

RECREATIONAL READING
IN A LARGE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY SYSTEM

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IN recent literature strong objections have been raised against the term "recreational reading" because of its vagueness. "It is applied to readers and books as far apart as the school girl with her fairy stories and the businessman with a hobby in ancient philosophies."¹ Waples's criticism is valid in so far as the content of books is concerned, but the term can be applied to book collections if we do not assume that homogeneity of topics has to be the deciding factor.

Although the problem of subject matter is the guiding principle, both in selection and shelving of the bulk of our printed material, we have important special collections which are heterogeneous in this respect. The common denominator in a Rare Book Room for instance is the difficulty and expense of an eventual replacement; the exhibit "The Fifty Best Books of the Year" is selected from an aesthetic viewpoint. What should be the selecting principle in a collection of books destined for recreational reading? It cannot be the content because almost every book can provide recreation for somebody. And obviously neither the problem of replacement nor the quality of workmanship could be the basic selecting guide.

The dictionary definition of recreation is: "refresh-

¹ Douglas Waples, *et al.*, "What Reading Does to People." Chicago, University of Chicago Press (1940), p. 18.

ment of the strength and spirits after toil, or diversion." We are dealing with a particular attitude of the reader and we have to plan the collection with the desired effect in mind. The selecting principle, therefore, will be a psychological one. If the collection should produce "diversion," it must basically differ from the other libraries on the campus.

It would be a costly mistake to assume that it is only necessary to provide good books in order to have a successful recreational library. The equation "a good book plus an intelligent reader equals enjoyment of reading" is a fallacy. Many students of reading have noted that the influence of a book is determined by a multiplicity of causes which in many instances are extraneous to the work itself. The importance of the physical surroundings² and of the entire intellectual and emotional experience of the reader has been frequently observed. "One's liking for a book depends in large measure upon the time when one reads; it must form a link with something that has gone before . . . it is the environment of thought into which one takes a book that determines its final effect."³

This reader's *predisposition* has been investigated by Waples in many carefully planned experiments and its influence on the effect of a book has been clearly established. "Predisposition includes all the personal conditions involved in the reading experience. Such conditions derive from various aspects of the reader's total personality. They range from broad traits like age and sex . . . to the most intimate feelings he has about himself at the moment."⁴ Predisposition, therefore, is a prominent conceptional element in our frame of reference.

² Holbrook Jackson, "The Anatomy of Bibliomania." New York, 1931, p. 294 ff.

³ Anne Douglas Sedgwick, quoted in Holbrook Jackson, "The Reading of Books." New York, Scribner, 1947, p. 75.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 82. (With a selected bibliography of the field.)

Despite the comparative freedom of learning provided by a broad curriculum, the university is a place of formal education. The student has to read given books, take certain courses, write papers, and pass examinations. Many subjects and titles are not of his own choice but are prescribed in order to fulfill the requirements of the school. On taking out a book one constituent in his predisposition is coercion. In too many cases a book is read only for an instructional course. If we want to offer diversion, we have to change the atmosphere into one of informal education with freedom of choice of title and subject.

Everybody agrees that informal education and informal reading perform a prominent function in the educational system. Prescott's criticism, although mainly intended for public schools, holds also true for college education. "Formal education has never really come to grips with the task of meeting the needs of developing personalities."⁵ And Kelley lists as one of the faulty assumptions of our education that "Subject matter taken on authority is educative in itself, i.e., when subject matter has been acquired, the person becomes automatically educated."⁶

Only books which are not read *for* an instructor but which are the free choice of the reader can reach the educational goal which has been described by Sabine as one of the important objectives of the college library. "The college aims not merely to offer a service to persons who are already readers but also to make readers out of boys who have not yet formed the habit."⁷ We are so much concerned with the difficult task, especially in larger university libraries, of providing the necessary material for research and

⁵ Daniel A. Prescott, "Emotion and the Educative Process." Washington, American Council on Education, 1938, p. 126.

