

ROBERT MILTNER

The Rule of the Media? Readers, Writers and Teachers in the Post-Pop Era

An *Atkins* Diet for Contemporary American Readers?

“Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.”—Richard Steele¹

Contrary impulses are more interesting than consistency. It is no surprise, then, that while we Americans are literally growing larger, with 65% of Americans overweight and 37% obese,² our reading habits are growing thinner. Are the fast-food equivalent of literature and the passivity of media contributing to the decrease in readers in general and serious readers in particular, or are we perhaps merely witnessing a stage in the intellectual development of Americans? As an educator and a writer, I wonder what the implications are for both readers and writers.

Consider that in an average week in America, we consumers can, on the one hand, select from one of 104 types of packaged bread at a Safeway and be one of five million customers choosing from over twenty-six “coffee drinks” at Starbucks; on the other hand, we can select a drive-thru meal, basing our decision upon the effectiveness of the three billion dollars spent each year on advertising by the fast food industry.³ Concurrently, more than two billion books will be sold by the publishing industry, and well over

175,000 will be newly published books.⁴ Some of these books are read for specific reasons—for classes, book clubs, or professional reasons—while others are read for pleasure or interest, but not many. For, on the whole, as the population is increasing, readers are decreasing.

Are Writers Readers, or Merely Writers?

“I know a few writers who...do very little reading. This doesn’t mean that they are bad writers, but in some cases I think they might be better writers if they read more.”—Richard Wilbur⁵

A 1999 Gallup poll reported that 84% of Americans surveyed had “read at least part of one book last year;”⁶ oddly, the survey did not indicate either what kind of book it was that the typical American read, or whether the reader ever finished the book. In contrast, a 1999 Gallup Poll revealed that 7% of all Americans were “avid readers” who read more than one book a week.⁷ Moreover, a 2002 National Endowment for the Arts Public Participation study revealed 40% of all Americans read, attended, or visited literature;⁸ “visited” and “attended” literature: peculiar phrasing, really, the way this sneaks out of the language, how it meshes with the idea of “part of a book” read. In 2002, this activity included plays, poetry, novels and short stories, but since this means the data includes seeing a film version of an actual book, that would account for hearing such comments from a student as: *Jane Austen? I love her movies!*

Pop Fiction, Pulp Fiction, or Literary Fiction?

“Reading novels—serious novels, anyway—is an experience limited to a very small percentage of the so-called enlightened people.”—Jerzy Kosinski⁹

The specific group considered to be “literary readers” comprises 46.7% of the reading public.¹⁰ Literary readers are those who read novels, poetry, creative non-fiction and

plays, as opposed to general readers who read “how-to” books, coffee-table books, and general information books.¹¹ Furthermore, this statistic does not distinguish between readers of popular literature—best-sellers, mysteries, and summer beach books—and readers of serious literature, which generally includes small press publications, experimental work, poetry, prose poetry. Serious reading is not a traditional American trait, despite the leanings of educators, scholars, academics, and writers. Conversely, French readers “take a compulsive, missionary interest” in literature, so much so that they call their return from the summer holidays *La Rentrée Littéraire*, the return to serious reading, observes novelist Paul West, who adds:

When a nation adjusts its calendar in so decisive a way, you not only respect its readers, you also wonder what happens to books in the United States, where pundits blather about beach reading and authors type books aimed at the audience on the littoral. There is no mention of *our* return to serious reading, or even of a departure from fluff, trash, slop, drivel, twaddle....¹²

Most troubling, however, is the recent NEA *Reading at Risk* report which shows a nearly 20% decline in the “regular” reading habits of the nation’s college graduates: from about 82% in 1982 to only 66% by 2002.¹³ Clearly, the issue is not that educated people cannot read, but that they are disinclined to do so. Charles McGrath, a former *New York Times Book Review* editor, speculates that this decline may be due to the fact that our definition of “reading” is changing, for “[w]hen people surf the Web what they are doing, for the most part, is reading.”¹⁴

A Page-Turner, a Screen-Scroller?

“It is a mistake to think that books have come to stay. The human race did without them for thousands of years and may decide to do without them again.”—E. M. Forster¹⁵

Sven Birkerts and others have warned that computers and the Internet would render reading obsolete due to competition from technology. As Birkerts explained his view in

The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age:

In that book I made the argument that the historically sudden arrival and adoption of computer technologies was changing everything about the way we lived and thought and related to one another. ... I saw book culture and electronic culture as polarized in crucial ways and argued against the view that the new technologies are merely tools of convenience, or powerful augmentations of the existing.¹⁶

Obviously, the discussion initiated by Birkerts concerning “the shift from page-centered to screen-centered communication”¹⁷ still engages readers, viewers, and writers.

