

STUDENT ESSAYS

Reading Is A Committed Act

By Cristina Baldor



The cause behind the decline in readership, especially for those between the ages of 18 and 24, seems simple on the surface. We are the videogame generation; if it isn't flashing lights or making noises, it seems that most of us are just not interested. Unfortunately, I have to agree with this sentiment to some degree, but as an English major at Holy Cross, I can at least personally stand as an example against the findings.

Reading is a habit. Something as simple as a nightly bedtime story soon blossoms into a lifelong appreciation for literature. I am fortunate enough to read literature every day, but students in other departments must concentrate on the required reading in their own field of study. Outside the realm of the liberal arts institution, many students

choose a career path and never learn the value of literature, its ability to spark the imagination and to cultivate the intellect. In an anthropology course last semester, I completed a research project analyzing the readership decline in Japan. The articles I read cited the intense competition to enter universities, where standardized test scores are the only criteria for acceptance. These students grow into adults who see reading only for its utility, and have no motivation to read without an explicit purpose such as studying for an exam.

Reading is a committed act. It requires substantially more energy and concentration than does sitting on the couch and watching a movie. In the high-stress environment of competitive colleges, the temptation to sink into a thoughtless state in front of the television screen prevails. When I asked my friends to share their thoughts on reading literature, they overwhelmingly expressed a desire to read. However, many struggle to complete even the required reading for their classes. They view reading literature aside from coursework as a luxury that they wish they had, but simply cannot afford. One young woman I spoke with even said she kept a list of books that she planned to read "once I graduate and I have the time."

Of course, that's not to say that if only we decreased the workload, everyone would pick up that Jane Austen they've been dying to read. Clearly students find time for a variety of activities besides schoolwork. However, they are losing the concept of reading for pleasure; it reminds them too much of the homework they should be doing. The preferred way to spend free time is one that allows an escape from this reality, anything from spending time on the Internet to heading to the bars.

I would also like to address one of the other issues brought up by the NEA report, *Reading at Risk*, the finding that the readership decline among Hispanics tops that of other ethnic and racial groups. Again, I can at least say that I am a first generation Cuban-American, and I read. The greatest challenge in assimilation to the United States for Hispanics lies squarely on the issue of language. This is not just the struggle to attain English, but also the nostalgia of leaving behind Spanish. In many Hispanic households, conversations flow between the two languages seamlessly, sometimes mid-sentence. Reading a piece of literature, whether in English or in Spanish, means having to commit to one language. Since life for Hispanics in the United States is not in only one language, identifying with a text is that much more difficult.

I was not surprised to see that while reading has decreased, the interest in creative writing has increased. Seats in creative writing classes at Holy Cross are hard to come by, reflecting the general trend reported by the NEA. I belong to a small group of creative writers that meets weekly with a professor for an independent writing workshop. We share our latest short stories, learn about sending our work to literary journals, and read other authors we would not have had the opportunity to cover in class. If more budding authors realize that that the first step in creating a quality piece of writing is learning to recognize the tools used by other writers, the reading of literature will soon be on the rise. Writers are inspired by other writers, and the best writers are skilled readers. ■

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