

## The Twilight of the Books?

Monday, January 7, 2008



Years ago, Walter Ong argued that our civilization is returning to a condition of “orality” in which the text gives way to the tongue. Specifically, Ong argued that this condition is actually a form of “secondary orality” since the culture had once been literate — but willingly gave up reading. The great civilizational achievement of literacy was being surrendered to a new non-literate age, fueled by television and mass electronic culture.

The bare fact is that reading is not an important part of the lives of many persons — including millions who *can* read. Americans have far more leisure time than ever before, but they fill those hours with everything from television to video games to surfing the internet. These media often use words, but they may also be the great enemies of literacy.

Writing in *The New Yorker*, Caleb Crain warns that literary reading is fast disappearing as Americans are shifting attention to amusements. In “[The Twilight of the Books](#),” Crain cites a number of research reports from both the United States and the Netherlands and argues that we are just not reading as previous generations had read. Book sales per person are falling, reading scores at many grade levels are falling, and this generation of parents is producing a generation of young people who do not read books — and generally feel no loss.

As Crain reports:

*The most striking results were generational. In general, older Dutch people read more. It would be natural to infer from this that each generation reads more as it ages, and, indeed, the researchers found something like this to be the case for earlier generations. But, with later ones, the age-related growth in reading dwindled. The turning point seems to have come with the generation born in the nineteen-forties. By 1995, a Dutch college graduate born after 1969 was likely to spend fewer hours reading each week than a little-educated person born before 1950. As far as reading habits were concerned, academic credentials mattered less than whether a person had been raised in the era of television. The N.E.A., in its twenty years of data, has found a similar pattern. Between 1982 and 2002, the percentage of Americans who read literature declined not only in every age group but in every generation—even in those moving from youth into middle age, which is often considered the most fertile time of life for reading. We are reading less as we age, and we are reading less than people who were our age ten or twenty years ago.*

The impact of all this is more significant than some might think. Only 13 percent of Americans are thought to be able to take two contrasting newspaper editorials and come to a reasoned comparison. Then again, many Americans are not reading newspapers in the first place. This has obvious implications for our national discourse and politics.

For Christians, the concern must reach even deeper levels of concern. Christians are a “people of the Book.” Our knowledge of God, the Gospel, and all things essential to our faith is found within a book, the written text of the Bible. Beyond this, while Christian witness is often oral in transmission, the survival of the church depends upon the availability of the Bible as the church’s living witness to Jesus Christ. Put simply, Christians who are not deeply involved in a growing understanding of the Bible will find their faith fed, fueled, and formed by something other than the Bible.

Taking the argument a step further, Christians should note that Christianity has also given birth to a literary culture of books. The church has been fed, challenged, and corrected by arguments and narratives that have been irreducibly literary. Take away the book (or take away reading those books) and the church is a very different people.

Crain helps us to see this point by looking at the way reading is becoming a mere hobby for the eccentric:

*There's no reason to think that reading and writing are about to become extinct, but some sociologists speculate that reading books for pleasure will one day be the province of a special "reading class," much as it was before the arrival of mass literacy, in the second half of the nineteenth century. They warn that it probably won't regain the prestige of exclusivity; it may just become "an increasingly arcane hobby."*

Television seems to be the main competitor, even as other digital media and entertainments join the competition for attention and time. The viewer and the reader are given themselves to very different forms of activity, especially with reference to mental activity. As Crain notes, "A reader learns about the world and imagines it differently from the way a viewer does; according to some experimental psychologists, a reader and a viewer even think differently. If the eclipse of reading continues, the alteration is likely to matter in ways that aren't foreseeable."

Indeed, Christians can perhaps understand that these "ways that aren't foreseeable" will influence the shape of Christian discipleship as well. Charles Spurgeon preached to thousands of persons in the weekly services of the Metropolitan Tabernacle. But the printed version of his sermons hit the streets of London and other major British cities within 48 to 72 hours of the preaching event, reaching many thousands more than could hear him on Sunday.

A comparison of Spurgeon's sermons as preached and as printed reveals heavy editing — done by Spurgeon himself. Spurgeon understood the difference between the experience of hearing and reading, and his careful editing of the sermons reveals this. Some estimate that Spurgeon may be the most extensively published author in the English language, and his sermons remain in print now over a century after his death. Our only access to Spurgeon's preaching is through the printed word.

The revolution of digital media has brought many gains. Indeed, no one but the most technophobic among us would want to return to a day without the Internet. I see television as a great enemy of civilization, but it remains indispensable for some news and cultural entertainment. Some forms of literary expression can survive on the Internet, but few are likely to be read a century from now. The book remains the most stable form of literary communication in human history.

Crain remarks:

*No effort of will is likely to make reading popular again. Children may be browbeaten, but adults resist interference with their pleasures. It may simply be the case that many Americans prefer to learn about the world and to entertain themselves with television and other streaming media, rather than with the printed word, and that it is taking a few generations for them to shed old habits like newspapers and novels. The alternative is that we are nearing the end of a pendulum swing, and that reading will return, driven back by forces as complicated as those now driving it away.*

*But if the change is permanent, and especially if the slide continues, the world will feel different, even to those who still read.*

The world will feel different, and so will the church.

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