Furthermore, technoculture theorists argue that technological advances affect “who is socially, culturally and politically privileged with developments in technology.”¹⁸

Granted, technology influences the shape and tendencies in writing, and the technology we use as a process affects the resulting product. Consider what poetry looked like on a page when it was handwritten, compared to what happened when typewriters became mass produced: William Carlos Williams and E. E. Cummings used typewriters as personal linotypes; Burroughs’ “cut ups” developed when he could type on rolls of paper, then cut, and mix and match, the same process which we now do electronically. Or consider the way the soft-return feature encouraged the prose poem: poetry’s fear of the right margin is dissipating through technology to the point where poetry and fiction are blurring. What is more, technology impacts on readers as equally as it impacts on writers.

With the average American child living in a home with a computer,¹⁹ and nearly 60% of them connected to the internet,²⁰ perhaps the shift in reading patterns reflects the privileging that accompanies American culture and technology, that is, selection of the Internet instead of selecting a book. After all, the Internet is a more interactive medium

than reading a book, and perhaps a tendency toward performance and interaction—activities that range from video games to coffeehouse open mic. readings, from performance poetry to stand up comedy and theatrical events—are also competing for readers’ attention and time.

From Page to Stage?

“Some writers take to drink, others take to audiences.”—Gore Vidal²¹

Interestingly, the NEA Survey of Public Participation found in a recent study that 7% of those surveyed claimed to have personally performed or created literature in 2002.²² Of course, since this statistic includes anything to do with theatre, and anything to do with creative writing, it lumps together the person who writes a novel with someone who hands out a programme at a play. Moreover, this 7% represents about half of the 13.3% of the US population—over 27 million people—who claimed to have taken a creative writing class, academic or non-academic, and at all grade levels, during 2002.²³ Still, we might infer from this data that approximately 3.5% of all Americans—approximately seven million Americans—engage in some generalised activity that is loosely connected with creative writing. The question for those of us who teach creative writing is, who is the traditional eighteen-year-old student who enters our college or university creative writing classes?

Student Readers?

“All the old houses that I knew when I was a child were full of books, bought generation after generation by members of the family. Everyone was literate as a matter of course. Nobody told you to read this or not read that. It was there to read, and we read.”—Katherine Anne Porter²⁴

The demographics of these writers, according to the NEA *Reading at Risk* survey, show a set of characteristics common to traditional students, including those who enroll in college creative writing courses. If average, this student lives in a household with approximately three TVs, three radios, two VCRs, two CD players, one computer and one video game player.²⁵ By the time this average student graduates from high school and enters a college class, s/he has seen 30,000 commercials, seen 16,000 TV murders, and has seen 200,000 acts of physical, emotional or verbal violence.²⁶ In any given week, this student watches TV for nineteen hours, listens to music for ten, searches the internet for seventeen, talks on the cell phone for eight, plays video games for ten, and reads five hours a week.²⁷ However, because a teenager multitasks pretty well, s/he could be simultaneously surfing the net, listening to music, talking on the phone and probably doing homework while playing a video game.

Still, this student reads five hours a week, not a bad number considering what it is weighed up against. But how does this five hours a week break down? On average, that is forty-five minutes a day, for all reading, including newspapers and magazines. Given that the nearly fifteen hundred daily newspapers published in the United States are all owned by the same eight multinational corporations, this significantly edits what one is going to read in those newspapers and magazines. AOL Time Warner, for example, is a partial or majority owner of fifteen television networks (including CNN), sixty-four magazines (including *Time* and *People*), three movie companies, forty record labels, four internet companies, seven websites, and a library of 6,500 movies and 32,000 TV shows.²⁸ Furthermore, eight million students in 12,000 classrooms—40% of U.S. middle and high schools—watch Channel One Television each school day, and, of the twenty-

minute broadcasts, 20% of the airtime covers politics, economics, or cultural or social issues (which includes literature), while the other 80% is devoted to sports, weather, “features,” advertising and Channel One promotions.²⁹ Channel One Television offers a clear example of corporate selection of “state of the art” information at a time when 25% of US schools use textbooks published in the 1980s or earlier.³⁰

Fair and Balanced?

