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## Cover Story



# The Loss of Literature

Are Americans forgetting how to read?  
Or simply looking to new sources for information?

BY LAWRENCE HARDY

Evan Hoppman loves to read books—mostly science fiction and fantasy. He reads when he's supposed to be doing his homework. He reads in the car after volunteering to go with his mother on errands. At night at his home in southern Maryland, he reads in bed under the covers, using a flashlight to illuminate the words.

Evan's reading habits may not seem unusual for a 10-year-old, but if he is still reading fiction by age 18, he will become part of a distinct, and rapidly dwindling, minority: American adults who engage in "literary reading"—anything from Shakespeare to Stephen King to the eerie stories that Evan devours after his family has gone to bed.

A recent study by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) found that the percentage of American adults who read literature—any literature, whether it's *Crime and Punishment* or romance novels—has declined rapidly over the past two decades. The most precipitous drop has been among 18-to 24-year-olds, who used to be among the nation's heaviest readers. Only about 43 percent of this group now reads literature, compared with nearly 60 percent in 1982.

"The accelerating declines in literary reading among all demographic groups of American adults indicate an imminent cultural crisis," the NEA report says. "The trends among younger adults warrant special concern, suggesting that—unless some effective solution is found—literary culture, and literacy in general, will continue to worsen. Indeed, at the current rate of loss, literary reading as a leisure activity will virtually disappear in half a century."

Are we really facing an "imminent cultural crisis," as the NEA contends? Is literature on its way to becoming a dead language? If young adults are reading fewer novels and short

stories, is it because they don't want to, because they can't understand them-or some combination of the two? And finally, what should schools be doing about it?

"I think that the schools have a larger responsibility because they are, for most kids, the only place they will ever encounter literary reading," says Diane Ravitch, research professor of education at New York University and a former assistant secretary of education. "... And if they don't get it there, they're not going to get it."

### **The rise of the digital alternatives**

Look around and you might wonder what all the fuss is about. Don't gargantuan Borders or Barnes & Noble stores seem to be popping up with each new shopping center? Aren't book clubs thriving? Didn't Oprah's Book Club, the grand lady of them all, manage to send the 131-year-old Anna Karenina-no one's definition of an easy read-to the top of the bestseller list?

To those who warn of "imminent cultural crisis," might you not answer with an equally catchy phrase of your own-for example, Harry Potter?

All true, says the NEA. But the fact is that, despite these phenomena, the reading of all books, including nonfiction, is down, though not as precipitously as literary reading. In 2002, when the survey was conducted, just 57 percent of adults said they read any book, fiction or otherwise, during the year, compared with 61 percent 10 years earlier.



And, as you might have guessed, the likely culprit is as near as your computer. Or television. Or GameBoy.

"We think that the main cause is the rise of digital entertainment, the rise of electronic alternatives to reading," says Mark Bauerlein, NEA's director of research and analysis. "Kids are spending more and more time in front of a screen and less time with books, either reading or being read to."

That the digital revolution has had a tremendous impact on young people's reading habits is beyond dispute. But there is considerable disagreement over whether this means children are reading less overall, or just reading fewer books and getting more information online. Indeed, some experts think the new generation may be reading more than ever.

"They're text messaging. They're surfing. They're blogging," says MaryEllen Vogt, president of the International Reading Association. "All of this is out-of-school literary behavior. ... I don't think the sky is falling. I just think we need to look at literacy in ways we haven't in the past."

### **The imagined world**

But how rich is this literary experience compared with the traditional act of reading books? Once again, the experts are divided. "I'm a book lover," Vogt says, certainly to no one's surprise. But she says schools aren't doing enough to embrace this new kind of online literacy. "We don't do a very good job of valuing the kind of reading they're doing out of school and finding a way to connect that to what they do in school."

Others say that something critical is being lost.

“The argument that students are doing more reading online flies in the face of what nearly all of us know for a fact: Most student time online is spent uploading or downloading music, playing games, or e-mailing boyfriends and girlfriends,” says Jim Trelease, author of *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. “There’s little or no ‘real’ reading being done there; in fact, students are not riding the ‘information highway,’ they’re Rollerblading on the I-playground.”

