

What Kind of Books? What Kind of Readers?¹

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WHEN THE SUBJECT of the present conference—"More Books; More Readers"—was told to me, and I was asked to present a paper which would relate in some way to the topic at hand, it seemed to me that the only possible reaction that I could voice would be one of skepticism concerning the implicit assumption underlying the conference theme. As it hardly seemed proper for me, as invited guest, to accept the invitation and then promptly to question the beliefs of my hosts, I was in a quandary as to how to approach the subject of my paper. It was a great relief when I discovered that the title suggested for the paper seemed to support my belief that the theme of the conference cannot mean what it says. "What kind of books? What kind of readers?" poses some basic questions concerning the starry-eyed idealism of the official statement—questions which came immediately to my mind when the theme was announced. Apparently, then, I should not be completely out of tune with my listeners if I should enlarge upon those questions in the body of my paper.

Strictly speaking, it would seem that any attack upon the "more books-more readers" ideal should be directed at the public library rather than at the academic library. The drives for larger circulation, for new registrants and for wider appeals

to the public are mainly the concern of the public library. After all, the public to whom the college and university library caters is limited by definition: it consists of the student body, the faculty, and the alumni of the particular institution. I think it has never been seriously proposed that the college library make a concerted effort to attract to its collection the members of the community-at-large who are not in some way connected with the school. More books may be a problem in the college library, but are "more readers"?

In three very important ways the college and university libraries have an interest in the "more readers" question which makes it pertinent to evaluate that goal even before such a group as this. First, the college² librarians are keenly aware that all of their potential users are not reached; that even within the limits which the special nature of the library imposes, there is not a 100 per cent response from its community. Therefore many college librarians consider the drive for more readers to be a legitimate goal as long as any part of the student body or the faculty remains unreached by the library. *The first goal, then, is to reach those students who are not now patrons of the library.*

Secondly, college librarians are even more concerned with the fact that library use is merely a mandatory chore for many students. They know that a great majority of their patrons read only assigned pages

² For the sake of convenience, the terms "college library" and "university library" will be used interchangeably throughout this paper to denote all libraries connected with institutions of higher learning.

¹ Paper presented at the Conference of the Illinois Library Association, November 1948.

in prescribed books; that many never set foot in any part of the library except the reserve room; and that the few nonassigned titles which do circulate are seldom free-reading, but are generally used for the writing of term papers or in some other connection with assigned class work. Librarians feel that such grudging and disinterested use of library materials is the least desirable use to which its facilities can be put. They should like to see their students really interested in the book, reading with pleasure, however serious the purpose served. The college librarian is interested in enticing students to read on their own—for recreation, for information, for self-education—without the imposition of class assignment to rob the reading act of the benefits of spontaneous choice and desire. *The second goal, then, is not just to reach new readers, but to make real readers of those we already have.*

Thirdly, college librarians know that while students and young people in their teens form a large proportion of the library clientele even in the public library, that neither the college nor the public library retains more than a fraction of them as patrons five or ten years later. They realize that once formal schooling is dropped, book reading is also dropped by the great majority. That these young people have taken occupations as self-supporting adults, that they have assumed family responsibilities, that other rival interests vie for their time is acknowledged. These are all *good* reasons for failure to read, but librarians doubt that they are the *real* reasons. For those who do continue to read are also subject to the same demands upon their attention and rivals for their time. "No time" is the reason given by people who do not *want* to read. Invariably it has been found that time exists for many other noncompulsory activities in which the respondent has a greater interest. Librarians fear that

they, along with our modern educational system, are partially responsible for this condition. If reading were made more attractive to the students; if they were taught to turn to the book almost as second nature; if a more concentrated effort were made to make lifelong book-users, perhaps school-leaving would not automatically mean book-leaving. Thus, *the third goal is not merely the extension of reading to nonreaders, nor the enrichment of the readers whom we now have, but the retention of current readers as library users after they are no longer members of the college student body.*

At present, the college library's most typical approach to all three of these problems has been through the establishment of browsing rooms, or general reading collections. Most collections of this type are admittedly and deliberately stocked with noncurricular reading to attract those whose classwork does not force them to use library materials; to supplement class assignments with recreational reading which will cater to personal interests; and to demonstrate the many-faceted appeals and services which the book can provide in addition to the purely educational ones. In such a collection, colleges and universities attempt to provide attractive and friendly personnel in an attractive and friendly atmosphere stocked with, if you will pardon the pathetic fallacy, attractive and friendly books. These, they feel, are the three basic requirements for luring in new readers, broadening the interests of the readers it has, and establishing a habit of book reading which will be lasting.

