

## Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

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Volume 30

Article 11

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10-1-2006

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Ray Dademo

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#### Recommended Citation

Dademo, Ray (2006) "Student Essays: The Private Voyage," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 30, Article 11.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol30/iss1/11>

# The Private Voyage

By Ray Dademo



For an English major with an internship at a publishing house, I spend an awful lot of time avoiding my bookshelf. The enthusiasm I once had for reading has twisted and frayed into something arduous. The pastime has become the chore.

As a portly, “indoor” child, I tended to devour any book I could get my hands on. (When parents’ library was exhausted, I found great solace in the sturdy prose of instruction manuals.) These days, however, I’d be hard pressed to recall my last substantial stretch of extracurricular reading. What happened along the way? For young people—bookworms and dimwits alike—reading doesn’t enter the equation easily, and it’s tempting to wonder what we’re all doing instead.

I’ll give you a hint. Whatever it is, it probably involves typing.

Today’s youth must remain constantly reachable, or else risk isolation. Our days are spent “connected” to the

rest of the world via our cell phones, laptops, blackberries, and pagers. For members of this “Millennium Generation”—my generation—the art of reading has been rendered obsolete by 21st century technology. Instead of devoting time and energy to a novel, we “Millennials” prefer to waste long afternoons in front of a computer screen, simultaneously e-mailing, text messaging, blogging and facebooking. We’re multitasking, yes, but what are we really accomplishing?

In today’s world, a generation that insists upon “staying connected” simply has no use for something as insular and burdensome as reading. This is no one’s fault; merely a symptom of the new millennium. Even among “book nerds” like myself, it’s difficult to find the proper amount of time between e-mails to squeeze in a book. For example, if given an hour of free time and a choice between Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* and myspace.com, I will invariably choose the website. Why? Because my brain is slowly decaying. I have an iPod Nano for music, youtube.com for streaming video, AOL Instant Messenger for mindless chit-chat and, best of all, I don’t waste one neuron of brainpower contemplating any of it. With so much instant entertainment at my fingertips, reading for leisure doesn’t seem so leisurely anymore. Not unless the prose is divided into manageable text-message-sized portions.

Reading, as a form of entertainment, seems relegated to those occasions when we are required to break away from our computers and force ourselves to disconnect from this constant flow of communication. When you think of it, most people read in one of three situations: waiting to fall asleep, commuting to work, or baking

on the beach somewhere. To read a book is to fill space in between activities and, as a result, we like books that keep up with our Attention Deficit Disorder. Lilliputian-size chapters, fresh events on every page, and a brisk narrative are the basic requirements of Millennial beach reading. For this reason, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*—third-rate Philip Marlowe on Adderall—isn’t merely a cultural phenomenon, but perhaps the definitive novel of the 21st century.

I fear that in staying perpetually tethered to mass communication, we are losing the ability to connect with literature. Leafing through the pages of a book can be, in the best of circumstances, a journey, an experience. But unlike technology, the voyage is a private one; a one-at-a-time hobby that places the reader face-to-face with his or her own powers of imagination, intellect, and introspection. Whenever I make the time to truly read, I feel an almost uncomfortable level of intimacy with my own thoughts.

Why do I identify so strongly with Augusten Burroughs? How could I allow myself to be seduced by a monster like Humbert Humbert? Why can I excuse Blanche DuBois for lying, but not James Frey? What are these books trying to say and, most importantly, what do they say about me?

When we can find the wherewithal to stay focused, reading leads us to a level of profound truth that no smokinggun.com could ever unearth. After all, it was only through reading, through exposure to art and philosophy that Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya realized the futility of his own existence.

Nowadays, he wouldn’t have time to ponder such morbid notions. He’d be too busy posting blog entries at morose-russian.net. ■

*Ray Dademo is an English major at Fordham College at Lincoln Center and opinion editor of The Observer.*