

Libraries and the Refreshment Of Reading

THERE IS A CONTINUING and very real concern among the faculty of our universities and colleges about the dire state of undergraduate reading. The freedom to read was taken away from those poor young people long ago by the family and social contacts that bind them from their childhood and it is only among the children of the privileged or peculiar few that there are books for them to wander in, to be surprised by joy.

This ignorance about reading is producing a class of leaders that is illiterate; it vitiates the pattern of education. Voicing the concern of the professors, wrote Robert Hoopes, professor of English, and director of the Stanford Study of Undergraduate Education,

There is a popular idea that learning and wisdom come from absorbing the sights and sounds around us, that you don't really have to do much about it. You simply assimilate learning like the sun. It just happens. This vegetable doctrine accepts the notion that all kinds of experience are equal repositories of learning.

This fallacy is a comfortable one, as easy as the primrose path, and superficially justified by the fact that undifferentiated experience does indeed represent a source of stimulus and information. But the road to discipline and knowledge and wisdom is and always has been the traditional and difficult way of learning.

Part of the business of motivating the undergraduate is to make him aware of the nature of that road. We do all we can by improving course content and arrangement, by urging teachers to do the best

job they can in the classroom—all that we can do in short to put the student on that road. Once on it, excited by the prospect of intellectual adventure and discovery, where shall he go?

He must go to the crystallized record of the civilization and culture that he has inherited. He must go to books, and they will serve him as a guide, a solace and a reward. Without them the journey of the mind remains aimless and arid.¹

The ability to read intelligently and critically is perhaps the most tangible and valuable endowment of a liberal education, an ability that can only be acquired through practice—an acquired habit that becomes all the more difficult to take on since it runs so far away from the domestic and social habits of American society. Whatever the college and university libraries can do to help the faculty in their onerous and fundamental task, the improvement of undergraduate reading, that they must do; it is a prime responsibility, and this is a time when the libraries can do something about it. On Chapel Hill and in the Harvard Yard, in other libraries, all too few in this great land, there are lights shining in this darkness. These lights can be as stars.

There are many ways whereby the libraries can do their share. There is no set pattern, but this is clear: there is no need of a survey to find out whether undergraduates will respond to books and pictures, music and films; they will do so. It is the human condition to respond to the attractions that are offered: the tragedy is that they are offered so rarely, to so few.

¹In *Appreciation* (Stanford University Libraries), III (1955), pp. 2-3.

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The first and most important way that the library can help lies in the actual distribution of certain types of books: the paperbacks and the duplicates, making them attractively and readily available. The new generation of paperbacks is a most welcome addition to the world of books. They may, outside the college reading problem, bring about a revolution in the book business by reversing the current trend, the growing reluctance in this age of avid and conspicuous consumption, to pay money for books, to read for the love of it. How-to-do-it books are booming, textbooks and self-help books (peace of mind, consumer reports, income-tax aids), but reading for the sake of good alone is waning, both within and without the walls, and where fewer people buy books and read them there the clouds are piling up, there the dark is coming.

Now it is not altogether the fault of the undergraduate, of people generally, that there has set in this decline in reading. Booksellers, publishers and librarians have to share the blame.

The publishers are often very irresponsible. Can you blame the reader who is slow to buy, to read, when publishers and book societies unite to praise as a new Turgenev, as a fearless Zola, a writer whose turgid novel of protractive rape, of frank brutality, will be forgotten when the next literary sensation bursts upon the scene? How can the groping reader confide in those who hailed the tangled web of William Faulkner's *Fable* as if it were the fifth Gospel? They do this for money, and it is this economic grave necessity that so distracts and complexes the book business.

The trade book shop, so far the natural outlet of the wares of the publishers, is beset by this same necessity—money. In order to stay in business the book store is become more of a variety store than a bookshop. A student bitterly writing to the editor of his college

newspaper voices a well-nigh universal town and gown complaint about book shops, be they on the campus or outside the walls:

"Five and Dime"

To the editor:

The editorial in yesterday's *Daily* outlines most of the causes of the Bookstore's inadequacy [a justified diatribe about the whole attitude and practice of the usual bookstore] but does not mention the main one!

