

# ROBERT MILTNER

## **The Rule of the Media? Readers, Writers and Teachers in the Post-Pop Era**

### ***An Atkins Diet for Contemporary American Readers?***

“Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.”—Richard Steele<sup>1</sup>

Contrary impulses are more interesting than consistency. It is no surprise, then, that while we Americans are literally growing larger, with 65% of Americans overweight and 37% obese,<sup>2</sup>

175,000 will be newly published books.<sup>4</sup> Some of these books are read for specific reasons—for classes, book clubs, or professional reasons—while others are read for pleasure or interest, but not many. For, on the whole, as the population is increasing, readers are decreasing.

### **Are Writers Readers, or Merely Writers?**

“I know a few writers who...do very little reading. This doesn’t mean that they are bad writers, but in some cases I think they might be better writers if they read more.”—Richard Wilbur<sup>5</sup>

A 1999 Gallup poll reported that 84% of Americans surveyed had “read at least part of one book last year;”<sup>6</sup> oddly, the survey did not indicate either what kind of book it was that the typical American read, or whether the reader ever finished the book. In contrast, a 1999 Gallup Poll revealed that 7% of all Americans were “avid readers” who read more than one book a week.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, a 2002 National Endowment for the Arts Public Participation study revealed 40% of all Americans read, attended, or visited literature;<sup>8</sup> “visited” and “attended” literature: peculiar phrasing, really, the way this sneaks out of the language, how it meshes with the idea of “part of a book” read. In 2002, this activity included plays, poetry, novels and short stories, but since this means the data includes seeing a film version of an actual book, that would account for hearing such comments from a student as: *Jane Austen? I love her movies!*

### **Pop Fiction, Pulp Fiction, or Literary Fiction?**

“Reading novels—serious novels, anyway—is an experience limited to a very small percentage of the so-called enlightened people.”—Jerzy Kosinski<sup>9</sup>

The specific group considered to be “literc8icf a.]TJ-18.65( )Tfi

plays, as opposed to general readers who read “how-to” books, coffee-table books, and general information books.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, this statistic does not distinguish between readers of popular literature—best-sellers, mysteries, and summer beach books—and readers of serious literature, which generally includes small press publications, experimental work, poetry, prose poetry. Serious reading is not a traditional American trait, despite the leanings of educators, scholars, academics, and writers. Conversely, French readers “take a compulsive, missionary interest” in literature, so much so that they call their return from the summer holidays *La Rentrée Littéraire*, the return to serious reading, observes novelist Paul West, who adds:

When a nation adjusts its calendar in so decisive a way, you not only respect its readers, you also wonder what happens to books in the United States, where pundits blather about beach reading and authors type books aimed at the audience on the littoral. There is no mention of *our* return to serious reading, or even of a departure from fluff, trash, slop, drivel, twaddle....<sup>12</sup>

Most troubling, however, is the recent NEA *Reading at Risk* report which shows a nearly 20% decline in the “regular” reading habits of the nation’s college graduates: from about



than reading a book, and perhaps a tendency toward performance and interaction—activities that range from video games to coffeehouse open mic. readings, from performance poetry to stand up comedy and theatrical events—are also competing for readers’ attention and time.

### **From Page to Stage?**

“Some writers take to drink, others take to audiences.”—Gore Vidal<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, the NEA Survey of Public Participation found in a recent study that 7% of those surveyed claimed to have personally performed or created literature in 2002.<sup>22</sup> Of course, since this statistic includes anything to do with theatre, and anything to do with creative writing, it lumps together the person who writes a novel with someone who hands out a programme at a play. Moreover, this 7% represents about half of the 13.3% of the US population—over 27 million people—who claimed to have taken a creative writing class, academic or non-academic, and at all grade levels, during 2002.<sup>23</sup> Still, we might infer from this data that approximately 3.5% of all Americans—approximately seven million Americans—engage in some generalised activity that is loosely connected with creative writing. The question for those of us who teach creative writing is, who is the traditional eighteen-year-old student who enters our college or university creative writing classes?

