitious teens don't have time to deliberate over a volume of Robert Frost or learn five new words a day. E-literacy derives not from bibliophobia, then, but from the miraculous and evolving advent of digital technology, the Information Age, and the Electronic Word. The more young adults master the practices of digital life, the better they succeed. With the American Freshman Survey reporting in 2005 that 71 percent of students attend college "to be able to make more money" (up from 44.6 percent in 1971), e-literacy makes a lot more sense than book learning.

The e-literacy argument proceeds, and with so many benefits from technology shoring it up, bibliophiles have lost their primary rationale. Book reading doesn't seem to improve young people's money and prospects, so why do it? If a national leader of English teachers commends them for their viewer know-how, why spend four hours on a Sunday afternoon digging through *Middlemarch* or *Up from Slavery*? When science writer Steven Johnson appears on *The Colbert Report* and asserts that twelve-year-olds who play *Civilization IV*, the second-most-popular game in 2005, "re-create the entire course of human economic and technological history," the screen rises into a better and faster teacher than the textbook. Bibliophiles end up in the rear guard forced to re-argue the case for books.

Most of the time, they lose. To argue against screen diversions is to take on an economic and cultural juggernaut, and an even stronger force, too: the penchants of adolescents. An April 2007 *Education Week* article whose header runs "Young people typically plug in to new technology far more often on their own time than in school" briefly illustrates the attitude. "When I step out of school, I have a pretty high tech life," a Providence, Rhode Island, high school senior tells the reporter. "When I step in school, I feel like I'm not me anymore. I have to jump into this old-fashioned thing where everything is restricted." Digital technology reflects his identity, books alienate him, teachers restrict him, and hundreds of peers echo his disquiet. Furthermore, they have a host of experts to reinforce the self-centered view, as an educator and futurist, Marc Prensky, does just a few paragraphs later in the article. "School represents the past," he says. "After-school is where they are training themselves for the future. The danger is that as school becomes less and less relevant, it becomes more and more of a prison."

But however much the apologists proclaim the digital revolution and hail teens and twenty-year-olds for forging ahead, they haven't

explained a critical paradox. If the young have acquired so much digital proficiency, and if digital technology exercises their intellectual faculties so well, then why haven't knowledge and skill levels risen accordingly? If the Information Age solicits quicker and savvier literacies, why do so many entrants into college and work end up in remediation? A 2008 report from Strong American Schools found that 43 percent of two-year college students and 29 percent of four-year college students end up in a remedial class in reading, writing, or math. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, one-third of students who enter college straight out of high school drop out after one year. And a 2004 study from the National Commission on Writing surveyed businesses and determined that corporate America spends \$3.1 billion dollars a year on in-house tutoring in writing. Digital habits have mushroomed, and kids read and write more words than ever before, but reading scores for high school seniors have been flat since the 1970s and down since the early 1990s. Until we receive evidence from colleges and workplaces that digital habits do, in fact, yield better academic and job performance, let's hold off on proclaiming the allure of the screen and the end of the book.

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