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The American Reading Public

What it Reads

Why it Reads

FROM INSIDE EDUCATION AND PUBLISHING:
VIEWS OF PRESENT STATUS, FUTURE TRENDS

The *Daedalus* Symposium, with
Rebuttals and Other New Material

EDITED BY *Roger H. Smith*



R. R. BOWKER, *New York*

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Introduction

ROGER H. SMITH

THE AMERICAN READING PUBLIC—who are they? They are, in a sense, everyone but the very young and the very illiterate. They read tabloids and best sellers and are the *raison d'être* for the multi-million dollar advertising-in-print industry. They also read technical manuals, scientific reference works and highly specialized monographs. The range of what they read is as wide and varied as the range of human interests and human competence.

The American Reading Public, on its own initiative or through the institutions which it directly or indirectly supports, buys nearly \$2 billion worth of books every year. It buys approximately 270,000,000 copies of magazines every issue and more than 60,000,000 newspapers every day (and 48,000,000 on Sunday). Our civilization is such that reading is a *functional* necessity, no less than breathing and eating, and he who cannot read is a permanent cripple.

Universal public education in the United States has brought untold boons—and not a few problems. Given a few years of rudimentary reading instruction at the elementary school level, is a grown man, with no further formal education, competent to vote? Except in special situations, deplorably rigged on racial grounds, our society more favors the opportunities inherent in universal suffrage than the safeguards of a meaningful minimum test of literacy. So be it.

To this extent, then, practically everyone is a reader—of something, sometime.

This book, in seeking to define the nature of the American Reading Public and those who serve it, goes beyond this minimum concept of the reader. It is concerned with the person for whom reading is an act of engagement, whether for professional reasons or recreation or both: the student, the teacher, the executive—and the individual who inspires the fondest thoughts among publishers, the “faithful reader.” The twenty articles in this book (including the book review at the end) are about

this *engaged* segment of the American Reading Public. Some are written from within the publishing industry—by publishers and other practitioners. Others come from American higher education and are by interested and informed observers.

The idea for this book originated with the editors of *Daedalus*, the journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, who devoted their winter, 1963, issue to the subject, "The American Reading Public." The twelve articles in the *Daedalus* issue, plus the review of "Catch-22," are reprinted here in full, with only minor corrections and additions which were requested by the authors. Added to those are seven articles which were specially commissioned for this book. In sum, they represent a definitive portrait of an important segment—perhaps the most important segment—of communications in America in the 1960's.

The American Reading Public

BY STEPHEN R. GRAUBARD

Editor of *Daedalus*

PUBLISHING is a curious enterprise—a business for some, a vocation for others—its objectives defy easy definition. While the purpose of providing diversion for the reader need not conflict with that of instructing him, it is seldom that the two can be realized simultaneously. Since the printed word remains the primary device for learning, other “educational tools” having had by comparison only a limited effect, there is a powerful sentiment for judging the success of publishing in other than profit-and-loss terms. The values that govern in our society cannot but be reflected in our estimate of the worth of the vast quantity of material which pours from its presses.

This issue, devoted to “The American Reading Public,” expresses the deep concern which many in this country feel about the present state of publishing. If there are many criticisms, this is only partly a comment on inadequate performance; it is also a statement of the large expectations which are thought to be legitimate in this area. The dimensions of the problem are suggested by the great variety of subjects treated, but also by the necessity of seeking contributions from persons who are engaged in widely divergent activities but whose common concern is the printed word.



1

Educating the Reader: From Grade School to Graduate School

LEARNING to read can be a wondrous revelation of new worlds and new sensations, or it can be a soul-searing exercise of endless repetition. ("Look. Look. See. See. Look and See.") However reading is taught, the textbook lies near the heart of the process. Frank Jennings, in the first article in this section, takes a look at the American textbook: its past; its present strengths and weaknesses; and its likely course of future development as textbook publishers respond to currents of change in American education.

Reuben A. Brower, in the second article, approaches the matter of Why Johnny Can't (or Can) Read from the standpoint of the methods and materials used in the teaching of reading. There is, tragically, a world of difference between the elementary-high school approach and the approach which the student will be expected to follow when he enters college, Mr. Brower believes.

Benjamin De Mott is worried about a phenomenon prevalent among undergraduates and graduates alike: the *passive* reader. Reading, according to Mr. De Mott, should mean involvement—"true contention, successful struggle."

2

Commercial Publishing

WHETHER one likes the fact or deplors it, most of American book publishing is commercial. Dan Lacy, leading off this section, describes the boundaries of publishing economics—the volume in dollars earned and in copies sold—and the financial expectations that are realistic for authors and publishers.