And whatever digital reading they’re doing is usually far less valuable than what they can get from books, says Carol Jago, codirector of the California Reading and Literature Project and a high school teacher in Santa Monica.

“I don’t really count reading online,” Jago says. “It’s scanning for information.”

Literary reading offers the possibility of much more: entry into an imagined world that, by its very nature, questions readers’ assumptions and forces them to think. At the beginning of his book, *Why Read?* University of Virginia English professor Mark Edmundson quotes Marcel Proust on the qualities of self-discovery, reflection, and analysis that good literature demands: “It seems to me that they would not be ‘my’ readers but readers of their own selves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combreys used to offer his customers—it would be my book but with it I would furnish them the means to reading what lay inside themselves.”

Edmundson contrasts this idea—what Ralph Waldo Emerson calls “creative reading”—with the willy-nilly absorption of facts on the Internet. He doesn’t mention the half-baked opinions, lies, and distortions that also lurk in cyberspace, but, of course, they’re out there as well.

“By putting a world of facts at the end of a keystroke, computers have made facts, their command, their manipulation, and their ordering, central to what now can qualify as humanistic education,” Edmundson writes. “The result is to suspend reflection about the differences among wisdom, knowledge, and information. Everything that can be accessed online can seem equal to everything else, no datum more important or more profound than any other. Thus the possibility presents itself that there really is no more wisdom; there is no more knowledge; there is only information. No thought is a challenge or affront to what one currently believes.”



The graduates of top schools such as the University of Virginia probably will survive and even prosper despite the diminished status of literature in their lives. They are smart enough, at least, to be able to distinguish the Internet’s bogus facts from its correct ones and to order their world in a way that—while not as enriching as Edmundson would like

—enables them to rise to the top of our information-obsessed society.

But what about the rest of us? Look at some of the studies cited by the NEA and others, and you might wonder whether people’s grasp of information, of facts, is as complete as that of earlier generations. How much might this be attributable to a lack of good reading or of reading comprehension?

In *The Skills Gap 2001*, a report by the National Association of Manufacturers, 78 percent of respondents said public schools were not preparing students adequately for the workplace, with the biggest deficiency being a lack of academic and employability skills.

A survey by the National Conference of State Legislatures found that just 40 percent of 15- to 26-year-olds could say which party controlled Congress, but 64 percent knew that Ruben Studdard was a winner on the TV show “American Idol.” The National Geographic-Roper 2002 Global Geographic Literacy Survey found that 56 percent of Americans aged 18 to 24 could not find India on a map, and 85 percent could not locate Afghanistan, Iraq, or Israel, despite the constant presence of these countries in the news.

Two years later, a poll by the University of Maryland’s Program on International Policy

Attitudes found widespread misconceptions about the positions of the two presidential candidates. For example, just 59 percent of respondents knew that Democrat John Kerry favored the United States being part of the International Criminal Court. Moreover, 51 percent of respondents believed incorrectly that Bush supported the Kyoto Treaty on global warming, and 84 percent believed mistakenly that he favored including labor and environmental standards in trade agreements.

Is it possible that a lack of reading contributed to these misconceptions? And, if so, what does it say about the health of our democracy if citizens do not understand the essential positions of their leaders? Is this the inevitable fate of a fast-paced society of watchers, accustomed to, in Edmundson’s words, “total entertainment all the time?”

### **How we make meaning**

When you’re reading you are the equal partner in the making of meaning. “We are in control of the speed process,” writes children’s author Philip Pullman. “We go at the rate we want, not the rate someone else has decided for us. When we’ve finished reading, we bring away what we ourselves and the text have made together. If we don’t contribute, if we don’t take part, we get nothing. If we do, we get a world. That’s what I mean by the democracy of the text and it’s why printing and publishing and libraries and literacy and booksellers and writers and books are more necessary than ever and why reading and democracy are not different things, not even different aspects of something else; they are the very same thing.”

Psychologist Jane M. Healy, author of *Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children’s Minds-for Better and Worse*, approaches the issue of computers versus books from a scientist’s perspective, but she comes to much the same conclusion as Pullman.