“The programming [at Fox] is deliberately and consistently distorted and twisted to promote the Republican Party of the US and an extreme right-wing viewpoint.”—Deceptive Practices Complaint filed 19 July 2004 with the Federal Trade Commission by MoveOn.org and Common Cause³¹

Moreover, some networks, like Fox, are being accused of presenting politically-slanted viewpoints rather than objective reporting,³² and it is not hard to argue with that when David Boylan of Fox affiliate WTVT in Tampa blatantly states, “We paid \$3 billion for these [Fox affiliate] television stations. We decide what the news is. The news is what we tell you it is.”³³ Accepting Boylan’s logic amounts to a willing suspension of belief in some commonly-held ideas of *the real* and an acceptance of a media-created version of what constitutes our collective idea of the truth; accepting such logic creates a hybrid-reality, a one-sided truth; from this logic it follows that the massive media can foster a new canon, leading to an American parochialism in which virtual cosmopolitanism (hip-hop, jazz) and romanticised ruralism (country music) puts everything at a distance, making us passive observers of an artificial reality through which we scroll rather than stroll. But who has the means to challenge such an entrenched and empowered system of information production, and how? Edward Said, considering this question in *Power, Politics, and Culture*, observed that

the entire process represents choice and selectivity, exclusions and inclusions, and things of that sort are highly sophisticated. But what is truly ominous about this monopolization of information production is not so much the problem of access to the information itself, but rather access to the means of *criticizing* the information.³⁴

One means of criticism, suggests Said, is the production of a “literature that aspires to the status of a classic,” written by a group that includes “not only American writers like Thomas Pynchon but European and Third World writers like Rushdie and Garcia Marquez.”³⁵ As such, writing offers a criticism by working as an agent of “social, intellectual, and cultural change” because it introduces both “whole new worlds” and “a particular kind of hybrid experience into English.”³⁶ Thus, writing creates a particular kind of hybridity that fosters active intellectual and cultural change, offering an alternative to the Americentric parochialism that both fuels and is fuelled by the media.

Reader, Writer, or Reader-Writer?

“I learned early in life that you can be a reader or a writer. I decided to be a writer.”—Erskine Caldwell³⁷

In a nation where over forty million people are functionally illiterate,³⁸ the media—not libraries, bookstores or schools—are a powerful force which programmes our students. Further, while students spend a fraction of their leisure time reading, very little of what they read is diverse. Few (only 7%) are “avid” book readers,³⁹ and, when they do read, they seem not to read the books which we, as teachers, want them to read in order to prepare themselves to be writers. While many are familiar with Quentin Tarantino, Anne Rice, 50 Cent, and Howard Stern, few read James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Carole Maso, or Toni Morrison. Worse, most of our students have never read a book of poems by a single living author. Passive readers and active learners, our students are media-

connected, yet aliterate, spending far more time viewing than reading. Yet they want to be poets or novelists. Still, seemingly, many students—disillusioned and deadened by the vapid wasteland of TV and Hollywood movies, of skewed news and reality television—are drawn to writing because ultimately they are desperate for something far more real than what the media gives them. Or they are drawn to it because it is a more active way of engaging with text than is offered by reading. As Charles McGrath observes, “While the number of people reading literature has gone down, the number of people trying to write has actually gone up. We seem to be slowly turning into a nation of ‘creative writers,’ more interested in what we have to say ourselves than in reading or thinking about what anyone else has to say.”⁴⁰ They really want to be Jane Austen.

Cinema Fans as Creative Writers?

“Screenwriting isn’t really writing; it’s carpentry. There’s no language in it, and the writer is not in control of the pace of the story, or of the tone of the narration, and what else is there to be in control of? Novelists shouldn’t write for the movies, unless, of course, they discover they’re no good at writing novels.”—John Irving⁴¹

Because writers have long competed with the media of their time, some have borrowed journalistic, advertising, or cinematographic techniques, and employed them in their writing. James Joyce, in *Ulysses*, mimicked popular magazine fiction and newspapers, while John Dos Passos, in his *USA* trilogy, included newsreels, collages of “found” headlines, song lyrics, political speeches, advertisements, and biographies; he also included “Camera Eye” sections in an attempt to write fiction through intentionally cinematographic ways.⁴² Joyce and Dos Passos are examples, then, of Modernist writers who come to the craft of writing at a time when the media are beginning to become mass media, when “media” is a *medium* which, while contemporary, can be used as a way to

augment or *supplement* the skills learned on the page. What about today's student writer, though, who has grown up *through* the media, in the cathode tubes and silicon chips of popular culture? What is our students' relationship with the media?

Who's the Star of This Book?

