

# “The axe for the frozen sea . . .”

## The value of reading for academic librarians

by Katherine Branch

In his 1987 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Joseph Brodsky said, “Having emerged in order to give us some idea not so much of our origins as of what the sapiens is capable of, a book constitutes a means of transportation through the space of experience, at the speed of a turning page.”

### Has reading become a bad word?

This eloquent statement about the power and mystery of reading causes me, as an academic librarian, to wonder why our profession talks, thinks, and writes so infrequently about reading. Curiously, the mission and strategic plan of ACRL do not contain the word *reading*. Yet have you ever met a librarian who said they *didn't* like to read? And how many of us chose the field because we love to read, a confession that we feel vaguely embarrassed to admit when we are asked during job interviews or cocktail parties about how we came to be a librarian?

Our professional literature mentions reading hardly a whit. Is the topic too mundane, too lowly, too associated with the image of the dowdy librarian? Or is it that the importance and value of reading to our clientele and our profession is too obvious to bother with? Or is it that we don't consider the topic of reading to be within our professional purview?

As the ACRL focuses on its values this year, let us remember that reading *is* within our purview.

### It's not just for kids

In journals catering to the academic library crowd, articles on such divergent topics such as censorship, preservation microfilming, information technology, participative management, scholarly communication, and information literacy abound, yet the topic of reading seems to be relegated to the literature of children's, young adult, and public librarians. Compare the body of work by academic librarians on reading to the body of work by writers on reading. Authors as diverse as Amy Tan, Bernard Malamud, Richard Wright, Stephen King, Isaac Asimov, Robert Pinsky, James Baldwin, Henry Miller, Grace Paley, and Edith Wharton have written passionately about reading and books.<sup>1</sup>

### The book as the new haven

Henry James asked in *Brooksmith*, “What is the place of reading, and of the reading sensibility, in our culture as it has become?” A hundred years later, Ernest Boyer answers this question for academic librarians in today's electronic culture by saying, “Television extends human sight, computers extend memory and ability for calculation. Books extend wisdom. It is now our task to fit together these tools, the new ones with the old.”

As for the importance of reading to us as individuals, Alvin Kernan in *The Death of Literature* says, “This is what makes reading so very difficult in the cultural present: we cannot easily get off the rails of one kind of  
 (“The axe for the frozen sea” cont. on page 35)

### About the author

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The Whyfiles are published by the National Institute for Science Education, funded by the National Science Foundation. According to the information page, "the NISE is a collaborative effort to ensure that all students who leave the educational system can make informed decisions about science, mathematics, engineering and technology." While the implication is that this information is geared towards students at a pre-college level, the easy-to-read style of writing and selection of current topics should also appeal to the undergraduate student.

The site does a good job of staying fresh—every article has a different background and graphics theme. Some articles are only a page, while others are quite lengthy. There is also a section for an online forum—basically Web-based discussion groups.

After spending some time exploring this site, my opinion of it changed considerably. I came to appreciate the non-technical writing style and the simple interface. I learned a lot. I'll bet your students will too.—Paul Pival, Nova Southeastern University; paulp@nsu.nova.edu

**Africa News Online.** Access: <http://www.africanews.org>.

Through a partnership with Africa's leading news agencies, newspapers, and magazines, Africa News Service produces Africa News Online. Africa News Service is a non-profit U. S. news agency that started in 1973. This agency boasts being "directly or indirectly responsible for a significant percentage of U. S. media coverage of Africa." Africa News Online is the online version of the widely read news periodical *Africa News*, which has been an exclusively electronic publication since 1993.

The homepage contains an abundance of links for contemporary news in politics, entertainment, sports, business, science, and health. The "Resources Cuisine" link provides access to special reports, interviews, profiles, and even a link for ordering an African cookbook. "Internet Gateway" links to Web sites for news topics such as United Nations & Africa, United States & Africa, and Africa's Great Lakes Region. Links can also be found

to Web sites for African news organizations, newspapers, and news agencies. For daily,



full-text articles from the largest

news gathering agency in Africa, there's the "PANA News" link, which includes searchable archives. Additional current articles from news magazines and newspapers can be accessed by clicking on the "News Central" link. Included are links to news reports from various regions and countries in Africa. It offers searchable archives that are in the testing stage.

African News Online fills an information gap for faculty, undergraduate, and graduate students in the fields of African studies, government, and international affairs. Although the link for information resources is labeled "Resources Cuisine," a user will find navigating through this Web site is easy. This Internet resource opens up Africa to the rest of the world.—Nancy Allen, USF at Sarasota/New College ■

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*"The axe for the frozen sea . . ." continued from page 16*

time to experience another. But perhaps when the need is strong enough we will seek out the word on the page, and the work that puts us back into the force field of deep time. The book—and my optimism, you may sense, is not unwavering—will be seen as a haven, as a way of going off-line and into a space satisfied by subjectivity.<sup>22</sup>

If you are convinced that we need to do more to recognize and support reading, I recommend the Library of Congress's Center for the Book's 1997–2000 campaign, "Building a Nation of Readers." Their web page at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/readbro.html> contains excellent ideas about promoting reading, both in our libraries and as individuals. As we academic librarians skillfully surf the shoals and tidal waves of the Internet, let's heed the words of Franz Kafka who said, "The book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us."

## Notes

1. Toth, Susan Allen and John Coughlan, *Reading Rooms* (New York: Doubleday 1990).

2. Kernan, Alvin, *The Death of Literature*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. ■