### **Student Readers?**

“All the old houses that I knew when I was a child were full of books, bought generation after generation by members of the family. Everyone was literate as a matter of course. Nobody told you to read this or not read that. It was there to read, and we read.”—Katherine Anne Porter<sup>24</sup>



minute broadcasts, 20% of the airtime covers politics, economics, or cultural or social issues (which includes literature), while the other 80% is devoted to sports, weather, “features,” advertising and Channel One promotions.<sup>29</sup> Channel One Television offers a clear example of corporate selection of “state of the art” information at a time when 25% of US schools use textbooks published in the 1980s or earlier.<sup>30</sup>

### **Fair and Balanced?**

“The programming [at Fox] is deliberately and consistently distorted and twisted to promote the

the entire process represents choice and selectivity, exclusions and inclusions, and things of that sort are highly sophisticated. But what is truly ominous about this



connected, yet aliterate, spending far more time viewing than reading. Yet they want to be poets or novelists. Still, seemingly, many students—disillusioned and deadened by the vapid wasteland of TV and Hollywood movies, of skewed news and reality television—are drawn to writing because ultimately they are desperate for something far more real than what the media gives them. Or they are drawn to it because it is a more active way of engaging with text than is offered by reading. As Charles McGrath observes, “While the number of people reading literature has gone down, the number of people trying to write has actually gone up. We seem to be slowly turning into a nation of ‘creative writers,’ more interested in what we have to say ourselves than in reading or thinking

*augment* or *supplement* the skills learned on the page. What about today's student writer, though, who has grown up *through* the media, in the cathode tubes and silicon chips of popular culture? What is our students' relationship with the media?

### **Who's the Star of This Book?**

"I like to read screenplays. They're little books.... I'll read [the screenplay] rather than go to see the movie itself. I enjoy shooting the movie in my mind."—Thomas McGuane<sup>43</sup>

Who or what shapes how our students conceive of character, plot, setting, audience, attention span, language



from 7% to 4% over the last thirty years.<sup>47</sup> Rather than lament this decline, we need to ask what it signifies.

In our classes, we can bring forward from the literary tradition what is the *best* of tradition, not just what is old, and we can bring in from the media what is the *best* of the media, not just what is new. Even more importantly, we can help students understand why such distinctions are important, so that they can make, independently, the best choices about what affects their writing. One thing writers have learned about writing is that good writing is the result of good choices. As teachers of writing, we can encourage students to ask questions about what they are doing in their writing. Why are they selecting the images, characters, actions and values they put in their writing, and what do these selections represent to their readers? After all, the components they select are “interacting simultaneously in a surrounding social and cultural world” and “can lead to different patterns of domination and representation.”<sup>48</sup>

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emotionally, tonally, stylistically, intellectually and artistically. For some, this contact zone may include more serious reading than they have previously done.

NEA Chair Dana Gioia, in the preface to the *Reading at Risk* report, offers this challenge:

Each concerned group—writers, teachers, publishers, journalists, librarians, and legislators—will legitimately view the situation [the decline in reading] from a different perspective, and each will offer its own recommendations.<sup>50</sup>

In our dual role as writers/teachers, we can recommend that students question whether the choices they make as writers only echo what comes out of the media, or whether their choices draw from broader, richer contexts. Further, students should question whether they are appropriating from the media because that is part of a paradigm to which they ascribe, or whether they do so as a creative, playful borrowing. As educators, we can help students develop the ability to take material from the pop culture and the media and to bring their individual imaginations to skew it, put a spin on it—using irony, parody or some fresh hybridity—rather than merely replicating it. In short, we can make students aware of the process that defines their progress in the craft of writing. Ultimately, we can recommend a balanced diet of traditional literature and pop culture, accompanied by

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<sup>8</sup> “Survey of Public Participation in the Arts” (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2002),

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<sup>9</sup> Plimpton, 253.

<sup>10</sup> Fenza, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>50</sup> Fenza, 25.