

To read or not to read

By Dan Naumovich

Published Sunday, August 19, 2007

It's always precarious, or if not then trivial, to try to divide the lot of humankind into two opposing camps. That said, there are two kinds of people in this world: those who read books, and those who don't.

I'm not claiming that one group is from Venus and the other from Mars, or that either is nearer to God. We're not selling self-help or salvation here today. If some prefer the warm glow of a flat screen to the tactile pleasure of bleached pulp, so be it. But there are cultural differences between book readers and those who subscribe to other traditions of communication, especially in these modern times.

Ever since some owlsh Babylonian penned the "Epic of Giglamesh" - arguably the first book ever written and, from what I understand, a real tablet turner - book readers have been held in higher esteem. And ever since the first English major slapped suede patches onto his tweed sports coat, some book readers have been seen as pompous know-it-alls.

Despite the affected reputation, until recently, book readers usually were deferred to in conversation. Even while their eyes glazed over when talk would turn to Jane Austen, the non-bookish often were hesitant to admit their lack of interest. They'd apologize for their abandoned literary pursuits and promise to crack open a classic real soon.

Lately, however, I've witnessed a change in attitude.

When discussing current reading lists recently, one of my friends declared, not the least bit sheepishly, that he doesn't have time for books. He almost sounded huffy about it.

I soon gathered that his pride comes from living a life that is much too full to allow for the time and solitude required to immerse oneself in a book. To him, reading a book is like taking a long soak in a hot tub - a luxury beyond his means.

Implicit in his characterization, if one wanted to take things personally, is the idea that book readers are idlers whose erudition comes at the expense of actually getting out there and living life. I don't want to play the library card here, but there's more than a hint of bibliophobia in this attitude, and it's becoming more pervasive.

There are a growing number of people who like to announce, with all of the pride of a recovering alcoholic recounting his last drink, that they haven't picked up a novel since Cliff-noting their way through freshmen English. That many of them are intelligent only confounds those of us who thought that the only path to knowledge was through the stacks of a library.

Could it be that in today's fast-paced society, where everyone is hell-bent on multi-tasking for instant gratification, books no longer are the mark of a mind well spent? In this binary age, is the man of letters losing supremacy to the disciple of zeroes and ones?

Possibly so.

We don't process information the way we used to, so it's not delivered in book form as much. Today we get our information in short bursts, whenever there is an idle moment in our busy schedules, and it's increasingly difficult to digest more than what will fit on an iPhone screen.

It could be that in our society the bibliophiles are being cast aside, and it will be their turn to nod demurely while the technophiles hold court on the important issues of the day. Those Bluetooth headsets protruding out of people's ears are every bit as pretentious as a suede-patched sports coat, so maybe the mantle already is being passed.

It seems a shame to me, and probably would to Groucho Marx as well:

"Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."

Dilbert never got off a line that good.

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