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ESSAY

You Are What You Read

By LEAH PRICE

In 1605, Francis Bacon observed that "some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." Today, as we supersize our burgers and abridge our books, reading and eating continue to provoke symmetrical anxieties. Surveys now diagnose too little of one, too much of the other; regression analysis correlates calorie surplus and book deficiency with drug use, divorce and teen pregnancy.

Last month, the National Endowment for the Arts lengthened that list. "To Read or Not to Read," its 2007 report on American reading habits, identifies who reads as the best predictor of who exercises, plays sports, volunteers, votes and stays out of jail. These data, the study goes on to suggest, refute "assumptions that readers are passive, isolated or self-absorbed." So what's the X factor that will make you not just civic-minded and muscular, but also friendlier, outdoorsier and less wrapped up in your thin, law-abiding self? The N.E.A. refuses to speculate, acknowledging only that "strictly understood, the data in this report do not necessarily show cause and effect." The obvious explanation is tucked away in a "technical note" whose fine print acknowledges that "no attempt has been made to ... delve into racial, ethnic or income traits of voluntary readers."

We're not the first generation to invest reading with miraculous powers. But until radio and television dethroned the book, social reformers worried about too much reading, not too little. Advice about when and where not to read was once a medical specialty. In an 1806 diagnosis, a British doctor hypothesized that the "excess of stimulus" produced by reading novels "affects the organs of the body and relaxes the tone of the nerves." Reading at the table interfered with your digestion, reading before lunch with your morals. Another expert, in 1867, warned that "to read when in bed ... is to injure your eyes, your brain, your nervous system, your intellect." Cue to the other in-bed activity that makes you go blind. Like masturbation, reading was too pleasurable for its own good; like masturbation, it threatened to upstage real human contact (messy, tedious, disappointing) with virtual pleasures.

In 18th-century paintings, the reader sprawls on a sofa or lolls at the hairdresser's; in 19th-century magazines, those characters shown reading are the least likely to engage in any exercise more strenuous than turning a page. One English journalist in 1874 worried that frequent readers "are defrauded out of their proper amount of exercise, get their muscles relaxed and their health out of gear." In 1835, Balzac addressed his reader as "you who are holding this book in your fair hand, you who sink down in your soft easy chair." Reading drove Madame Bovary to adultery, debt and rat poison.

Novelists were the first to pick up on the anomaly that the N.E.A.'s surveys continue to register: men have become a minority within the reading public. In the developing world, men's literacy continues to outstrip

women's. But in the modern West, women buy, borrow and read more books. By the 18th century, Cervantes's romance-reading hero reappeared in drag in a novel called "The Female Quixote," and the playwright George Colman could warn: "Miss reads — she melts — she sighs — Love steals upon her— / And then — Alas, poor girl! Good night, poor honor!"

Reading was for girls what gaming is for boys: absorption shading into addiction. And like the Xbox or the potato chip, the pleasure it gave in the moment was proportionate to its dangers in the long term. Then, reading was a sign of laziness; now, readers get credit for hard work. Paradoxically, though, the N.E.A. shuns the literal workplace — and, by extension, any use of literacy for something other than disinterested pleasure. Its 2004 report, "Reading at Risk," excluded not just nonfiction (giving credit for "The Da Vinci Code" but not "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire"), but also reading done "for work or school." This time around, while any genre of "voluntary reading" counts, the second restriction remains in force. It takes some gerrymandering to make a generation logging ever more years in school, and ever more hours on the BlackBerry, look like nonreaders.

No one would claim that the written word is the only medium for mind-blowing literary experience. (For many time-pressed commuters, the loose, baggy novel has found its life-support technology not in the e-book but in the CD player and the Interstate highway system.) It's harder to remember that mind-blowing literary experience isn't the only thing the written word is good for. That all-time best seller, the Bible, fits nowhere within the survey's neat division between "reading for literary experience," "reading for information" and "reading to perform a task." Nor does pornography.

More fundamentally, the "after" in which Game Boys displace James Joyce presumes a "before" that never existed. Think of the most successful printer in 18th-century Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin. As James Green and Peter Stallybrass have shown, Franklin's wooden press cranked out auction announcements, lottery tickets, handbills advertising runaway slaves and newspapers crammed with classified ads, as well as "Bills of Lading, Bills of Sale, Powers of Attorney, Writs, Summons, Apprentices Indentures, Servants Indentures, Penal Bills, Promissory Notes, &c" (as one advertisement put it). Franklin also printed labels for medicine bottles, wrapping for soap and "500 advertisements about thread." What he didn't print, with a handful of exceptions, was anything we would recognize today as literature.

People read for many reasons, from the sublime (to save their souls) to the ridiculous (to avoid eye contact on the subway). Franklin's example should remind us that what the N.E.A. calls "reading for literary experience" has never been more than one use among many. A crucial one, for my money; but then, a white, female, nonincarcerated exerciser, volunteer, voter and English professor like me turns out to be statistically likely to think so.

Last year, the N.E.A. responded to the supposed reading crisis with the Big Read, a campaign that offered communities a choice of book to read together. Predictably, one of the selections was Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451." I'm not sure what moved me to reread the novel last month: maybe the dystopian N.E.A. report, maybe the release of the Kindle. (Is Amazon suggesting that the books of the world can now go up in flames?) Something puzzled me this time, though: what exactly are Bradbury's villains trying to get rid of? Sometimes it's a material object — bound pages get burned without ever being read. At other times, it seems to be high culture, oral as much as written. In a world full of actors "who haven't acted

Pirandello or Shaw or Shakespeare for years," one character can tell another, "It's not books you need, it's some of the things that once were in books." Writing in the same decade as Marshall McLuhan, Bradbury never seems certain whether his topic is the medium or the message.

The N.E.A. perpetuates the confusion about what's "at risk." Great literature (as opposed to pulp fiction)? Pleasure reading (as opposed to reading to grub grades or grub money)? The reading of books (as opposed to newspaper Web sites, mail-order catalogs and N.E.A. reports)? Reading mediated by some surface that predates the LCD — books, scrolls, tombstones? Bafflingly, the N.E.A.'s time-use charts classify "e-mailing" and "surfing Web sites" as competitors to reading, not subsets of it. Bradbury's logic was even less consistent: in the future, he predicts, the "rule book" will forbid reading.

The one hypothesis that neither "Fahrenheit 451" nor "To Read or Not to Read" supports is that reading itself stands in any danger. Although Bradbury equates totalitarianism with book burning, his novel never explains how a surveillance state could function without record-keeping. (Every historian knows that police states generate the juiciest archives.) When the hero goes on the lam after being caught reading "Dover Beach," the alert broadcast on the "televisor" takes an alphabetical form: "'Montag,' the TV set said, and lit up. 'M-O-N-T-A-G.' The name was spelled out by a voice." Bradbury can imagine a world without books, but not without bookkeeping. The file, the list, the label, the memo: these are the genres that will keep reading alive. Whatever happens to the novel, we'll always need a rule book.

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