The theory behind such a collection appears logical enough. Most university libraries have closed stacks and complicated charging and request procedures. Many students do not even know what kinds of things are available in the collection. It is assumed that many of them might read

much more if materials meeting their needs and coinciding with their interests were brought to their attention and made accessible. The establishment of a collection of books of general interest which are readily accessible when wanted, and which may be examined by the reader and easily charged out, eliminates an unnecessary barrier between reader and book and guards against the loss of many potential readers who otherwise might never find the useful and worthwhile titles for which, all unconsciously, they may be seeking. And the student who learns to turn to the library for his leisure reading—the student who learns what pleasure can be obtained from the book, even though his use of it may be educational or informational rather than recreational—will be the student, it is believed, who forms a life long habit of good reading which school-leaving will not break.

The widespread approval of such collections by librarians is not shared by all educators or educational systems. There are those who would deny the responsibility of the college library to step outside the curriculum to win readers; who would insist that extracurricular activities and interests are sufficiently met by nonacademic agencies and that the problem of what kind of reading people do 10 years after they leave school can best be tackled by an educational system which teaches serious reading habits rather than by one which strengthens nonintellectual predispositions.

The college of the University of Chicago represents a case in point. Under the Chicago plan, the college students are presented with a heavy program of prescribed reading which covers the "best that is known and thought" in the major intellectual disciplines. It is a heavy schedule, stringently selected and rigorously imposed. The basic readings must be purchased, in symposia of selections gathered into syllabi. The addi-

tional readings are classical and standard titles available on reserve and in the stacks of the several university libraries. The assignments are such that the student is not left with much leisure in which to browse through the popular titles of the day. If he has time to read, there is a program of reading waiting for him. Under such a system there is no logical place for a browsing collection in the usual sense. The system has no faith in the educational benefits to be derived from reading which cannot be defended as contributing to the purposes of its prescribed curriculum.³ Therefore, with space at a premium and the need to justify the use made of every available room in the library building, the abandonment of the "browsing collection" is a logical step. Today, the University of Chicago Library no longer has a browsing collection—for the University of Chicago is an educational, not a recreational, institution.

Such a viewpoint, resulting as it does in the reduction of the number of libraries rather than in their multiplication, is a shocking one to most librarians. They point out that reading, even of books outside the prescribed list of "greats," is an important activity, and that the provision of materials for such reading and the inculcation of reading habits for whatever purposes they might serve the reader, are responsibilities of the library. They enlarge upon the benefits of recreational reading for which no scholarly justification may be found at all. They indicate that "free" reading, in the sense of reading to which the student turns of his own free will rather than because of prescribed assignment, often has a greater effect upon the

³ Note the wording of the phrase "contributing to the purposes of its prescribed curriculum," which indicates that reading is not limited merely to that which is assigned. It is limited to that which will serve the same high and serious purposes as the curriculum itself; and it is not part of the school's program to strengthen, foster, and perpetuate the indiscriminating and unenlightened tastes of preuniversity days.

student just because it is not prescribed. They deplore the implicit intellectual snobbery which would place beyond the pale everything which does not fit the particular standards set by a selfappointed group of experts.

The University of Chicago approach, however, does not deny the benefits of purely recreational reading. It willingly admits that there are other aspects of life in addition to the academic, and that a well-rounded individual does not limit himself to the single one. It recognizes that rental libraries, popular bookstores, corner newsstands and drugstore book departments serve useful functions in our society. But it takes the stand that the university's function (and therefore the function of the university's library) is educational, and that noneducational needs should be filled elsewhere. The very fact that other media and other agencies are established which effectively rival the library in these areas of the noneducational underlines the special responsibility of the university library for concentrating upon that area of communication which is its special province and in which no other agency does exist. The uncritical, the recreational, the standardized materials are multiplied through all the several popular agencies of communication. The serious and permanent materials which supply the range and depth of content to which the scholar should address himself are nowhere made available except in the library. The library should not lose its distinctive character by trying to take over responsibilities which more properly adhere to other agencies. The library of the university should be just that; not another curbservice collection of popular ephemera.