“Visual technologies are so seductive and habituating, that it’s hard to drag yourself away from them and do something else,” she says.

But drag yourself away-or drag your children away-you must, Healy says. “It isn’t only the capacity to read [that is lost]. It’s the capacity for the kind of logical, reflective, analytic thought that reading promotes. And if you don’t develop those skills somewhere along the way, it becomes almost impossible to recover them as you get older.”



“There are vast implications for our survival as a nation-or certainly our survival as the culture we have known,” Healy continues. “Cultures can evolve, and they can evolve either positively or negatively. And those that evolve negatively go down the tubes.”

All this talk about national survival and the like amuses people like Philip Thompson, a speech professor at West Chester University near Philadelphia.

“Certainly, people are reading less today in traditional media,” Thompson says. “People

are reading fewer books. Many are not reading books at all. ... I don't think that's a terrible thing-unless you're an English teacher."

The cultural messages once conveyed almost exclusively by books-messages that bind a society together-are now found in other media, particularly movies, Thompson says. Movies and TV are what people are talking about in offices and teachers' lounges, not books. And, as far as losing our capacity to imagine, Thompson adds: "I think you lose the kind of imagination that is nurtured by reading. But that doesn't mean you don't have other kinds of imagination that are nurtured by other things."

To illustrate, Thompson tells a story about a newspaper reporter calling him for a story on just this topic: the decline of reading. The reporter had seen the transcript from one of Thompson's classes, in which he invents a kind of Socratic dialogue between two of his pets: Dr. Saffron, the representative of all that is elite and highbrow, and Chester, the couch potato and Everyman.

Apparently, the reporter's computer did not process the images that accompanied the transcript, because he asked for permission to use one of Dr. Saffron's quotes.

"I had to tell him that Dr. Saffron was a bird," Thompson says.

"It seems to me that some people would be better off if they expanded their notion of literacy," Thompson continues. "There are things that you can get visually that you can't get through the written word."

Thompson points out that the same dire warnings being voiced today about the digital world and its pitfalls were being said 50 years ago about comic books. And, in fact, the hand-wringing goes back further. In a recent essay, Catharine Lumby, chair of the Media and Communication School at the University of Sydney, notes that the 18th-century poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge "saw the novel pretty much the same way many people view the 'Jerry Springer Show.'" Coleridge pronounced that reading [novels] 'produces no improvement of the intellect but fills the mind with a mawkish and morbid sensibility.'"

Lumby's point is that today's popular culture supplies us with tomorrow's classics. That's not to say that the classics aren't important, but that popular media can be viewed alongside them-with little danger of knocking Melville and Shakespeare off their pedestals.

"Culture involves a dialogue," Lumby writes. "A text doesn't just sit there radiating universal truths, regardless of how brilliantly it's been crafted. It invites us to engage-and sometimes quite profound personal insights and emotions can be unleashed by apparently banal cultural forms."

Lumby describes a research project in which she and a colleague interviewed teenage girls about their media consumption. "We were amazed by how eloquently they talked about the ethical lessons embedded in their TV favorite show, 'Big Brother.' Among the issues they discussed were remaining true to oneself in a group, drawing a line between healthy self-interest and selfishness, and the extent to which appearances matter."

But Jago, of the California Reading and Literature Project, isn't buying it. Certainly, it's fine to spend a little class time discussing hip-hop music and other popular culture, she suggests, but only as a conduit to something deeper. What she doesn't like is teachers mining that culture for literary themes or using "teen lit" for discussions of symbolism and foreshadowing.

“These books are written to be gobbled up,” Jago says.

NYU’s Ravitch refers to teen lit as “problem-oriented” literature, books written about drugs or relationships or other pressures of adolescence.

“This goes to the whole notion of kids not wanting to read anything unless it’s about themselves,” Ravitch says. “But I think you have to have a larger and more generous concept of ‘about oneself.’ It’s not going to be about you. But, in some sense, in all great literature you enter into the world of literature. If it enters into your world, that’s fine. But it really is intended that you enter into the world that it creates.”

