



National Endowment for the Arts Sounds Alarm on Literacy

According to the Report, the number of 17-year-olds who never read for pleasure increased from 9 percent in 1984 to 19 percent in 2004. Almost half of Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 never read books for pleasure. Why? Because reading has become a painful, tortuous exercise that they wish to avoid. The survey states:



Reading at Risk is not a report that the National Endowment for the Arts is happy to issue. This comprehensive survey of American literary reading presents a detailed but bleak assessment of the decline of reading's role in the nation's culture. For the first time in modern history, less than half of the adult population now reads literature, and these trends reflect a larger decline in other sorts of reading. Anyone who loves literature or values the cultural, intellectual, and political importance of active and engaged literacy in American society will respond to this report with grave concern.

The only problem with the report is that it did not state the cause of the problem or how to correct it. But we've known of the cause since 1955, when Rudolf Flesch wrote his famous best-selling book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. In it he said:

The teaching of reading—all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks—is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense.

Since 1955, there have been many books on the subject including my own, *The New Illiterates*, published in 1973. The Endowment report would have been much more powerful had it indicted the education system for its failure to teach reading with intensive, systematic phonics instead of the look-say, sight, or whole language method.

So we know why we have a reading problem, and we know the cure, but all that the liberal cultural powers can do is express "grave concern." And if the Endowment report was not going to indict the education system, why did it even bother to do the survey? That's the mystery. By the way, after the release of the report and its dissemination to the press, it seems to have fallen into that big black hole where all such reports wind up. It reminds me of what the National Commission on Excellence in



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Education wrote in its report of April 1983, some 28 years ago:

The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people.... If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.

An act of war! The Commission was telling us that treason had been committed by our own educators! And what was the result of that report? It too fell into the big black hole where all such reports wind up.

It is obvious that our nation's educational leadership has its own agenda and it will not be stopped by any report. It is now so well entrenched by federal legislation and funding, that the agenda has taken on the appearance of normal national policy. When President George Bush and Senator Ted Kennedy re-authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, signed into law by Lyndon Baines Johnson, they simply extended the life of the agenda for another six years, calling it the No Child Left Behind Act. And before Bush left office, instead of calling for the abolition of the U.S. Department of Education, he named its Washington headquarters the Lyndon B. Johnson Building.

As for the Endowment report, it can be summarized in a single sentence: "Literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young." And yet we spend more money on education than any nation in history. Chairman Gioia asks: "What is to be done? There is surely no single solution to the present dilemma, just as there is no single cause."

And that's the problem. Apparently the Chairman has not read a single book written by any of us who has exposed the problem for what it is: deliberate educational malpractice on the part of the public educators. But if he wants to know what the philosophy of reading is among those educators, here it is in their own words, taken from a book, *Whole Language: What's the Difference*, by three whole language professors:

From a whole-language perspective, reading (and language use in general) is a process of generating hypotheses in a meaning-making transaction in a sociohistorical context. As a transactional process ... reading is not a matter of "getting the meaning" from the text, as if that meaning were in the text waiting to be decoded by the reader.

Rather, reading is a matter of readers using the cues print provides and the knowledge they bring with them (of language subsystems, of the world) to construct a unique interpretation.

Moreover, that interpretation is situated: readers' creations (not retrievals) of meaning with text vary, depending on their purposes of reading and the expectations of others in the reading event. This view of reading implies that there is no single "correct" meaning for a given text, only plausible meanings.

I wonder what Chairman Gioia would think of that philosophy of reading. To me it sounds like something I'd hear in an insane asylum. When children are expected to create meanings instead of retrieve meanings, you are telling them that what's on the page is not as important as what they think is on the page. That is a form of educational malpractice intended to turn that student into a disabled reader.

I hope the Tea Party movement begins to understand that the only way to solve America's education



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problem is to, first, get the federal government out of education and then privatize the public schools so that they can once more be run by sane people. Our children deserve nothing less.



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