The immediate objection to such a circumscribed program is that it will result in a loss of patronage, and that the library will soon be serving only the few select

students who are already capable of appreciating the advantages which good reading has to offer. There is no denying that a library following such a policy would lose some of its patrons. But it would lose mainly those who do not want a university library to be a university library, but rather a more accessible department store. If it is the function of the university library to lead students to the best reading, than the best reading is what it should collect. It is not its business to increase the number of patrons for that kind of casual reading which Coleridge called one of the great destroyers of intellect.

There is a good practical objection which immediately enters the debate at this point. It does no good, the argument runs, to have a well-selected collection, chosen with taste and discrimination, if no one ever uses it. The library can only lead those to better reading who are present to be led. The first step must be taken where the reader is, not where you wish he were, before the second step toward better reading can be taken. It is a case of immediate *vs.* ultimate goals. The important thing is to get the patron into the library and then to teach him to choose wisely and well. Therefore, and this argument is put forward by college libraries as well as by public libraries, the provision of much that is second rate and mediocre is necessary in order to lure the reader into the library. After he is in, reading his Thorne Smith, we can introduce him to writers of greater literary and cultural significance.

Unfortunately we have no proof that the reader who is not interested in significance can be led to it. We have no good studies which trace through time the development of literary taste in a user of a library. We need some good intensive case histories which follow a patron through his library career, to see if it is really true that the devotee of Thorne

Smith automatically learns to enjoy Herman Melville—or even Mark Twain—just because of the physical presence of titles by these writers on adjoining library shelves. The cynics are of the opinion that the patron who starts as a reader of Thorne Smith will, after 20 years, be reading the latest Thorne Smith, or reasonable facsimile. They point out that the Kathleen Norris fans who showed a sudden interest in Emily Brontë were led to the classic, not by the cultural influence of the library, but by a fanatic addiction to Laurence Olivier's cleft chin. The burden of proof rests with those who claim that, in order to raise the standards of the patron, we must lower the standards of the library.

Advocates of this position should recognize the serious responsibility that such a view places upon them. If it is true that the library establishes habits of reading which the student carries with him throughout his life, then is there not the danger that the library actually teaches him to turn to the second rate and the mediocre rather than to the best? For note the interesting contradiction in terms. While such a view acknowledges the library's ultimate function to be the provision of the good (however defined), it advocates the acceptance of the less good as the means to attain it. Such a stand can be justified, it seems to me, only if you believe that book reading per se, is a better activity than any other. Advocates of reading though we be, I think that even librarians would not claim that reading is always better for everyone than something else would be.

The American Library Association, in its statement of postwar standards,⁴ lists five objectives of library service (and I presume, of the book) which are conceived of as the library's primary areas of concen-

⁴ American Library Association. Committee on Postwar Planning. *Postwar Standards for Public Libraries*. Chicago, A.L.A., 1943, p. 20.

tration. These five are: (1) education, (2) information, (3) research, (4) recreation, and (5) esthetic appreciation. Let us ask a question or two concerning these areas to see if even here the book is indisputably the most important source to which to turn. First—education. Is it always better for the seeker after education to read a book rather than to hear a lecture, or view a practical laboratory demonstration? Second—information. Is a book a more satisfactory source of information of all kinds, or are there occasions when it might be better to consult, let us say, a physician, or a clergyman, or a plumber? Third—research. Does the book supersede controlled laboratory experimentation, operational verification and empirical demonstration? Fourth—recreation. Is it always better to read a book—especially in the ill ventilated and dimly lighted mausoleums which libraries too often provide for that purpose—than to take a hike, or play a game of tennis or putter in the garden? And fifth—esthetic appreciation. If you could only do one or the other, would it be better to hear a symphony, look at a statue, attend an art exhibit—or read books about them? I do not stay for an answer, but obviously the superiority of book reading depends upon the purpose to be served, the circumstances surrounding the reading situation, the individual concerned—and the excellence of the book.

All of which leads us back to a position outlined earlier: that the function of the college library is not merely to provide reading, but to provide the best reading. Reading in itself is not a better thing unless it contributes something worthwhile which no other source can contribute. The case for the book cannot be made on the grounds that it is just as good as a movie or a soap opera, but that it is very much better. Let those who want soap operas

listen to them, but do not pretend to be improving their tastes just because you put the soap opera in a buckram binding. For the kind of thing it does, the soap opera is supreme; the book cannot and should not try to vie with it on its home grounds. It would do better frankly to admit that it serves another public.