Not that it will always resonate with young people. Ravitch recalls being made to read George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* as a high school student in Houston. “And it was totally meaningless. It just passed right over our heads. By the time I read it as an adult I just found it incredible and profoundly moving, and it made me cry. It didn’t touch me [earlier], but I wasn’t grown up enough to read it.”

Does that mean her high school shouldn’t have taught the book? No, Ravitch says. It just means it didn’t click for her, but it might have for someone else, and students need to be challenged and introduced to classics that hold the possibility of resonating with them.

In her 2003 book, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, Ravitch argued that textbooks have been dumbed down by well-placed constituencies on the political left and right alike who want to censor material they consider objectionable. She says a similar homogenization threatens the English curriculum as well.

As a former member of the National Assessment Governing Board, Ravitch participated in numerous hearings across the country on state curriculum frameworks for the National Assessment of Educational Progress. “And the most striking thing about the English frameworks is very few of them mention literature at all,” Ravitch says. “They will say that it’s important to read different genres. But it’s almost as though it’s a leap too far to actually say, ‘Read Shakespeare.’”

But what good is Shakespeare if students won’t read it-or struggle with it so much that they develop an aversion to anything their English teachers assign? That’s the view of Donald R. Gallo, who teaches at Central Connecticut State University and is an editor of anthologies for teenagers. In his essay “How Classics Create an Alliterate Society,” Gallo argues that emphasizing the classics is the surest way to turn off adolescents to reading.

Recalling his own experience as a teenager, Gallo says he, like others his age, was interested in teenage concerns, not adult concerns, but the books they were being asked to read were written for adults, about adult issues.

“Now you can see why I understand and sympathize with the 10th-grade boy who told me that his required literature books ‘... have nothing to do with me.’ And the 10th-grade girl who defined literature as ‘keeping in touch with the dead.’ Or the teenager who said, ‘I’m tired of reading this boring stuff. I want to read something with a pulse!’ One of my former graduate students put it this way: ‘My experience in high school with the classics was similar to dissecting a frog: It was tedious and it stunk.’”

Gallo cites the 70-word opening sentence of *Silas Marner*-the same book Ravitch says moved her to tears as an adult-to make his point. There are better books written for adolescents, he says-books with snappier openings and the kind of action, suspense, and



adventure that teenagers-particularly boys-like. To insist instead on teaching the classics to teenagers who don't want to read them is simply elitist.

The argument about teen lit versus the classics-like the broader argument about what makes a literate society-isn't going away anytime soon. Jago disagrees with Gallo, saying that the classics *can* form the basis of an enticing curriculum if a teacher uses a little imagination. For a lesson on *Hamlet*, for example, Jago had her high school students discuss a continuum of viewpoints that run from Lance Armstrong's life-affirming statement, "I want to die at 100 years old with an American flag on my back ..." with Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy.

Certainly, there are English teachers who bore their students by analyzing themes ad nauseam-the kind of literary dissection that Gallo's graduate student said was reminiscent of a bad biology class. But it doesn't have to be this way, Jago says.

And the debate continues

At the National Book Festival on the Capitol Mall in Washington, D.C., the literary life seems anything but dead. In large tents perched around the mall, readers of all ages listen to authors read from their works and try to explain what it is that inspires them to write.

Evan Hoppman, the 10-year-old aficionado of science fiction novels and fantasy, is there with his mother, Nicole, and his brothers, Ryan, 11, and Cameron, 5. They're listening to David Shannon, whose book *No, David!* is about a little boy Cameron's age who is always getting into trouble. Shannon is one of Cameron's favorite authors.

Evan's mother, a kindergarten teacher, has taken some basic steps to make the boys into the excellent readers they have become. Books are all over the house, and no videos or TV are allowed from Monday to Friday-simple things, yes, but more, apparently, than most parents do.

"I think we're going to probably forever have this struggle between the forces of deep learning and the forces of immediate gratification," Ravitch says. "And the reason I think it's going to go on for a long time, if not forever, is it's been going on for decades, and there will always be people who say 'What's the point of all this, you can look it up?'"

"Why bother wasting your time reading, when you can see the movie?"

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