Next, Marshall Best offers an analysis of the so-called “revolution” which allegedly has taken place in book publishing since the end of World War II, with specific reference to the much-heralded “paperback revolution.”

Jason Epstein, one of the prominent younger publishers, is critical of the complacency he finds among commercial book publishers. The commercial publisher, Mr. Epstein feels, should be more imaginative, daring and, perhaps, eccentric than he is now likely to be.

Frederick A. Praeger, one of the more successful of the post-World War II publishers, is similarly concerned with the creative aspects of publishing. In his article, he describes the publisher in his dual role of businessman and individualist—a duality which is not always easy to resolve.

One of the most important figures in any commercial publishing transaction is the literary agent. Perry Knowlton writes about what an agent can do (and cannot possibly do) for his client, the author; what the agent contributes from the publisher's standpoint; and what changes may be expected in the agent's role as middleman between author and publisher.

3

The University as Publisher

IN book publishing, one phenomenon in recent years has been the growth of publishing by universities. Today, one book in every thirteen published in the U.S. bears the imprint of a university press.

Roger Shugg, in this section, writes about the unique functions which a university press performs and about the unique relationships which exist between university presses and their authors.

Thomas J. Wilson offers an overview of American book publishing, its "hazards and opportunities." Although Mr. Wilson writes about the whole of American book publishing, he does so from a university press viewpoint—which contrasts, in several respects, with the attitude expressed by commercial publishers elsewhere in this volume.

4

The Reader and the Book:

Areas of Contact

HOPEFULLY, every book finds a reader. But the process is not easy, nor is it always successful. This section is concerned with the points of contact between book and reader: among them, the bookstore, the drug store, the newsstand, the public library.

Leonard Shatzkin, the first author in this section, feels that the process of bringing book and reader together would be simplified considerably if the publishers themselves became a little less "bookish" and a little more concerned with strengthening and reforming their own distribution methods.

Next are two views of bookstores: an outsider's (customer's) view by Edward Shills and an insider's (bookseller's) view by Theodore Wilentz. The contrasts between the two are striking, almost as though customer and bookseller had not, in this particular case, ever met.

Finally in this section, Emerson Greenaway discusses the public library—what it is and what it can become for the American reading public. Further development of public libraries, Mr. Greenaway indicates, depends heavily on Federal financial aid.

5

The Mass Media of Print

OF all the media of print, the mass media, by their very nature, reach the largest audiences. Correspondingly, their opportunities, their budgets, and their responsibilities to the public are greater. Mass circulation can lead to mass taste: Is this a "good" (*i.e.* "unifying") development for the nation, or is it a "bad" (*i.e.* "leveling") effect on the national culture?

Donald Fine, writing about mass-marketed paperback books, celebrates the diversity of output from paperback publishers. Diversity added to availability, he feels, will make the "American reading public" and the entire American public one and the same.

Herbert R. Mayes similarly celebrates the "big" American magazines—their colorful past and the infinite diversity of their future. (Mr. Mayes' article is based on a speech which he gave April 16, 1963, before the Chicago Headline Club.)

Leo Bogart, looking at newspaper publishing in the age of television, adds up a few losses, many more gains and new prospects in the "revolution in the media of our time."

6

Literary Criticism, the Publisher and the Reader

LITERARY CRITICISM and book reviewing (the two are not necessarily the same thing) are the favorite whipping-boys in book publishing. Nobody, it seems, is particularly content with the state of the art of evaluating new books—not authors (well, hardly ever), not publishers (except when their own books are well received), not reviewers (whose essays are altered by editors), not editors (who have all those essays to edit). Nevertheless, the reviews are, in their own milieu, indispensable; they are publicity, good or bad, and publicity is essential to book publishing.

In this section, two professors from Yale, Henri Peyre and John Hollander, offer thoughtful critiques of American book reviewing.

At the end of the issue of *Daedalus* on which this book is based, there was a section headed by this statement: "Given what has been said about American book reviewing both in this issue and elsewhere, the Editors concluded that there might be some use in publishing a collection of reviews which would not be subject to the conventional criticisms." The first of these was a review of "Catch-22" by Joseph Heller, and it raised a storm of protest. At the time, "Catch-22" was enjoying (and it still enjoys) a great vogue. Yossarian Fan Clubs (so named for the hero of the book) had sprung up

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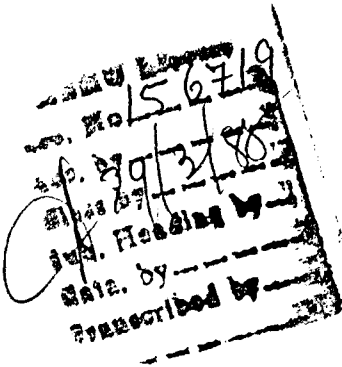
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