The corollary of this conclusion is that our libraries then will be the haven of the few rather than of the many, and that we may be deliberately sending patrons elsewhere instead of trying to attract them to the library. But if you have admitted that book reading is not always the preferable activity in all cases, why should there be an objection to sending people to that agency which will serve their needs better? The library will just have to become reconciled to the hard fact that the services it offers, however excellent, are desired by an atypical minority.

To many this appears to be a kind of intellectual idealism, but actually it is less idealism than it is realism. The library, even now, is a minority institution. We do not serve the majority of our population anywhere; or if we do serve the majority in numbers (as we do on most college campuses) we serve them only because under the compulsion of class assignment they must come to us. That a majority would not do so voluntarily is attested by the fact that such a large porportion of them leave the library when they leave the school.

What about our goal of winning permanent users for the library? If we limit our patronage to the select few, do we not limit the possibilities for making lasting habits of library use among our potential clientele? Again it must be admitted that we are limiting our potential public, but the limitation is placed upon quantity, and our quantitative impact upon the community has never been our most notable

contribution to society. Since we are already selective, would it harm us to be slightly more so?

For note: the selectivity is not imposed by the library, which is open to all. It is a process of selfselection which operates among the public themselves. The public library's clientele is topheavy with the better educated, far out of proportion to their numbers in the population. The learned and the skilled professions use the library much more than their proportion of the population warrants. The community and opinion leaders are much more likely to be library users than are the people they lead. That being so, it would seem that the college library and college education have not failed as badly as we think; by and large, the better educated *are* the library users. If we *have* failed, our failure lies in ignoring our natural clientele in a vain attempt to pull into our libraries those who do not want what we are best equipped to give. For as we demonstrated earlier, for some people in some circumstances, the book is not the best and most useful medium. The book serves best only those who seriously seek the kind of knowledge, understanding and growth that it and it alone provides. The blame for our minority appeal, if it be blameworthy, belongs not to the library but to the very process of reading itself, for its appeal, naturally and inevitably, is limited to the few.

What of the influence of the library? Are we going to limit our impact upon society by serving the few instead of the many? Again we must recognize that even if the public library served every single person in the community who ever reads as much as a book a month, it would still reach only about 30 per cent of the adult population. The influence of the book, and of the library as the agency for distributing the book, has always been an

indirect one. The books that have changed our minds—the Darwins, the Freuds, the Marxes—have never reached the great majority directly, even though the lives of that majority have been colored and reshaped by them. It is always the leader, the teacher, the expert, who has acted as intermediary between the majority and the printed word. If we serve these real readers with the best, will we not, by training the natural leaders to be more enlightened leaders, be doing a greater indirect service to the majority than if we sacrificed the leadership in favor of the most backward in the parade? It seems to me that it cannot be denied that we will.

I should like to anticipate two objections which are usually raised when such suggestions as this are put forward. The first is that nobody really knows what the best and the good are; that excellence is judged solely on subjective standards and what is good for one is not for another. Granting that differences of opinion exist, and different purposes are served in different ways, still we do have standards upon which excellence can be judged. There are good books and poor ones; worthwhile and worthless ones—and we know it. The standards may require sharper definition and more precise delimitation, but standards have been devised, and librarians, even now, act upon some of them. That we cannot buy everything that is published means that we must be selective. A value judgment is exercised every time one book is purchased while another is not. But under our present system of book selection, we act on the premise that we should place our minimum level of merit as low as we

possibly can, and I am advocating merely that we place it as high as we possibly can.

The second traditional objection is that the librarian does not have the right to dictate what other people shall and shall not read. I agree heartily with that statement, but I think that the librarian *does* have the right to decide what shall be placed on the library's shelves (which is an entirely different thing). It is the right of his office—the right that permits the conductor of the symphony to select Hindemith and eschew the Hit Parade—the right which allows the curator of the museum to accept Gauguin for exhibition and reject George Petty; the right of the corner drug store, indeed, to stock *The Babe Ruth Story*, but not the *Bhagavad Gita*. It is a right which even the objecting librarians themselves exercise every time they reject a pornographic title for library purchase. Again it is merely a matter of deciding whether the critical floor we establish shall be as low as we can possibly allow it to be—or as high.

The latter objective does not rule out fiction, humor or reading for pleasure. It does not rule out, for university libraries, the provision of many second-rate materials needed for research, analysis and comparison. It *does* rule out those titles which can be defended on no other grounds than that a popular and completely uncritical demand for them exists. It rules out—as patrons of the college library—those whose only reading interest is in the inferior and the unsound.

More books, more readers? Quite probably not. But *better* books and *better* readers, certainly.