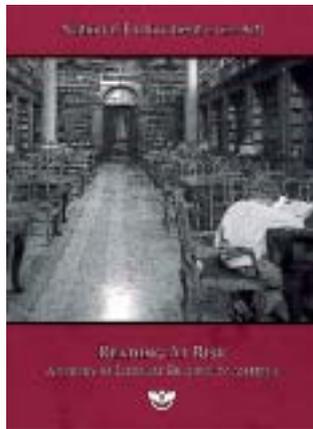


A Bad Moon Rising

A recent survey by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) shows a dramatic decline in the number of American adults who read books, particularly literature. The group interviewed more than 17,000 Americans in all gender, income, educational level, age, and race/ethnicity categories. Results from the 2002 interviews were compared with surveys done in 1982 and 1992, and the numbers supported several dismal conclusions. “The accelerating declines in literary reading among all demographic groups of American adults indicate an imminent cultural crisis.” The NEA, which had worked with the Census Bureau on the survey, predicts “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.”

On some level, everyone has understood that print would suffer in the Electronic Age. But then why hasn't the obvious question been asked: “What happens to a civilization that quits reading?”

Titled *Reading at Risk*, the survey results contain a warning and a couple of answers. How this happened is addressed with some 1999 statistics. In that year, a study “showed that the average American child lives in a household with 2.9 televisions, 1.8 VCRs, 3.1 radios, 2.1 CD players, 1.4 video game players, and 1 computer.” It should come as no surprise that other numbers in the report show “the steepest decline in literary reading is in the youngest age groups.” In the



past 20 years, the rate of decline for the youngest adults (18-24) has been 55% greater than for other adults. From 1982 to now, the 18-24 group has had a 28% rate of decline in literary reading.

All reading has suffered. But what difference does it make whether you read the book or watch the movie, read the newspaper or magazine or get your information from TV? Dana Gioia, chairman of the NEA, describes the process that's endangered.

“Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice...Print culture affords irreplaceable forms of focused attention and contemplation that makes complex communications and insights possible.”

Further, the study indicates that “the decline in literary reading foreshadows an erosion in cultural and civic participation.” That's because, statistically, literary readers are more likely than nonliterary readers “to perform volunteer and charity work, visit art museums, attend performing arts events, and attend sporting events.”

Gioia warns we're facing a future of decreasing literacy and, “As more Americans lose this capability, our nation becomes less informed, active, and independent-minded. These are not qualities that a free, innovative, or productive society can afford to lose.” ■

You can download and read the entire report in PDF format, or you can order a free print copy at <http://www.nea.gov/news/news04/ReadingAtRisk.html>.