"I like to read screenplays. They're little books.... I'll read [the screenplay] rather than go to see the movie itself. I enjoy shooting the movie in my mind."—Thomas McGuane⁴³

Who or what shapes how our students conceive of character, plot, setting, audience, attention span, language, or image? Given the pop culture and its *tsunami* of media influence, students are versed in the techniques of media to an equal, if not greater extent than in literary technique. Film and TV have "their own language with distinct syntax and grammar"—cuts, close ups, zoom-in, fade, slow motion, speeded-up actions, dissolves—all of which create a composite representation which collects these different shots into one "sequence," the basic element of the moving picture⁴⁴. The syntax and grammar of the media are evident in student writing. Students use soundtrack to evoke emotion, use cinematographic techniques to set action in place, employ the quick cut—like channel surfing—to give excitement and movement to a scene. Has the short attention span of the TV helped contribute to the popularity of prose poetry, microfiction, flash fiction, brief fiction, snap fiction, and brief creative non-fiction?

As writing teachers, we find students tend to go quickly for the visual image, but often ignore the rest of the senses. When writing fictional scenes, all too often the students emulate sitcoms, making their plots predictable and their characters one-dimensional, stock figures. Moreover, if they write dialogue that does not sound real, why should the writing teacher wonder? After all, nearly 60% of them watch TV during

dinner—one of the few meals families share together⁴⁵—where, instead of sharing their own talk in “real time,” they are listening to TV dialogue of imaginary others, that comes pre-scripted with laugh tracks added. What is worse, many students are desensitized to violence: physical violence, verbal violence, emotional violence, and gratuitous violence. As a result of such desensitization, they do not even care about their own characters, let alone the characters of the stories written by others: their emotions are on permanent *Pause*.

Granted, both watching movies and reading books can equally offer the vicarious experience in lieu of the real, and both readers and viewers, given their respective circles of discussion, will talk about their favorite literary and TV characters as if they were real people. However, since more students watch TV and movies than read books, media characters become the more common currency in the discussion of character. Yet when TV shows go off the air, when movies are no longer watched, and when the viewers age beyond some popularity bubble, where does the discussion go? Where is the common frame of reference? Will Jerry Seinfeld, Beaver Cleaver, or Oprah Winfrey maintain the same shelf-life as Hamlet, Leopold Bloom, or Addie Bundren?

Writers as Teachers?

“Our duality will find its form in [the poetry of the future], without renouncing one zone or the other.”
—Czesław Miłosz⁴⁶

Teachers of writing need to stand with the sceptic, not the Luddite, questioning and not rejecting, adjusting and not adjudicating. We need to ask why the number of English majors—which in most colleges and universities includes creative writers—has declined

from 7% to 4% over the last thirty years.⁴⁷ Rather than lament this decline, we need to ask what it signifies.

In our classes, we can bring forward from the literary tradition what is the *best* of tradition, not just what is old, and we can bring in from the media what is the *best* of the media, not just what is new. Even more importantly, we can help students understand why such distinctions are important, so that they can make, independently, the best choices about what affects their writing. One thing writers have learned about writing is that good writing is the result of good choices. As teachers of writing, we can encourage students to ask questions about what they are doing in their writing. Why are they selecting the images, characters, actions and values they put in their writing, and what do these selections represent to their readers? After all, the components they select are “interacting simultaneously in a surrounding social and cultural world” and “can lead to different patterns of domination and representation.”⁴⁸

Post-Pop Kids with Literary Ipods?

“So turn to the students. Young visionaries. Who click on the Internet, the cyberworld of their sleep... In love with the blinding light out there, the possibility...”—Carole Maso⁴⁹

At the core of our relationship with our students lies this: passing on to them what we have learned about the craft of writing. We do so because we can only pay back those to whom we were apprenticed by taking on apprentices (students) ourselves.

As teachers of writing, we can help our students recognise they limit themselves when they only write from or about their comfort zones. For some of them, the comfort zone is what they know of the media and pop-culture. Our challenge is to help students learn to enter into new writing contact zones, places where they can grow topically,

emotionally, tonally, stylistically, intellectually and artistically. For some, this contact zone may include more serious reading than they have previously done.