⁶ Earl C. Kelley, "Education for What Is Real." New York, 1947.

⁷ George Sabine, "College and Research Libraries," IX, 1948, p. 3.

study that we are likely to neglect our obligation toward the undergraduate student and his intellectual needs. The library as the intellectual center of the university campus is not a storehouse which waits in passivity to be used by the student when ordered by his instructor. The library has a teaching function of its own and has to carry its message dynamically to the student body. It is our prerogative to show what enjoyment lies in intellectual pursuits; it is our duty to disclose the beauty of books; it is our task to prove that even a famous book, a book which is on the compulsory reading list, can be read with real enjoyment.

One frequently hears the opinion that love of reading is an innate quality, that a good reader is born and not made. Such an intellectual predetermination is contradicted by our experience; habits can be taught, can be acquired, good ones and bad ones alike. However, no activity will become a habit unless we are emotionally conditioned to accept it. No list of books enforced by the instructor can kindle enthusiasm for reading in a student who does not believe that books are anything but boring drudgery. To explain to him the wisdom and literary quality of a given book will not convince him; psychological attitudes cannot be changed by rational arguments. Many students are already readers when they enter the college, and their liberal education will be deepened and enriched by the courses they take. But quite a few leave our colleges and even graduate schools without ever having experienced the dynamic power of a book.

What constitutes a reader? The number of books one has read is meaningless; most censors of reading follow more or less Quintilian's advice: "multum, non multa."⁸ The essence of reading is a synthesis between reader and book. Reading presupposes one's avidity to listen; it is the ability to recreate a book in his own mind, the faculty to discover, to accept, or

⁸ Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*, X, 1, 59: "multa magis quam multorum lectione formanda mens."

to reject the personal message it has for himself, and the willingness to become suffused with the moods and emotions of the author. Reading is not an end in itself. It is instrumental in gaining a better understanding and, therefore, a fuller and more mature enjoyment of life.

Recreational reading collections which have such an important educational function will need thoughtful administrative attention. There is no doubt that they have to be placed under the authority of the director of libraries according to the fundamental conception of modern, efficient librarianship, which places all book collections on the campus, regardless of the fund from which they are bought or of the function to which they are designated, under the administrative control of the director of libraries. All recreational collections should be considered as one unit (administrative rank: departmental library) and should be supervised by a professional staff member reporting to the library administrator in charge of public services. The departmental librarian must combine the ability to understand the reading interests of the student groups with mature literary judgment and must be conscious that the functions of this position go far beyond normal library routine. The techniques of the reader's adviser,⁹ which are based on adult-education principles, must be adjusted to our problems. We are less interested in guiding the student to read a given book, which *we* think is important for him; we want to make him conscious of the fact that there *are* books which are worth his while. In the last analysis he has to discover the books for himself. We may suggest titles and topics, but the ultimate choice must be his own. Our goal is achieved when the student has for once in his life felt the impact of a book. Debates, suggestive reading lists, and personal discussions will be some of the techniques which will have to be developed.

⁹ Jennie M. Flexner. *Reader's Advisers at Work*, New York, Am. Association for Adult Education, 1941.

It is recommended that the collections be placed all over the campus in strategically selected locations. A browsing room in the main library will serve as the center for all the branches; another browsing room should be in the Student's Union Building;¹⁰ smaller collections can be in all dormitories, fraternities, and sororities.

Regulations for use should be as liberal as possible. Although uniformity for the entire campus is highly desirable, freedom should be given to the individual student groups to make their own laws. If a book is heavily in use, it will be more profitable in view of our educational objectives to buy additional copies instead of forcing the reader to keep a terminal date. In so far as general building regulations do not forbid, smoking should be permitted as a matter of course. The principle of "silence" should not be overstressed.