The chief difficulty with the Bookstore is that it is not a bookstore at all but a rather high-priced five-and-dime which barely keeps enough books in stock to maintain its masquerade.

Replacement of the stationery, costume jewelry, baby bibs, women's toiletries, bedspreads, men's billfolds, toy animals, drinking glasses, red lace-trimmed garters, and all the other junk that has nothing to do with scholarly pursuit by books is the improvement most sorely needed at the Bookstore.

This letter appeared in the *Daily* under the heading "Campus Opinion," and it is a very fair opinion at that. There is no need for any behavioral scientist to investigate the dearth of undergraduate reading; the reasons are clear, as is the solution, and one most important feature is concerned with the availability of the books.

The new paperbooks need a better source of distribution than the trade bookstores. What better source could there be than a library? A kiosk can be set up, like book kiosks are set up the world over, in a library, the paperbacks displayed openly and easily, and there begins a traffic. This need is greater in the more isolated colleges and universities that are distant from any good book stores, but near or far from the stores, the library is a good place for the distribution and the sale of paperbacks. There need be no throttling of private enterprise here, rather the reverse. The book-

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titles or hitherto unobtainable titles rather than on gaps in basic sets.

The stature of librarianship in the minds of the faculty and administration on the U-T campus when I arrived was one which permitted the library staff to work with a sense of personal and academic dignity, a situation then seldom found and, I am afraid, infrequent even today. Miss Baker credited the faculty status her staff enjoyed to her predecessor, Miss Lucy Fay, as she credited almost everything for which I thanked her, saying she only hung on to it. As I have told both Miss Baker and Miss Fay, that was equivalent to holding on to a Smoky Mountain bear for twenty years, a creditable feat, even though somebody else caught the bear. This academic acceptance was reflected in the quality of staff. Specific faculty rank, therefore, came naturally and unequivocally.

We are this fall breaking ground for an expansion of our main library building, the

one Miss Baker planned so painstakingly, so economically, and so wisely. I wish she could have known of our plans and how easily they can be put into effect because of the clean, functional foundation she insisted upon.

Miss Baker believed in thoroughness, accuracy, and order; she had no patience with carelessness. She believed in complete honesty in all things—professional, personal; day in and day out. Her integrity was unquestionable, and her interest and affection for her staff, her friends, and her profession were sincere and enduring. Eight Mary E. Baker Scholarships have been awarded to promising young people by the U-T Staff since 1950. Miss Baker was proud that the scholarships were named for her and liked to be informed about the recipients and their subsequent careers.

She was a fine woman, a fine librarian, and it has been a privilege to have known her.
—William H. Jesse

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lot could be rented or given as a concession to a bookseller, where he could operate under library supervision. Candy-bar, cigarette, soft-drink concessions are set up all over the campus; there should be no reluctance to the setting up of a book concession, and far from exacerbating the local book stores it should encourage them, for a reader of good paperbacks is on his way to becoming a reader of their goods and a likely customer.

The library book sales of duplicate and surplus material are worth all the trials and hazards that may accompany them. Those libraries that promote them in their divers ways—Minnesota, Iowa, Stanford, among others—are performing a service to the student body that can earn affection and respect for the library, two concomitants that have a great deal to do with undergraduate reading.

There is also a great need for the col-

lege and university libraries to identify themselves more closely with the aspirations and struggles of the world of learning. This is a time, the first in all the world, when there are available great reproductions of art in nearly all the media—this is the substance of André Malraux's *Voices of Silence*—but in the commercial pattern of life only city stores or very occasional special shops can provide for their distribution, unless the library takes it on, with a rental collection of art reproductions, a "for sale" sign on all of them. The great foreign films, even our own better ones, are rarely seen away from the metropolitan centers that can support art movie houses; the distribution and projection of these films is a part of the library. It is not by books alone that there will come a refreshment in reading, but by the use of film, book, song, and story, all blending together in harmony in the library.