NEA Chair Dana Gioia, in the preface to the *Reading at Risk* report, offers this challenge:

Each concerned group—writers, teachers, publishers, journalists, librarians, and legislators—will legitimately view the situation [the decline in reading] from a different perspective, and each will offer its own recommendations.⁵⁰

In our dual role as writers/teachers, we can recommend that students question whether the choices they make as writers only echo what comes out of the media, or whether their choices draw from broader, richer contexts. Further, students should question whether they are appropriating from the media because that is part of a paradigm to which they ascribe, or whether they do so as a creative, playful borrowing. As educators, we can help students develop the ability to take material from the pop culture and the media and to bring their individual imaginations to skew it, put a spin on it—using irony, parody or some fresh hybridity—rather than merely replicating it. In short, we can make students aware of the process that defines their progress in the craft of writing. Ultimately, we can recommend a balanced diet of traditional literature and pop culture, accompanied by plenty of diverse writing exercises, as a means of improving the general health of our nation’s readers and writers.

¹ George Plimpton, ed., *The Writer’s Chapbook: A Compendium of Fact, Opinion, Wit, and Advice from the 20th Century’s Preeminent Writers* (New York: Viking, 1989), 3.

² Stephen Findlay, “Designating Obesity as Disease” (*USA Today* www.USAToday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2003-12-15-obesity-edit_X.htm).

³ Manfred B. Steger, *Globalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 72.

⁴ D. W. Fenza, “Brave New World: Aliteracy in America” (*The Writers’ Chronicle* 37.1, 2004), 24.

⁵ Plimpton, 321.

⁶ Darren K. Carlson, “Poll Shows Continuing Strong American Reading Habits” (*The Gallup Monthly Poll*, Abstract, October 1999 <http://web2.infotrack.galegroup.com>), 1.

⁷ Fenza, 24.

- ⁸ “Survey of Public Participation in the Arts” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2002),
- ⁹ Plimpton, 253.
- ¹⁰ Fenza, 24.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Paul West, “The End of an Elite,” in Sven Birkerts, ed., *Tolstoy’s Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse* (St. Paul, MN: Graywolf, 1996), 46.
- ¹³ Fenza, 24.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 25.
- ¹⁵ Plimpton, 351.
- ¹⁶ Sven Birkerts, Introduction, in *Tolstoy’s Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse*, ix.
- ¹⁷ Sven Birkerts, “The Fate of the Book,” in *Tolstoy’s Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse*, 196.
- ¹⁸ Ziauddin Sardar and Borin Van Loon, *Introducing Cultural Studies* (Cambridge, UK: Icon Books UK, 1999), 103.
- ¹⁹ Fenza, 24
- ²⁰ Steger, 108
- ²¹ Plimpton, 265.
- ²² “Survey of Public Participation in the Arts,” 6.
- ²³ Fenza, 24.
- ²⁴ Plimpton, 15.
- ²⁵ Fenza, 24.
- ²⁶ “Congressional Research Report/Kaiser Family Foundation Surveys” (*Media Use Statistics* www.med.sc.edu:1081/mediause.htm).
- ²⁷ “New Study Finds Children Aged Zero to Six/Kaiser Family Foundation Report” (*Media Use Statistics* www.med.sc.edu:1081/mediause.htm).
- ²⁸ Steger, 48.
- ²⁹ Michael Moore, *Stupid White Men and Other Sorry Excuses for the State of the Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).
- ³⁰ Ibid., 88.
- ³¹ “Deceptive Practices Complaint with the Federal Trade Commission, Filed 19 July 2004 by MoveOn.org and Common Cause,” (*MoveOn.org* http://cdn.moveon.org/content/pdfs/ftc_filing.pdf).
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Jim Hightower, *Thieves in High Places; They’ve Stolen Our Country and It’s Time to Take It Back* (New York: Viking, 2003), 137.
- ³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, Gauri Viswanathan, ed. (New York: Vintage, 2002), 43-4.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 415.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 416.
- ³⁷ Plimpton, 5.
- ³⁸ Moore, 87.
- ³⁹ Fenza, 24.
- ⁴⁰ Fenza, 25.
- ⁴¹ Plimpton, 252.
- ⁴² Robert C. Rosen, “John Dos Passos,” in Paul Lauter, ed., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2 (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1994), 1744.
- ⁴³ Plimpton, 253.
- ⁴⁴ Sardar and Van Loon, 156.
- ⁴⁵ “New Study Finds Children Aged Zero to Six/Kaiser Family Foundation Report” (*Media Use Statistics* www.med.sc.edu:1081/mediause.htm).
- ⁴⁶ Czeslaw Milosz, “What will the poetry of the future be...” in *Unattainable Earth* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1992), 33.
- ⁴⁷ Fenza, 25.
- ⁴⁸ Sardar and Van Loon, 155.
- ⁴⁹ Carole Maso, “Rupture, Verge, and Precipice; Precipice, Verge, and Hurt Not,” in *Tolstoy’s Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse*, 65.

⁵⁰ Fenza, 25.