

Musing Upon "The Year of the Young Reader"

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Although "The Year of the Young Reader" is still itself a relative infant, there is much to suggest that by the time 1989 shuffles off bent and bearded into antiquity there will exist a mountainous haystack of promotional paraphernalia, programming pamphlets, professional pontificating and, of course, books designed to awaken the sleeping young reader beneath it.

To this writer's mind, however, it may well be that it is the library profession which is to be found "fast asleep." Surely the fact that today there exists a need for such a year (one will suffice?), or for a national literacy campaign directed toward adults as well as children, suggests the necessity for much, much, more than clever slogans or updated versions of the tried and true program gimmicks so often touted in today's library "show and tell" workshops, conferences or in the popular professional publications.

Perhaps what is needed far more than another finger games book, puppet play or creative craft corner is a genuine shift of emphasis by the profession from pizza, pajama, or "pig-out" parties designed to "pack 'em in,"

to a serious inquiry of the uniquely human and exceedingly personal process that is inherent in the activity known as reading.

At this writing, however, certification curriculum and in-service training sessions offer scant insight into the phenomenon of reading. Instead, the library candidate is presented, in a variety of scholarly sounding packages, the book as object, the reader as consumer and the library as the party responsible for capturing "a piece of the action" by promoting its own spectacular happenings as a means of enticing would-be patrons to its product. The theory, not unlike Postman and Weingartner's, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*¹ is that if the young patrons enjoy the puppet show, the craft project, etc., they'll want to read books about the subject. Pushing the theory further, the larger the group, the greater the likelihood that the activity will be viewed with security by the individual and thus pursued on his own, or perhaps peer pressure will insure continued patronage as the result of the activity being viewed as one practiced by the "in-crowd." Unfortunately, when one considers the number of years libraries have been programming these

kinds of activities and the number of years the activity of reading has continued to deteriorate, the theory would appear to be one bumblebee that actually doesn't fly!

Meanwhile, today's world continues to become an ever more crowded domain. Day-care centers abound, accepting children at earlier and earlier ages. Public and private school classrooms bulge, with student-teacher ratios often nearing the forties. In colleges and universities lecture halls now hold hundreds of students per class meeting. Everywhere people are constantly being grouped, labeled and addressed with less and less attention to who they are as individuals. In certain instances the labels themselves lack identity. Case in point: Children between the ages of twelve and fourteen are grouped and labeled "middle-schoolers" or "junior high schoolers" largely by the particular school corporation they attend. The library establishment, on the other hand, can often be found referring to them as "Young Adults," a description "old adults" in this writer's library district generally reserve for high school or college age persons. Little wonder, then, that these individuals are often characterized as constantly being "in search of themselves," or that they often remain absent from events designed on their behalf. If society in general isn't sure who they are, how can they be?

But regardless of age, carving out a place of one's own, physically, intellectually, and emotionally, is becoming increasingly difficult. Personal

identity and individuality are becoming the privilege of a few. Could it be, then, that relief from "the sheep in the meadow and the cows in the corn" may be precisely what sends would-be readers to the one-on-one computer activities which are so very popular today? With only a passing observation of both children and adults engaged at the terminal one cannot help recognizing an immersion of self which is amazingly parallel to that of an engaged reader. Nothing distracts him; he is alone in his world. Is it just possible that by attempting to promote the activity of reading through yet another crowd or groupie activity the library establishment has inadvertently eroded its own patronage?

Granted, reading as escape is not a new theory, but there is the possibility that serious research might provide insight that would offer new and more effective direction toward recapturing a declining readership. Emphasis upon individuality and creative programming which enhances the one-on-one relationship synonymous with a book and a reader seem as worthy of pursuit as present strategies which appear to have done little more than approximate "the lemming condition."

Reference

¹Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1969.