It is necessary that the copies be clean and attractive; worn-out copies may be sold at bargain prices. General trade editions will suffice in all cases; sets which cannot be replaced easily and expensive art publications should not be located in browsing libraries.

Three major criteria are suggested for the book selection: 1. The selection should be the free choice of the student body. The departmental librarian ought to suggest and help in translating topical interests into specific titles but carefully refrain from superimposing his own tastes. The second-best book selected by the student himself will have a greater influence than the best book read on authority. 2. The books should bear on the problems and issues of our time. No ready-made list will be applicable, neither "the 100 Best Books," nor, on the opposite scale of academic sanction, a catalog of "Best Sellers." Many of our great books are timeless and will always remain modern,¹¹ but they should not be confused with the famous books which represent an important milestone

¹⁰ Cornell's center of student activities, Willard Straight Hall, has a very good browsing library, much patronized by the students.

in the development of human thought. These should be familiar to the scholar of the field, but they are not an intellectual necessity for every well-educated man. "Best Sellers" are a complex phenomenon, partly indicative of the taste of a period, partly the result of book-trade techniques, but the conception is meaningless in terms of literary quality or intellectual importance.¹² 3. The collections are not an independent unit but part of a great library system. The advising librarian should draw on the book resources of the university as a whole, arrange for short-term exhibits on important moral or intellectual issues, and rotate the books between the collections.

It is imperative to keep in mind that the objectives of the recreational libraries (and incidentally, the function of a truly liberal education) are the moulding of personalities who are able to formulate their moral principles and to live accordingly. The accumulation of knowledge is not a function of recreational reading.

The budgetary needs of such an important educational venture is, even on a far-flung campus like Cornell, comparatively modest. A salary of \$3,000-\$3,600 for the librarian and a book budget of \$10,000 for the first year and of \$6,500 for the subsequent years will suffice. The order work and the preparation of the material can be absorbed by the technical departments of the university library.

By furnishing the opportunities for recreational reading the library has provided a tangible contribution to education; we can add an important intangible one by encouraging the purchase of books by the students. A score of years ago Henry B. Van Hoesen declared: "The student's own library is one of the best methods of stimulating reading,"¹³ but little has been done since then to implement this

¹¹ Paul S. Conklin, "A History of Hamlet Criticism." New York, 1947, for a good example how every generation could see its own particular problems personified in a literary character.

¹² Frank L. Mott, "Golden Multitudes." New York, 1947.

statement. A few institutions give yearly awards for the best student's library, for instance, Swarthmore, Haverford, University of California, Pennsylvania State College, Smith, and Wellesley.¹³ It seems advisable to give at least two cash prizes (\$100 and \$50) and several book prizes, the award to be given for the best selections. The number of volumes is immaterial but the candidates for the prizes should motivate their selections.

The prerequisite, however, is a well-administered university bookstore, not just a store on the campus where, among a variety of commodities, books are also sold, but an establishment conscious of its educational function, which emphasizes the book and forgets the store. The bookshop at Maddox House in Rockford College or the Bull Head Bookshop at the University of North Carolina best exemplifies the type of service every university should render. The university library may not be interested in accepting administrative responsibility for the management of the bookshop but it should be represented on its governing board.

Informal education with recreational reading as its foremost tool is a vital complement to formal training. In courses and seminars we teach and learn subject matter essential for our professional calling; but accumulated knowledge is a blind force equally responsive to good and evil. Education conscious of its social obligations must free the energy latent in every human being which is able to direct his knowledge toward a moral end. Mastery of subject matter, enjoyment of living, and strength of character must be blended into one harmonious personality emotionally conditioned to feel the full force of a moral issue, intellectually capable of applying general principles to a particular problem, and temperamentally endowed with the courage to live according to his convictions.

¹³ SCHOOL AND SOCIETY, XXXIII (1931), p. 617.

¹⁴ E. S. McCawley, "Prize Awards for Student Libraries," *Publishers' Weekly*, CXXVI (1934), p. 1255.

