

“The Closing of the American Book”

By ANDREW SOLOMON

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A survey released on Thursday reports that reading for pleasure is way down in America among every group — old and young, wealthy and poor, educated and uneducated, men and women, Hispanic, black and white. The survey, by the National Endowment for the Arts, also indicates that people who read for pleasure are many times more likely than those who don't to visit museums and attend musical performances, almost three times as likely to perform volunteer and charity work, and almost twice as likely to attend sporting events. Readers, in other words, are active, while nonreaders — more than half the population — have settled into apathy. There is a basic social divide between those for whom life is an accrual of fresh experience and knowledge, and those for whom maturity is a process of mental atrophy. The shift toward the latter category is frightening.

Reading is not an active expression like writing, but it is not a passive experience either. It requires effort, concentration, attention. In exchange, it offers the stimulus to and the fruit of thought and feeling. Kafka said, "A book must be an ice ax to break the seas frozen inside our soul." The metaphoric quality of writing — the fact that so much can be expressed through the rearrangement of 26 shapes on a piece of paper — is as exciting as the idea of a complete genetic code made up of four bases: man's work on a par with nature's. Discerning the patterns of those arrangements is the essence of civilization.

The electronic media, on the other hand, tend to be torpid. Despite the existence of good television, fine writing on the Internet, and video games that test logic, the electronic media by and large invite inert reception. One selects channels, but then the information comes out preprocessed. Most people use television as a means of turning their minds off, not on. Many readers watch television without peril; but for those for whom television replaces reading, the consequences are far-reaching.

My last book was about depression, and the question I am most frequently asked is why depression is on the rise. I talk about the loneliness that comes of spending the day with a TV or a computer or video screen. Conversely, literary reading is an entry into dialogue; a book can be a friend, talking not at you, but to you. That the rates of depression should be going up as the rates of reading are going down is no happenstance. Meanwhile, there is some persuasive evidence that escalating levels of Alzheimer's disease reflect a lack of active engagement of adult minds. While the disease appears to be determined in large part by heredity and environmental stimulants, it seems that those who continue learning may be less likely to develop Alzheimer's.

So the crisis in reading is a crisis in national health.

I will never forget seeing, as a high school student on my first trip to East Berlin, the plaza where Hitler and Goebbels had burned books from the university library. Those bonfires were predicated on the idea that texts could undermine armies. Soviet repression of literature followed the same principle.

The Nazis were right in believing that one of the most powerful weapons in a war of ideas is books. And for better or worse, the United States is now in such a war. Without books, we cannot succeed in our current struggle against absolutism and terrorism. The retreat from civic to virtual life is a retreat from engaged democracy, from the principles that we say we want to share with the rest of the world. You are what you read. If you read nothing, then your mind withers, and your ideals lose their vitality and sway.

So the crisis in reading is a crisis in national politics.

It is important to acknowledge that the falling-off of reading has to do not only with the incursion of anti-intellectualism, but also with a flawed intellectualism. The ascendancy of poststructuralism in the 1980's coincided with the beginning of the catastrophic downturn in reading; deconstructionism's suggestion that all text is equal in its meanings and the denigration of the canon led to the devaluation of literature. The role of literature is to illuminate, to strengthen, to explain why some aspect of life is moving or beautiful or terrible or sad or important or insignificant for people who might otherwise not understand so much or so well. Reading is experience, but it also enriches other experience.

Even more immediate than the crises in health and politics brought on by the decline of reading is the crisis in national education. We have one of the most literate societies in history. What is the point of having a population that can read, but doesn't? We need to teach people not only how, but also why to read. The struggle is not to make people read more, but to make them want to read more.

While there is much work to be done in the public schools, society at large also has a job. We need to make reading, which is in its essence a solitary endeavor, a social one as well, to encourage that great thrill of finding kinship in shared experiences of books. We must weave reading back into the very fabric of the culture, and make it a mainstay of community.

Reading is harder than watching television or playing video games. I think of the Epicurean mandate to exchange easier for more difficult pleasures, predicated on the understanding that those more difficult pleasures are more rewarding. I think of Walter Pater's declaration: "The service of philosophy, of speculative culture, towards the human spirit is to rouse, to startle it to a life of sharp and eager observation The poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass." Surely that is something all Americans would want, if we only understood how readily we might achieve it, how well worth the effort it is.

Andrew Solomon is the author of "The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression."